

Female Characters in Ye Guangqin's Unfettered Wharf

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ABSTRACT

Ye Guangqin is an illustrious, prolific Manchu writer born in Beijing, whose chefs-d'oeuvre are exemplified by fiction concerning Beijing denizens from both ends of the social spectrum, especially those from upper-class Manchu Banner families. By virtue of Ye's profound construal of history and Manchurian culture, her writing pertaining to war and families has attained acclamation and been adapted into visual works. In this research, I explore a 2007 narrative entitled *Unfettered Wharf* depicting a Manchu father and his son residing in early modern Beijing, which is enriched by a cornucopia of historical and modern allusions as well as Beijing Opera elements. Notwithstanding critical attention to the male protagonists, female characters are largely overlooked yet deserve more scrutiny, in that they play a preponderant role in this thought-provoking novel and manifest laudable, rare merits.

Keywords: *Manchu literature, historical and modern allusions, tolerance, optimism, humour, oppressed feminism*

Ye Guangqin'in Unfettered Wharf'ındaki Kadın Karakterler

ÖZ

Ye Guangqin, Pekin'de doğmuş ünlü, üretken bir Mançu yazarıdır ve başyapıtları sosyal yelpazenin her iki ucundaki Pekin sakinleriyle, özellikle de üst sınıf Mançu Banner ailelerinden gelenlerle ilgili kurgularla örneklennmektedir. Ye'nin derin tarih ve Mançurya kültürü yorumlayışı sayesinde savaş ve ailelerle ilgili yazıları beğeni topladı ve görsel çalışmalara uyarlandı. Bu araştırmada, erken modern dönem Pekin'inde ikamet eden Mançu bir baba ve oğlunu tasvir eden, tarihi ve modern göndermelerin yanı sıra Pekin Operası unsurlarıyla zenginleştirilmiş, 2007 tarihli Sınırsız Rıhtım başlıklı bir anlatıyı araştırıyorum. Erkek kahramanlara gösterilen eleştirel ilgiye rağmen, kadın karakterler büyük ölçüde göz ardı ediliyor ancak daha fazla incelemeyi hak ediyorlar; çünkü bu düşündürücü romanda baskın bir rol oynuyorlar ve övgüye değer, nadir değerler sergiliyorlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Mançu edebiyatı, tarihsel ve modern imalar, hoşgörü, iyimserlik, mizah, ezilen feminizm*

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Introduction

叶广岑 Ye Guangqin (1948-), a prolific Manchu writer born in Beijing, is renowned as a descendant of the royal Yehenara clan and for comprehension of the late Qing (1644-1912) aristocracy and demise of the imperial era (China Writer, 2016). By virtue of her familial background, Ye's chefs-d'oeuvre are exemplified by fiction capturing Beijing and Manchurian culture, such as 采桑子 *Caisangzi* 'Picking Mulberries' (Trans. Mine), 状元媒 *Zhuangyuan Mei* 'Marriage Arranged by the Top Scholar' (Trans. Mine), 全家福 *Quanjia Fu* 'A Family Portrait' (Trans. Mine), 琢玉记 *Zhuo Yu Ji* 'An Account of Jade Polishing' (Trans. Mine) and 本是同根生 *Benshi Tonggen Sheng* 'Born of the Same Root' (Trans. Mine) (Li, 2013, Fan, 2014, Yang, 2017, Zhang & Zhao, 2017, Xia, 2018).

Apart from myriads of narratives featuring predicaments and vicissitudes of affluent or impoverished families, Ye has composed insightful works concerning history, ecology, human-animal relationships and environmental protection, viz. novels 青木川 *Qingmuchuan* 'Greenwood Riverside' (2012) and 太阳宫 *Taiyang Gong* 'Sun Palace' (2022) as well as an anthology 山地故事 *Shandi Gushi* 'Mountain Stories' (2017), all of which have been rendered into English (Xia, 2012, Ren, 2017, Xue, 2017). Additionally, Ye's thought-provoking novellas 学车轶事 *Xue Che Yishi* 'Learner Drivers' Anecdotes' (Trans. Mine), 黄连厚朴 *Huanglian Houpu* 'Goldthread and Officinalis' (Trans. Mine) and a novel entitled 你找他苍茫大地无踪影 *Ni Zhao Ta Cangmang Dadi Wu Zongying* 'Nowhere to Be Found' (Trans. Mine) have been adapted into commendable films, viz. 红灯停, 绿灯行 *Hongdeng Ting, Lüdeng Xing* 'Signal Left, Turn Right' (1995), 黄连厚朴 *Huanglian Houpu* 'Beijing Herbs' (2000) and 谁说我不在乎 *Shui Shuo Wo Bu Zaihu* 'The Marriage Certificate' (2001); novels such as *Picking Mulberries*, *A Family Portrait* and *Greenwood Riverside* have been adapted into popular television serials (Huang and Liu, 2007, China Writer, 2016).

In this research, I scrutinise a 2007 novel entitled 逍遥津 *Xiaoyao Jin* 'Unfettered Wharf' (Trans. Mine)¹ that manifests Ye's literary prowess and deserves more critical attention. Albeit having two men as its protagonists, female characters in *Unfettered Wharf* play a preponderant role in terms of both the plot and the theme, so I investigate female characters in this narrative.

Literature Review

Ye's fiction preponderantly concerns late Qing and Republican (1912-1949) Peking (Beijing) and its modern incarnation during the Maoist period and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as well as Manchu Banner denizens from both ends of the social spectrum, whose fate is inextricably intertwined with that of the metropolis during the passage of time (Li, 2013, Wang, 2016, Xia, 2018).

¹ All titles and cited examples in this article are rendered into English by myself, except for novel titles *Greenwood Riverside*, *Mountain Stories* and *Sun Palace*, as well as film titles, viz. *Signal Left, Turn Right*, *Beijing Herbs* and *The Marriage Certificate*.

Ye's fiction encompasses Manchurian dwellers' extant customs, social norms, everyday trivialities, leisure activities, culinary delights, linguistic features and personality traits from a realist, humanistic and social/cultural-geographical perspective, indicating her sympathy for both downgraded nobles and quotidian masses and reflection on their interaction with ineluctable historical transitions (Fan, 2014, Xia, 2018).

A salient attribute of Ye's narration lies in her adept employment of Beijing Opera elements: protagonists and supporting roles in her stories are prone to exhibit a lifelong passion for and unstinting devotion to Beijing Opera either as performers or audiences, whereas the upper classes' disdain towards Beijing Opera entertainers is also demonstrated (Kong, 2017, Zhang & Zhao, 2017); more significantly, storylines of famed plays augur fictional characters' doom or decease (Yang 2017). For instance, in a novel entitled 谁翻乐府凄凉曲 *Shui Fan Yuefu Qiliang Qu* 'Dolorous Tunes in the Music Bureau' (Trans. Mine), characters' adoration of and participation in Beijing Opera link a series of scenes, in which various plays bode ill for future scenarios concerning both individuals and the entire society (Song, 2017, Zhang & Zhao, 2017).

By virtue of discourses pertaining to Beijing and Manchus, Ye's writing bears similitude to that of an illustrious novelist and dramatist 舒庆春 Shu Qingchun (1899-1966), who is an iconic figure of modern Chinese literature and is more celebrated for his nom de plume 老舍 Lao She (Bickers, 1994, Liu, 2010, Auerbach, 2013, Fusini, 2013). In his chefs-d'oeuvre exemplified by the 1937 novel 骆驼祥子 *Luotuo Xiangzi* 'Rickshaw Boy; Camel Xiangzi' (McDougall & Louie, 1997: 118, Zhao, 1997) and the 1958 play 茶馆 *Chaguan* 'Teahouse' (Ho, 1996, Yu, 2013, Prado-Fonts, 2014), Lao She innovatively and humorously employs vernacular to characterise pre-modern Peking and its Manchu Banner dwellers (Hsia, 1961, p.165, Chen, 2010, p.20, Sheng, 2010, Vandertop, 2019). Ye's writing is not only in accordance of the tradition of Lao She's narration regarding Beijing and Manchu families (Fan, 2018), but also enriched by contemporary discourse (Wang, 2016) and detailed depictions of ambrosial delicacies, luxurious clothing and cultivated recreations and professions, which is discrepant from Lao She's narratives featuring cataclysms of the working class (Huang & Wang, 2016).

In terms of *Unfettered Wharf*, after its publication in 北京文学 *Beijing Wenxue* 'Beijing Literature', it has been incorporated as a chapter into the novel *Marriage Arranged by the Top Scholar*, which is a reminiscent semi-biographical work illuminating Manchurian inhabitants' public personae, aesthetic pursuits, virtuous mentality and dispirited struggles, as well as Beijing's societal changes under revolutionary and modern contexts (Yang, 2017). In *Unfettered Wharf*, the author creates an impoverished Manchu father and his son, both of whom are devoted fans of Beijing Opera and a myriad of extravagant hobbies; after the handsome son falls prey to Japanese invaders and the father dies due to their beating, and

son avenges by perishing together with his enemies in an excruciating manner, which signifies dignity and ancestral worship of the Manchu ethnicity (Yang, 2017, Fan, 2018).

In this research, I scrutinise this novel from a hermeneutic perspective, discussing different female characters depicted in the narrative.

Allusions and Tolerance

Albeit being a novel concerning a Manchu Banner family, *Unfettered Wharf* abounds with cultural allusions encapsulated by Japanese invasion and Beijing Opera. The multifacetedness of Ye's writing lies in that in addition to narratives highlighting families and nature, as mentioned previously, there is a third salient theme, viz. Japan and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), epitomised by 注意熊出没 *Zhuyi Xiong Chumo* 'Wildness Nature Hokkaido' (Trans. Mine), 战争孤儿 *Zhanzheng Guer* 'War Orphans' (Trans. Mine), 广岛故事 *Guangdao Gushi* 'Story of Hiroshima' (Trans. Mine), etc (Gu, 2007, Zhong, 2007). In *Unfettered Wharf*, Ye creates a seamless integration of familial representation and wartime turbulence, which is unprecedented among her previous works focusing on a sole subject; apart from vivid portraits of daily trivialities such as ambrosial delicacies and gastronomic artistry, Ye describes characters' animus towards Japanese invaders, which is ascribed to her profound construal of war and history (Gu, 2007).

The title of *Unfettered Wharf* is derived from an illustrious play of Beijing Opera, which concerns helplessness of the last Han (206 BCE-220 CE) emperor, as shown in Example (1). More significantly, the title implies (pre-)modern China on the brink of a quagmire of cataclysmic demise, and the fate of Emperor Xian of Han in the play is in line with that of the two protagonists in the novel, whose humiliation and decease are induced by Japanese invaders (Yang, 2017).

(1) 《逍遥津》是出悲苦戏，说的是曹操威逼汉献帝的故事。曹操带剑入宫，乱棒打死了皇后，还鸩杀了皇帝的两个儿子，害得皇上在龙案后头哆哆嗦嗦地抱怨自己是猛虎失威，是孤魂怨鬼，是扬子江驾小舟，风飘浪打，不能回归。...我不懂一出杀人的戏为什么叫了个挺舒坦的名字《逍遥津》，也不知这个皇上怎的窝囊到只有唱，没有别的花样，比如拿个大顶、炮个小翻什么的.....

Unfettered Wharf was a tragedy about the forced abdication of Emperor Xian of Han. Cao Cao entered the royal palace with a sword, killing the empress and two princes by beating and poison. The emperor moaned that he was an impotent tiger, a lonely ghost and a drifting boat that could never return to the harbour... I did not understand why a drama about slaughter was named *Unfettered Wharf*, or why the useless emperor could only sing, without any athletic movements...

(Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

Nevertheless, I propound that the historical and modern allusions not only apply to the father and his son in the narrative, but also another preponderant character, viz. the eldest daughter named Daxiu. The protagonist ‘Great-Uncle’ is the incarnation of Banner people’s cultural personality, who are work-shy, pretentious and unperturbed (Fan 2018), as shown in Example (2). Analogously, his only son, Qingyu, is an intractable young man who is indolent about work (Example (3)). Owing to their slothfulness and the fact that pawning items cannot make ends meet, Daxiu has to find odd jobs making handcrafts, in addition to domestic chores. In this sense, this female character bears similitude to the impotent emperor in the play, in that Daxiu is incapable of choosing her natal family or transforming her father and brother into responsible, self-motivated men, so she has been witnessing the deterioration in a cognizant yet helpless manner.

(2) 七舅爷没工作, 全凭典当家底, 以前过惯了拿钱粮, 大撒把的日子, 猛地一收, 还真的有些刹不住车。七舅爷家穷, 但日子过得闲适。...舅爷家的小院不大, 但齐整, 廊子上挂着鸟笼子, 院里跑着京巴儿, 北屋窗前, 东边一棵红石榴, 西边一棵白海棠, 当中是陶制大缸, 里面养着金鱼。七舅爷起得晚, 每天太阳老高了才打着哈欠从屋里踱出来, 出来先看天, 凝神注目呆坐一个时辰, 才趿拉着鞋走到墙根, 打开他的鸽子笼, 让一群鸽子飞上蓝天.....

Great-Uncle did not work, but made money by frequently pawnshops. He was accustomed to the old days, so it was impossible to quit the extravagant lifestyle. Great-Uncle was impoverished, but his life was idle and leisurely... His house was not massive but self-contained. There were bird cages hanging in the corridor, a Pekingese dog playing in the garden, a pomegranate tree and a white begonia in front of the north wing, as well as goldfish in a big fish tank. Great-Uncle was not a morning person. Every day, he would not step out of his bedroom, yawning, until almost midday. He always stared at the sky indolently for a couple of hours, before walking sluggishly to the wall and opening his pigeon cages. His pet pigeons then flew into the sky for their daily exercise.

(Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

(3) 想着青雨会感激父亲的举荐, 不料青雨并不领情, 他跟大秀说这是给他戴嚼子, 让他拉磨, 当科员, 看人眼色仰人鼻息, 他受不了!...不是赵三大爷拿着青雨抄录的名单给我父亲看, 谁也不相信青雨会干出这样的事来, 只上了一天班的青雨就让人家给裁了, 在铁路局却落下了好名声, 他们甚至想推举青雨当工会代表。...被铁路局刷下来的青雨很快地回归了他的票友队伍, 见天打扮得油头粉面地出门, 不到天黑不回家。

We thought Qingyu would be grateful that my father found him a job, but he complained to his sister that everybody was using him, and he refused to be a junior clerk who had no freedom or authority... We could not believe Qingyu’s misbehaviour until Mr Zhao showed my father Qingyu’s prank as evidence. Qingyu was fired after his first day, but he earned a reputation for rebellion among the railway circle—those workers even wanted him to be a union representative... After being fired by the Railway Bureau, Qingyu immediately continued his

devotion to Beijing opera. Every day, he went out in flashy clothes with his fair-weather friends and would not return home until evening.

(Chapter 3. Trans. Mine)

Furthermore, the character Daxiu is prone to unpredictability triggered by her father and brother's capriciousness and selfishness, which is parallel to Emperor Xian of Han, whose life and family are subjected to the warlord Cao Cao. For instance, as can be seen from Example (4), notwithstanding impoverishment, Great-Uncle and his son Qingyu exhibit a devil-may-care attitude towards life and are inclined to be infatuated with costly yet unessential items, so their lack of far-sightedness and hence lavish purchases render the entire family, including Daxiu, even more deprived. In Example (4), despite the fact the father and the son are depicted as being sentimental, joyful and blessed with childlike innocence and curiosity, their daughter, as the diligent and only income-maker, is haunted by their short-sighted compulsions. That is to say, although the anecdote in Example (4) is recounted in a humorous fashion, from the perspective of Daxiu, it is rife with dolorousness and apprehension.

(4) 下午睡醒午觉爷俩就没影儿了, 没半个时辰, 就兴高采烈地将那个宝贝蝈蝈捧回来了, 当得知这个蝈蝈是父子俩用东郊太阳宫一亩七分坟地换来的时候, 大秀差点儿没背过气去。一个普通的蝈蝈罢了。...突然地青雨冒出一个问题, 他说, 爸, 坟地卖了, 将来咱们死了埋哪儿呢? 七舅爷也愣了, 想了半天说, 是啊, 咱们埋哪儿呢?

After lunch, Great-Uncle and Qingyu took a nap and dashed out. An hour later, they excitedly brought the expensive bush-cricket back home. Upon hearing that this bush-cricket was exchanged with a burial ground they owned near the Sun Palace, Daxiu almost fainted. It was just an ordinary bush-cricket...All of a sudden, Qingyu asked: 'Dad, we've sold our burial ground, right? Then where will we be buried in the future?' Great-Uncle pondered for a while and said: 'Hmm. Good question. Where will we be buried?'

(Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

It is notable that as a tolerant female character, Daxiu assumes the role of a daughter, which is not prevalent in literary works, in that such a personality trait is predominantly embodied by mothers. For instance, in Example (5), in order to attain epicurean pleasure, Great-Uncle requires his daughter to buy a snack under the circumstance that they are even void of basic foodstuffs; failing to have his requirement immediately satisfied, he deploys moral coercion by means of accusing her daughter of 'mistreatment'. As a consequence, Daxiu has to compromise again and dotes on her self-willed father in a motherly manner, which indicates a reverse-role relationship.

(5) 一转脸看见儿子手里吃半截的糖葫芦, 立即对风筝没了兴趣, 跟大秀说他也要吃糖葫芦, 吃山药夹豆沙沾瓜子的糖葫芦。大秀说没闲钱买糖葫芦, 七舅爷不高兴了, 说现在他混得连糖葫芦也吃不上, 儿女们就这么虐待老家

儿吗？大秀无奈地说，您现在跟个孩子似的，我从青雨衣裳里搜出了两块钱，刚够咱们这几天的饭钱。

As soon as Great-Uncle saw the half-eaten candied hawthorns in Qingyu's hand, he lost interest in the kite immediately and told Daxiu he wanted to eat candied hawthorns too—the fancy ones made of yam and sweetened bean paste and decorated with sunflower seeds. Daxiu said: 'We can't spare money on snacks.' Great-Uncle was unhappy: 'Now I can't even have candied hawthorns, can I? Does a daughter just mistreat her father like this?' Daxiu said: 'You're like a kid now. I found two yuan in Qingyu's pocket, but it's barely enough for a few days' meals.'

(Chapter 3. Trans. Mine)

Analogously, Daxiu's younger sister, Erxiu, also has been assuming a quasi-mother role when interacting with her playful and capricious father (Example (6)). Both female characters are described to possess tolerance since childhood, with the absence of their mother who dies prematurely.

(6) 七舅爷就是嘴上的功夫，有了虾米皮疙瘩汤便不再坚持烩海参，一转脸就把海参忘了，直着嗓子让二秀把桌底下紫罐的虎头大阔翅拿来。二秀六岁，面对着桌底下一排蚰蚰罐不知取舍，问她爸爸虎头大阔翅是不是让人咬了大夯的那个。七舅爷说，是咬了别人大夯的那个。接过蚰蚰罐，掀开一道缝，拿马尾很小心地拨弄他的“虎头”，“虎头”在罐里嘟嘟地叫，七舅爷在罐外头也嘟嘟地叫，整个一个大蚰蚰。七舅爷让二秀给他的“虎头”弄俩大青豆来，二秀说没有青豆，七舅爷让二秀去想办法，二秀就把自己玩的包拆了，把里面的豆子掏出来，拿水泡上，小姑娘心里挺拿不准，也不知是不是青豆。

Great-Uncle just said it. When Daxiu made the flour soup with dried baby shrimps, he stopped insisting on sea cucumbers. After lunch, he ordered Erxiu to fetch his favourite cricket called 'Tiger-head'. Facing a row of cricket jars, the six-year-old girl was confused, so she asked her dad: 'Did you mean the one that was bitten on its thigh?' 'No, he's the one who bit his rival's thigh.' Great-Uncle opened the jar and carefully prodded 'Tiger-head' with a horse tail. While 'Tiger-head' was making noises inside the jar, Great-Uncle was mimicking it outside the jar, like a giant cricket. Great-Uncle ordered Erxiu to get two big peas for 'Tiger-head'. 'But we don't have peas at home.' 'Then find some.' Erxiu had to broke her toy and soaked the beans inside in water. The little girl was not sure whether they were the kind of peas her father wanted.

(Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

Optimism and Humour

In *Unfettered Wharf*, apart from the two protagonists, a female character is also featured by optimistic mentality, viz. Great-Uncle's wife. This female character only appears briefly in the narrative, whereas the author paints a very vivid

portrait of her as a woman who retains childlike curiosity and displays perpetual gratitude in the face of predicaments and vicissitudes of life. In Example (7), Ye represents an optimistic woman with inner equilibrium, who can appreciate even a wasp with her equally happy-go-lucky husband. According to the author, their optimism accords with Taoist credos, and to be more specific, the creeds prescribed by two illustrious philosophers 老子 Laozi (circa 6thc BCE) and 庄子 Zhuangzi (circa late 4thc BCE). Being a legendary thinker, Laozi is the founder of the Laoist school and the supreme divinity of religious Taoism, and his chef-d'oeuvre is a canonical classic entitled 道德经 *Dao De Jing* 'Tao Te Ching' that illuminates Taoist beliefs and practices (Chan, 2000, 2010, 2018, Kirkland, 2004, p.42, Waley, 2005, p.20-21, Nadeau, 2014, p.65). Having its pivotal conceptions saliently established on Laozi's teachings, *Zhuangzi* not only functions as an edifying commentary on *Dao Te Ching* in an integrated form of prose and poetry, but also manifests a fecundity of imagination encapsulated by a myriad of enlightening metaphors, allegories, parables and fables (Mair, 2000). Additionally, *Zhuangzi* is extolled for profound metaphysical thinking and Taoist canons capturing a multitude of issues pertaining to ethical evaluation, societal involvement, human behaviour, the spirit of individual emancipation, etc (Hansen, 2014, Coutinho, 2016). In a humanistic, naturalistic, mystical and postmodernist way, *Zhuangzi* encompasses fundamental philosophical strands such as 道 *dao* 'way', 无为 *wuwei* 'non-action' and 自然 *ziran* 'naturalness' (Liu, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), along with acts exemplified by 坐忘 *zuowang* 'sitting in oblivion' (Chan, 2000).

(7) 七舅爷对生活的乐观松心和七舅奶奶对穷窘日子的自然虚明, 无思无虑, 达到了老庄的境界, 让今天的我敬佩不已。他们对生活充满感激和喜悦, 充满了理解和想象, 就是窗台上偶尔落下一只歇脚的马蜂, 也能让两口子欣赏半天。

Great-Uncle was always optimistic about life, and his wife just ignored impoverishment. Their carefree mindset had reached the realm of Laozi and Zhuangzi, which still awed me today. They were filled with eternal gratitude and blitheness towards life, as well as abundant comprehension and imagination. Even a wasp that occupationally landed on their windowsill could attract their interest and attention.

(Chapter 1. Trans. Mine)

It is notable that the title of the narrative, 逍遥津 *Xiaoyao Jin*, is comprised of a noun 津 *jin* 'wharf' and an adjective 逍遥 *xiaoyao* that is identical to the one in Chapter 逍遥游 *Xiaoyao You* 'Free and Easy Wandering' (Trans. Liu, 2015a) from *Zhuangzi*. 'Free and easy wandering' in the sense of Zhuangzi denotes an unconventional status of being carefree, unrestrained and lingering, in which 'the broad and unhindered spirit is of one mind with the world' (Chen, 2016, p.5). 'Free and easy', therefore, is regarded to be positive pleasure derived from the process of attaining dependencelessness (无待 *wudai*) and spiritual freedom,

during which one's quest for external greatness has been converted into a quest for internal wisdom (Jiang, 2019). *Unfettered Wharf* is not a light-hearted work, and the characters Great-Uncle and his wife in the narrative fail to live an affluent life or achieve worldly success, yet they exhibit a blithe disregard for plight and apprehension, which is consistent with the Taoist construal of preserving 'free and easy' mindset. That is to say, the *Unfettered Wharf* is enriched with both Beijing Opera allusions as well as philosophical and religious constructs.

I postulate that Great-Uncle's wife in the narrative bears resemblance to the heroine of a celebrated autobiography 浮生六记 *Fusheng Liuji* 'Six Records of a Floating Life', which is the chef-d'oeuvre of a versatile intellectual 沈复 Shen Fu (1763-1825). *Six Records of a Floating Life* is renowned for Shen's vivid portrait of his wife 芸 Yun (Doleželová-Velingerová & Doležel, 1972, Huangfu, 2019), a meritorious woman who been granted the ultimate accolade by virtue of her intelligence, diligence and thoughtfulness (Zhai & Zhang, 2009, Xia, 2012, Sun, 2014), as well as adoration of and loyalty to her husband (see Huangfu, 2019, among many others). For instance, as extolled by 林语堂 Lin Yutang (1895-1976), the English translator of *Six Records of a Floating Life* and a leading bilingual writer (Guan, 2014, Zhang, 2015, Cui & Wang, 2016), Yun is 'one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature' (Lin, 1999, Zhang, 2004, Xia, 2012). The similitude between Yun in *Six Records of a Floating Life* and Great-Uncle's wife in *Unfettered Wharf* lies in that the former's turbulent life is also rife with a quagmire of travails and premature decease (Pratt & Chiang, 1983, p.17, Chang, 2017). More significantly, Yun never bemoans poverty or suffering, but manifests optimism and love for life (Zhai & Zhang, 2009, Sun, 2014), which is parallel to Great-Uncle's wife, as shown in Example (7).

There is no denying the fact that the character in *Unfettered Wharf* is still restricted by the time and society she lives in: she is disposed to be impregnated as an elderly primipara driven by the immemorial, infamous and irresistible son preference. Owing to Confucian filial piety and ancestral worship (Hwang, 1999, Chan & Tan, 2004), pre-modern China under a patriarchal system was marked by a widespread yearning for male heirs (Croll, 1985a, Li & Cooney, 1993, Wang et al., 2020). From a familial perspective, male offspring extended ancestral lines and thus promoted their mothers' postnuptial status (Lee et al., 1994, Bernhardt, 1995, Bray, 1997, p.114); from a societal perspective, male offspring attained higher income in agrarian production (Gustafsson and Li, 2000, Ge & Zeng, 2011, Guo & Yan, 2015). Therefore, notwithstanding her 'free and easy' mentality, as a female character living in the early 20th century, Great-Uncle's wife in *Unfettered Wharf* is still subjected to prevailing son preference and hence her premature decease caused by eclampsia upon giving birth of her son Qingyu.

Furthermore, Ye's novels and novellas are characterised by a delightful sense of humour (Huang & Wang, 2016, Zhang & Zhao, 2017), which can be attested from her depiction of Daxiu in *Unfettered Wharf*. Example (8) represents Great-

Uncle's pursuit of carnal desires provoked by ambrosial delicacies, culinary artistry and epicurean enjoyment, in line with his Banner counterparts who refuse to refrain from an extravagant lifestyle or aristocratic manners (Huang & Wang, 2016, Xue, 2017). Additionally, Example (8) serves as another paradigm indicating Great-Uncle's vexatious demands, in that he behaves like a spoiled child and requests Nanjing bamboo shoot and duck soup that their family cannot afford; Daxiu, therefore, has to display constant tolerance towards her father's deeds by replying that they have Beijing water and flour soup. Daxiu's sense of humour lies in that Beijing (Lit. 'north capital'), water and flour in her response form one-to-one contrasts with Nanjing (Lit. 'south capital'), bamboo shoot and duck in her father's request. Moreover, when her epicure brother unrealistically requests a culinary delight, she does not complain about his inopportune joke (Example (8)).

(8) 大秀端着托盘过来, 让她爸吃饭。七舅爷说他想喝碗南京春笋炖鸭汤。大秀说咱们有北京清水疙瘩汤, 说着将一个个小碟在桌上摆了, 碟里有各种咸菜, 看着很热闹, 其实没什么内容, 北京的穷旗人向来爱摆谱, 所谓的倒驴不倒架, 再没吃的, 几碟咸菜得撑在那儿。大秀将两碗疙瘩汤给父亲和弟弟一人一碗。青雨说, 汤里缺点儿嫩羊肉。大秀说, 吃吧你!

Daxiu brought the meal to her father with a tray. Great-Uncle said he wanted Nanjing bamboo shoot and duck soup. Daxiu told him they had Beijing water and flour soup, while laying an array of saucers on the table. Although their meal looked splendid, there were only salted vegetables on the saucers. Deprived Banner people residing in Beijing never gave up presentation—even if they had nothing to eat, salted vegetables must be displayed with several saucers. Daxiu handed her father and brother each a bowl of flour soup. Qingyu said: 'You should have added tender lamb in the soup.' Daxiu replied: 'Just eat!'

(Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

Oppressed Feminism

The character Daxiu in *Unfettered Wharf* is depicted to value her own face and possess dignity and pride (Fan, 2018). There is no denying the fact Great-Uncle also regards face as being all-important, as illuminated by his pretentiousness in Example (8). In stark contrast to her father and brother, Daxiu's perception of face lies in independence and self-reliance, and thus dignity and self-esteem. As can be seen from Example (9), Daxiu has been endeavouring to make meagre income herself, so as not to resort to relatives' succour.

(9) 有一段时间, 大秀到我们家来得很勤, 母亲知道大秀的意思, 补花作坊停工了, 连大秀过冬的棉袄都送进了当铺。母亲就掏钱, 掏钱的时候多背着父亲, 为的是不给大秀难堪。母亲知道, 大秀是个极要脸面, 内心很敏感的姑娘, 跟舅爷和他儿子的性情不一样。大秀跟我母亲说, 她把家里的面口袋翻了个个儿, 将里面的面扫尽, 那面也没盖过盆底儿。柜子、抽屉都空空如也, 家里能拿得出去当的东西什么也没有了。

There was a period of time when Daxiu visited us very frequently. My mother knew what happened to Daxiu: she could not find odd jobs making handcrafts, so she even had her coat taken to a pawnshop. My mother always gave Daxiu money, and most of times, she did it without my father's presence, so that Daxiu would not feel too embarrassed. My mother knew that Daxiu was a sensitive woman with dignity, unlike her father and brother. Daxiu told my mother: 'I turned the flour bag inside out and swept it throughout, but the flour could not even cover the bottom of a bowl. There's nothing I can take to the pawnshop—all cabinets and drawers are empty.'

(Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, *Unfettered Wharf* has its main setting spanning from the 1910s to 1940s, when Chinese women's societal and familial status was impinged upon by the extant patriarchal system. On the threshold of the 20th century, when China's sovereignty was catastrophically imperilled by colonial brutality and tensions among social classes, there was women's liberation and gender equality movement, triggered by foreign dominance and international class movements (Zuo, 2013, Wang, 2019). China's modernist elite, such as the pioneering May Fourth scholar 胡适 Hu Shi (1891-1962), propounded a construal of 'new woman' as a novel gender category, who was expected to be a rational and independent thinker and to defy orthodox rites and norms (礼法 *lifa*), as opposed to a submissive 'traditional woman' (Chien, 1995, Kang, 2017). Nevertheless, the May Fourth Feminist movement failed to eradicate the gender stratification in Chinese society or reach the vast majority of non-elite women residing in rural areas (Li, 2000, Liu, 2007). Prior to the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949, gender segregation still prevailed, and the Women's Federation was not founded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) until 1949, which advocated mobilising women for production, broke down their social isolation, protected their newly-won rights, as well as enhanced their self-confidence, educational level, political understanding and vocational ability (Davín, 1976, p.65-68, Croll, 1978, p.228, 1979, p.6, 1985b, p.145-147). Therefore, it can be assumed that notwithstanding Daxiu's diligence and motivation, her lack of a well-paid, full-time occupation (Example (9)) is ascribed to social proscription. Moreover, as can be seen from Example (10), Daxiu's identity as an unmarried woman even renders her interaction with shopkeepers, who are surmised to be male, inappropriate in her time.

(10) 出殡发表得要钱, 大秀给附近铺面的掌柜们挨家磕头, 求人帮忙。这实际是一种特殊情景下的乞讨, 大秀一个未出阁的姑娘, 抛头露面做这样的事也是万般无奈, 走到绝地了。

Great-Uncle's funeral needed money. Daxiu kowtowed to local shopkeepers one by one and begged them to chip in. This was actually begging. Unmarried women were not supposed to do it, but the desperate Daxiu had no choice.

(Chapter 6. Trans. Mine)

Therefore, although Daxiu longs to attain economic independence as part of feminist awareness, her helplessness is the embodiment of oppressed feminism prior to the 1940s.

Another aspect of Daxiu's oppressed feminism is epitomised by her lack of nuptial freedom owing to family-based oppression of Chinese women since time immemorial. The 1950 Marriage Law formulated by CCP marked a shift from family-based restriction to limited individual choice, functioning as a milestone in terms of China's transition from feudalism to socialism (Diamant, 2000, Hershtatter, 2004). From the 1960s onwards, there was a revolution initiated by the CCP regarding marriage reform and Chinese women's liberation and agency, so in the 1960s, a list of artistic works was released to promulgate a novel concept of 'self-determination' (自主 *zizhu*) that promoted women's autonomy for choosing their matrimonial partners (Coale, 1989, Cong, 2006). That is to say, prior to the CCP revolution, when Daxiu is due to establish a matrimonial relationship in the 1920s, she is deprived of free choice. By virtue of her father's unrealistic expectations of quality-of-life improvement via her marriage, or potentially, selfishness to retain her for household chores and income forever, Daxiu cannot have a spousal relationship (Example (11)).

(11) 有了爷俩的“作”，就有了大秀的难。母亲常说，七舅爷家只要没了大秀，那爷俩一天也过不下去。眼瞅着，大秀二十八了，早该谈婚论嫁了，也有来说媒的，可七舅爷的眼光太高，说是养女攀高门，他钮七爷家的格格有三不嫁，没有四品爵位不嫁，当填房不嫁，城圈以外不嫁……早是民国了，哪儿找四品爵位去？就是有了相当四品的官员，哪个肯空虚着夫人位置等待大秀？总之，非常非常的不现实，活活把个大秀在家里耽搁着。我母亲明白，大秀出嫁的前提是青雨爷俩得自食其力，可那爷俩全没有自食其力的意思。靠了大秀那点微薄的补花收入，只能是一天两顿稀粥，至于七舅爷那点儿家底，零敲碎打地进了当铺，再也找不出什么可当的东西。

Daxiu's hardship was exactly caused by her naughty father and brother. My mother often said that without Daxiu, Great-Uncle and Qingyu could not survive for a day. Daxiu was approaching her twenty-eighth birthday, quite old for an unmarried woman. There were matchmakers before, but Great-Uncle insisted to marry his daughter up. According to him, his daughter must marry at least a viscount residing in inner Beijing, as the first wife...The imperial Qing had long perished, so who still had a title? Even if there were Republican officials with equivalent status, who would maintain bachelorhood just for Daxiu? In a word, it was very very unrealistic. Daxiu was becoming a spinster. My mother understood that unless Great-Uncle and Qingyu could support themselves, Daxiu could never get married, but neither the two men planned to get a job. With Daxiu's low income from making handcrafts, the family could only afford two meals a day, having diluted porridge. As for the family's previous possessions, they had been taken to pawnshops bit by bit, and nothing valuable was left.

(Chapter 3. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, Daxiu strives to facilitate her younger sister's marriage and free the latter from exploitation imposed on by their nuptial family (Example (12)).

(12) 二秀早早地嫁了，嫁到了湖北武汉，男人在洋船上当二副，收入不错。二秀知道家里的情况，隔三岔五就汇点儿钱来，不敢直接汇家去，汇到我母亲这儿，由我母亲转交。依着七舅爷，二秀绝不能嫁到长江边上去，没有皇上的旨意，北京的王爷都不能随便出京，北京的旗人姑娘当然也不能随便嫁出京城，特别是他钮七爷的闺女更不能。那个九头鸟的姑爷看上了二秀水灵，到七舅爷家跑了好几趟，七舅爷就是不答应，非跟人家要沾过宋朝露水的蝈蝈做聘礼，成心刁难。九头鸟上哪儿找宋朝蝈蝈去，亲事眼瞅着要黄，大秀搬出我母亲当救兵，将二秀嫁了二副，她知道，这个家是个无底的船，早晚得沉，逃出去一个是一个。

Erxiu married at a very young age and moved to Wuhan, Hubei. Her husband was a well-paid second mate of a foreign ship. Erxiu knew her family's situation, so she often sent some money over, and because she knew her father and brother, she always asked my mother to pass the money on to her sister. According to Great-Uncle, his daughter must not marry a man living besides the Yangzi River—without the emperor's fiat, no royal member should leave Beijing, and of course, no Banner maiden should marry a man outside Beijing, especially the daughter of himself, Lord Niu. The Hubei bloke liked the pretty Erxiu and visited Great-Uncle several times, but Great-Uncle was rather stubborn, and he insisted bush-crickets born in the Song dynasty as a betrothal gift. Where could the Hubei bloke find bush-crickets that were hundreds of years old? Before the bloke gave up, Daxiu asked my mother to persuade Great-Uncle and married Erxiu off to him. Daxiu understood that this family was a bottomless boat that would sink sooner or later, so it would be good if at least one of them could escape.

(Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

Daxiu's acquiescence and complaisance are prescribed by the extant precepts of 三从四德 *san cong si de* 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues', viz. a set of rigorous institutions dictating women's comportment (Feng 1948/2007, p.40, Gao, 2003, Rosenlee, 2006, p.90-92, Lee, 2009). 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' is derived from an immemorial treatise on women's prenuptial education, which is a 106 CE rhetoric entitled 女诫 *Nü Jie* 'Lessons for Women' composed by a female scholar 班昭 Ban Zhao (circa 48-117 CE) (Chang, 2000, Donawerth, 2002, p.14, Wing, 2003). 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' is constituted of two parts: the former orders that a woman must obey her father prior to marriage, her husband during marriage and her son in widowhood, and the latter orders that a woman must observe moral values, utter punctilious expressions, maintain decent demeanour and conduct household chores (Hamilton & Wang, 1992, p.85, Lee, 1998, Pang-White, 2016).

Conclusion

Female characters in *Unfettered Wharf* are featured by a range of commendable traits, exemplified by Daxiu and her sister's motherly tolerance towards their irresponsible and capricious father and brother. Furthermore, the character Great-Uncle's wife can be adulated for her optimism and inner equilibrium, in that notwithstanding impoverishment and predicaments, she retains childlike curiosity and demonstrates perpetual gratitude for life. In this sense, this female character manifests Taoist 'free and easy' mindset and bears similitude to the heroine Yun in *Six Records of a Floating Life*. Additionally, female characters such as Daxiu are marked by a delightful sense of humour in the face of Great-Uncle and Qingyu's inadvisable requests. Nevertheless, female characters' feminist awareness in the narrative are opposed by the patriarchal society and family in the early 20th century, along with the immemorial 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues', which leads to Daxiu's helplessness and tragic fate.

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