

Male Ideology and Female Identity: Images of Women in Four Modern Chinese Historical Plays

Haiping Yan

Modern Chinese historical drama emerged with the modern spoken drama in the May 4th New Culture Movement in the early 20th century. The modern spoken drama, a Chinese imitation and appropriation of the form of Western modern drama which putatively began with Ibsen, was a radical negation of the Chinese traditional theatre represented by forms such as classical Peking Opera. Starting in 1917, *New Youth*, which was launched by a group of young intellectuals and became one of the most influential journals of the New Culture Movement, vigorously criticized the traditional theatre in which "no man speaks human language" and advocated a new drama about "real people's real life."¹ In their radical challenge to the traditional theatre, some of the young intellectuals argued that the genre of historical drama could not do anything useful but "repeat the old habits and stories."² Guo Mo-ruo, a radical activist and one of the founders of modern Chinese literature, had a different view on this issue. In his opinion, the long history of China contains "the soul of the nation and indicates its future fate." What he wanted to do, as he announced in 1923, was to project a living energy into the dead skin of history and to generate a new form of historical drama which combines the past and the present into an image of the future.³ The trilogy named *Three Rebellious Women* was his first dramatization of this theoretical claim and, in a literal sense, the beginning of modern Chinese historical drama.

The title—*Three Rebellious Women*—raises several questions: Why did this man choose three women from the past to stage his ideas concerning the present? What did he attempt to indicate through the images of these women? And how do these images figure in his representation of Chinese history? In short, what is embodied in this textual complex in which the past is recapitulated and the

Haiping Yan, currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Theatre and East Asian Studies at Oberlin College, received her Ph.D. from Cornell University and is the author of a prize-winning historical drama (staged in Shanghai, Shenyang, and Hong Kong), historical fiction, a film script, and television plays. She has published critical essays on modern and traditional Chinese drama, modern European drama, comparative dramatic literature and cross-cultural issues, as well as translations. She is currently compiling an anthology of Chinese drama, from 1978 to the present.

present articulated through particular female images dramatized by a male writer? These questions shall serve as the focus of my analysis of Guo's trilogy and, moreover, as the starting point in my examination of four twentieth century Chinese plays using historical female protagonists.

Zhuo Wen-jun,⁴ the first play of the trilogy, was written in 1923. According to the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian (145 B.C.— ?)⁵, Wen-jun was a young widow from a rich family who fell in love with Sima Xiang-ru, a poor poet of genius. After Sima persuaded her to elope with him, the father was outraged; but eventually he weakened and gave a big sum of money to the "shameful couple." Although the story had a happy ending thanks to the recognition given by a father figure, the name of Wen-jun was still stigmatized through literally thousands of years. Even as late as the time of the Republic (1911-1949), some "moralists" still condemned Wen-jun as a "bad woman."⁶

Guo Mo-ruo's representation of the story in the 1920s was clearly a challenge to the traditional moralists. Wen-jun in his vision is a courageous woman who values her individual feelings more than the order of the patriarchal society embodied by her father. She does not go off secretly—that is, *elope*—with Sima as Sima Qian recorded—and hence is immune from the pervasive silence and implicit sense of guilt which are often associated with the action of eloping. Instead, she declares her emotional attachment openly and opposes her father's will directly. More important, she seems capable of articulating what she chooses to do with remarkable eloquence. When her father and her father-in-law order her to commit suicide because what she does is absolutely disgraceful and intolerable in their eyes, she not only refuses but gives a solid rationale for her action:

I have treated you in a way that a daughter and daughter-in-law treats her father and father-in-law; now I am treating you as an equal human being. The old moral system made by You Men and sustained by You Old Men, cannot constrain us—the awakened young people, the awakened women—any more! . . . My behavior, I believe, will be praised by the people in future!⁷

Between Wen-jun's choice not to elope with Sima and her open announcement with a particular value-conviction about her romantic attachment to Sima, one may argue, there is a moment of possibility opening up for interpreting or constructing the meaning of her attachment in its relation to a reconstituting of her identity. Yet this moment of possibility, as the above quotation indicates, soon disappears into Wen-jun's particular verbalization which legitimizes, moralizes, and politicizes her attachment to Sima in a specific

discourse. In this long speech, there are several voices overlapping one another. We can hear, to begin with, echoes of western humanism. People are *essentially* equals. Prior to social identities such as father and daughter, lies the universal human being with equal rights and independence. This ontologized image of Man with a capital M forms the point of departure for Wen-jun's rationalization of her romantic feelings and, as the play unfolds, serves as the ultimate goal of her struggle. This ultimate goal, as I will discuss more specifically later, indicates that Wen-jun's attachment to Sima is based upon a type of humanistic consciousness which, while endorsing the truly liberating elements that the anti-imperial struggle contained for both Chinese men and women in the early of the 20th century, also obscures and submerges the socio-historically bound anti-patriarchal dimension in women's struggle. Associated with this humanistic ontology, furthermore, the western rationalistic concept of history as a process of necessary progress is also implemented in Wen-jun's speech. Made possible by the conceptualization of time and underlaid by the conviction that the future is always universally and necessarily better than the past, such a concept, while in an important way functioning to endorse and privilege Wen-jun's struggle, points to a "future" in which putatively all the undue differences between men and women should disappear into their ontologically shared humanity.

The questions one would naturally ask with regard to the ontologized Man and a totalized future are the following: What is contained in this image of Man for women as socio-historically bound human beings? What does such a "future" specifically imply for women in their relationship with men? In the case of the play, what did Wen-jun, the rebellious woman, obtain through her rebellion against her father? What would be Wen-jun's social status and identity in a "future" such as is indicated in the play? It is important to note that the playwright, while being rather forceful in his rejection of the old patriarchal morality, is elusive about women's status in his paradisiacal "future" of Man. In his appendix to the trilogy, Guo Mo-ruo writes:

According to the old morality, our Chinese women have to strictly follow three principles of obedience: when she is a maiden at home, she shall obey her father; after she gets married she shall obey her husband; if her husband dies, she shall obey her son. Through all her life, a woman is always the dependent of men and never is allowed a moment of independence. These three principles have indeed crystallized the male-centered morality in a completely naked manner. . . . Now, it is time for women to awake! They have been sinking under the male-centered morality for thousands of years and have sacrificed all their lives. They must first fight to be a real human

being, then they will be able to ask for equal participation and competition in the society.

Guo concludes, "Wen-jun is an excellent example of a challenge to the patriarchal order, and this is the most important motivation underlying my play."⁸ But what does this "excellent example" choose to do to be a "real human being?" The answer is very clear: She asserts herself as a "real human being" by winning a husband. For the stage direction in the last scene Guo wrote, "Sima appears on the stage, gentle, rather tall and in a long white robe. Wen-jun looks up towards Sima, Sima comes to Wen-jun, holding her hands, looking down on Wen-jun with deep emotion for a long time."⁹ The tone here is very tender. After having gone through all the sufferings, the woman now is in safe hands—a good man's hands of course. Wen-jun loses her father who belongs to the past, but she does not lose the male endorsement dramatized in the image of her husband as the representative of the future.

The feminist dimension of the genuine dynamics contained in her rebellion against her father is not only implicitly appropriated into the androcentric humanistic discourse I have pointed out, but explicitly domesticated through her relationship with Sima. It is strongly suggested in this last scene that, in the mythologized humanistic "future," Wen-jun is going to remain as an admiring and worshipping "female" to the opposite of her sex—although the opposite this time of a "new" and historically conditioned "progressive" sex. The relationship between Wen-jun and Sima which has been highly romanticized throughout the play is hereby crystallized as being entirely unproblematic. This unproblematic relationship is accompanied and foregrounded by the distinct break between the father and the daughter in the play. In the historical story recorded by Sima Qian, Wen-jun and Sima lived on her father's money happily ever after. In Guo's play there is no compromise between the Old and the New. The father absolutely refuses to accept this couple's relationship and Wen-jun hence makes an absolute break with her father in order to join Sima.

This ending is not accidental. Wen-jun's absolute break with her father and unproblematic union with her husband are highly suggestive of the author's desire. A significant shift has taken place between the historical model and its artistic counterpart when the play unfolds in such a way. The feminist dynamics contained in the conflicts between Wen-jun and her father have been finally resolved into a clear-cut dichotomy between the New husband-wife union and the Old father-daughter ties. The discontinuity between the two cannot obscure and in fact precisely reveals the continuity between the two—the continuity of male primacy. The conflict between the rebellious woman and patriarchal morality, in short, is displaced into the conflict between the Old Man and New Man. Wen-

jun remains as an object to be essentially defined by her male companion rather than a self-defining subject. As we mentioned earlier, Guo's sympathy with rebellious Chinese women and their struggle against male-centered morality was clearly based on his general humanistic conviction. The difference between the humanistic conviction of universal human equality and the feminist struggle for equality¹⁰ lies in the fact that the former is epistemologically universalized and the latter is socio-politically anchored. What is submerged in the claim of the universalized human equality, as manifested in the play, is the socio-historically bound particularities of humanity—the particularities that could be expressed through, for instance, the feminist discourse. The danger of such a claim, as I have pointed out in my above analysis and will discuss further below, lies in its intrinsic function to repress or erase genuine difference¹¹ in a given human society through its particular ideology. The notion of equality in the feminist agenda, on the other hand, insists on the specific conflictual dynamics of human relationships in historically conditioned processes and resists various essentialistic theoretical reductions, among which the humanistic discourse is an important type. What feminist practice attempts, as Michèle Barrett concisely articulates, is "to break away from reductionism, and to locate sexuality and gender identity in the specificity of historical ideological processes."¹²

Applying such an analysis to Guo's play immediately problematizes the complex multiplicity of meanings which the image of Wen-jun evokes. Such a perspective acknowledges both Wen-jun the Chinese woman who lived during the Han Dynasty, and Wen-jun the character of a 20th century drama—a drama in which she acts as spokesperson for the ontologized humanity formulated in the 17th and 18th century West. This complex matrix of images embodies a particular ideology which is humanistic by its nature and androgenic in its function. As an explicit challenge to the Chinese imperial moral order in the 20s, the humanist discourse does suggest a revolutionary alternative. The fact that the playwright does not follow the historically recorded story and changes Wen-jun's reconciliation with her father into an absolute break may be an indication of the degree of the author's desire to break away from the "father-order," a desire that is so strong that he cannot see any possible presence of the Old in the "future" of the New. As an assertion for a re-construction of the male-female relationship, on the other hand, the androcentric "high-argument"¹³ of humanism re-inscribes what it is used to undermine. Wen-jun's unconditional admiration for her husband can be viewed as an externalization of the male desire to be not just followed, but worshiped by the ideal female. It is the authorial voice which speaks through Wen-jun and through the dramatization of her story, the voice of a playwright who had an education in modern western science,¹⁴ was living at the turning point of modern Chinese history, and fighting against the imperial order

characterized by its traditional patriarchy while promoting the western humanistic ideology. In this image of a woman from the past lives the soul of a man, an author, struggling in the present.

This Self in Other, Present in Past, provides a revealing emblem of the social historical situation in China in the 1920's. Guo Mo-ruo projects an image of Wen-jun as a young rebel fighting against a particular "father order"—a fight which has important relevance to but cannot be identified with women's struggle against the inveterate Chinese patriarchal tradition. The historically conditioned complicity of Chinese men in such a tradition—the recognition of which does not replace the exploration of the absolutely crucial political, social and moral differentiations among them and the complexity of their radically differentiated relationships with women—appears absent in Guo Mo-ruo's dramatization. The play suggests to us that the old imperial moral system as characterized by Guo could no longer hold people in the society together, and that the disintegration of such a system opens up possibilities for imagining different but nonetheless androgenic cultural alternatives. It also suggests that it was under such circumstances that the women's movement was recognized and praised by Guo Mo-ruo, among many other young male intellectuals, through a perceptible psychological displacement. In *Zhuo Wen-jun*, a Chinese woman is used as a symbolic and temporary advance guard in social transformation. Women's socio-political and economical marginality in an established male-dominated society made it more feasible for them to be appropriated as the symbols of the agents of social change, "the first, temporary inhabitants of the future,"¹⁵ as Juliet Mitchell has put it. Such a coming "future" as indicated through Guo's dramatic representation of a woman's present struggle, does embody a radical discontinuity with the past, but this discontinuity is not as thorough or complete as the playwright himself thinks; the continuity of the male gaze as materialized in Wen-jun's unconditioned admiration of Sima—a figure who is significantly different from her father but nonetheless a male providing leadership, morality, and security—is visible.

Wen-jun, this "first inhabitant of the future," mediated in Western humanistic discourse as she is, indicates an important message for the development of modern Chinese history in the early part of this century. As Guo sees it, this message provides the moral ground for oppressed people to fight against their oppressors. From his many writings, one can see that Guo's cultural advocacy of women's liberation was also a derivation of his political rationalities about the oppressed social classes as defined by Marxism. Guo Mo-ruo's sympathy with the women's liberation movement was directed by his commitment to what he called "the socialist revolution" in China in the 1920s. This commitment to a revolutionary social transformation enabled him to see in

the women's movement a hope for a better society in the future from which both Chinese women and men would benefit. In his appendix to the trilogy,¹⁶ he compared women's struggle against oppression by the patriarchal moral order with the worker's fight against the exploitation by the ruling social group:

Socialism means to raise class consciousness to start the class struggle; the feminist movement means to raise the consciousness of sexuality to start the struggle for women's liberation. The working class has been oppressed by the capitalist social organization, they are asking for the equality of wealth, but the capitalists still treat them as inferior species. Women have been fettered under the male-centered morality, they are asking for the equality between men and women, but the supporters of the male-centered morality still view them as being wildly arrogant and crush them down violently. [. . .] Some people say that women are inferior to men, that they are different animals, and that the difference between women and men is similar to the difference between orang-utan and humans. [. . .] It is the male-centered morality which has orang-utanized women! And after turning women into a kind of orang-utan, it has been turning men into the same thing. We Chinese men are deteriorating day by day and have obtained and developed all the bad qualities such as jealousy, suspiciousness, obedience, laziness, dependence, nasty gossiping, frivolity, knowing nothing outside of family, knowing nothing besides the tiny self, all these so-called 'feminine weaknesses' are fully manifested in our men's characters! We have already sunk to such an extent, really we don't want to try to save ourselves?!¹⁷

The enthusiasm and a sense of devotion displayed by the author here towards the struggle of the oppressed people can hardly be overestimated. A full recognition of its significance, however, does not prevent one from seeing that such an enthusiasm is gender-related but gender-blind. While pointing out the revolutionary core shared by the socialist transformation and feminist movement, and powerfully arguing that the male-centered morality not only oppresses women but also men, Guo seems to have entirely overlooked the different processes and mechanisms in which women and men have been "orang-utanized" and the different implications and effects that the different processes exercise on men and women in a given historical time and place. It is interesting to see that Guo in his writing was unconsciously but clearly shifting his attention from women to men. By the end of the paragraph, Guo is in fact directly talking about men instead of women. Although he is acting as advocate for both men and women

of the future and protesting against the "Old Man" order, his emphasis is increasingly on the Old rather than on "Man," let alone the intricate combination of the "Old" and the "Man."

This gender-blindness embodied in Guo's articulation is not an isolated literary phenomenon; it is implicated in the general development of the cultural consciousness in the revolution that led to the founding of the People's Republic of China. It was believed that the theory of the class struggle provided by Marxism could solve the problems of the oppression of women. Indeed, Mao Zedong in his essay written in 1927, "The Report on the Peasants' Movement in Hunan Province," insightfully points out that Chinese women in imperial China, while having to endure the oppression executed by the government in the name of divine gods and through the authorities of the local patriarchs, also had to endure the oppressive authority of their husbands.¹⁸ But the nature of the authority of the "husband" is simply termed "feudal" by Mao and is concluded by Mao's followers and interpreters to be transparently the same as the oppressive authorities of the gods, the old government, or the "feudal" heads of the local communities. It follows that the revolution which aims at the emancipation of all oppressed people through class struggle would necessarily and similarly liberate women as a part of the oppressed class. The intricate implications of and the problematic link among the four sources of the oppression of women which Mao suggested and the different forms in which the oppression of women may survive and operate under a different social structure, therefore, are not sufficiently explored. The questions concerning women's problematic situation under a newly constructed socialist economy and political system with a long patriarchal cultural tradition, in other words, are not quite opened up. Such an unproblematized view of gender indicates the underdeveloped aspects of revolutionary consciousness which are partially but not simply due to the historical constraints under which it was initiated and developed.¹⁹ Moreover, the particular form of gender-blindness as representatively articulated by leading intellectual figures like Guo—the subordinate nature of women's struggle in its relation to the "class struggle"—points to the theoretical limits of Marxism which, as Barrett points out, "constituted as it is around relations of appropriation and exploitation, is grounded in concepts that do not and could not address directly the gender of the exploiters and those whose labour is appropriated."²⁰ Such a gender-blindness gradually becomes explicitly problematic after the practical success of the 1949 revolution.

With the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949,²¹ the once young and rebellious Guo Mo-ruo became the president of the National Science and Social Science Academy. Together with some other former young male rebels of the 1920s and 30s, his works have figured as an important part of the

cultural establishment for the new People's Republic. In 1959, he published another five-act historical play in which the central figure was again a woman—*Cai Wen-ji*. In this play, the oppressive father-figure has disappeared and the problematic relationship between old man and young woman has been replaced by a sublime harmony.

Cai Wen-ji, according to fragmentary records, was the daughter of Cai Tan, a prominent historian in the Han period (206 B.C.—220 A.D.). Her husband died in a war between Han China and the Xiongnu, a people living along the north-west border of China. She was captured by the Xiongnu army and became the wife of their khan. She stayed there for 12 years and had two sons by the khan. When Prime Minister Cao Cao finally gained control of China through military victories, he decided to ransom Wen-ji back in the hope that she would collect and edit her father's works which had been scattered and damaged during the war. The khan of the Xiongnu accepted the ransom and Wen-ji left her Xiongnu family, and returned to China alone. We do not know whether she actually fulfilled Cao Cao's expectations. What we do know is that she wrote a poem named "Xiongnu Flute Song of Eighteen Verses," a long, passionate, and pathetic poem which expressed her feelings about the suffering she had endured. It was said that she finally married again with a civil official named Dong Si.

Guo Mo-ruo originally wanted to make this story into the third play of his trilogy *Three Rebellious Women* in the 1920s. He wrote in 1926:

In her life, she [Cai Wen-ji] married three times—which is bad enough according to our Chinese morality, and the second time she was even married to a barbarian! In those moralists' eyes, she might very well be a gifted poet, but nonetheless a 'woman of shameless character.' Worst of all she did not commit suicide to keep her integrity as a Chinese woman after she was captured by Xiongnu! But such authoritarian judgements, in my opinion, are very dubious. I believe that the precondition for marriage is Love. Only those marriages based on Love are moral, regardless the beloved one is a 'negro', a 'barbarian', a whatever! Without Love, even if everything is done with perfect Chinese formality, a marriage is just a trade of bodies.²²

Following his idea of Love, which apparently was derived from 19th century western Romanticism, Guo was convinced that Wen-ji loved the khan of the Xiongnu and would not have returned to China if the khan had not accepted the ransom. But the khan wanted the gold and sold her back to Cao Cao, thus Wen-ji realized that the khan actually did not love her as she had imagined. With deep disillusionment, she left her sons and returned to China. Guo Mo-ruo concludes

in his essay: "Therefore in my opinion, Wen-ji is entirely a classic Chinese 'Nora'."²³

In Guo's play of 1959, the image of Wen-ji is strikingly transformed from Ibsen's Nora into an elegant woman civil official of the Weijin Dynasty. She begins with torn emotions over the conflict between her attachment to her sons and husband, and her moral commitment and devotion to her home country. After controlling her emotions, she finally reaches a sublime state of happiness in her total identification with a prosperous Han-China, an abstract entity symbolized by the image of Cao Cao. Sections of "Xiongnu Flute Song in Eighteen Verses" occurring throughout the play are re-written. The play opens with the first verse of the song. Wen-ji's original first verse was a denouncement of the chaotic situation in Han-China in which she suffered; Guo's first verse is a eulogy of Cao Cao's Han China in which Wen-ji is presented as being highly pleased that Cao Cao is trying to ransom her back and at the same time as being saddened by the possibility of leaving her children behind. In the second act, Guo does not change the original verses of the poem he uses and lets Wen-ji show more painful emotions through her singing. In the third act, however, Wen-ji appears to have gained control of her feelings, put her "small pains" in "the right perspective," and to have followed the morally noble advice offered by Dong Si, the official sent by Cao Cao to accompany her back: "Today's China under Cao is so different from the China you saw 12 years ago—it is now prosperous and peaceful and the common people are so much happier than before. Why don't you think about the nation's needs and the high expectations we all have for you to contribute to our cultural establishment instead of immersing yourself completely in your own personal feelings?"²⁴ The Wen-ji in the final act, logically, has become a civil official with a spirit of noble devotion to the country and a sublime sense of happiness. The 18th verse of the poem, used as the conclusion of the play, is changed from the original version—an uncompromising accusation against the merciless heaven, earth, and human world—into an ode to the Son of Heaven, Cao Cao.²⁵

In his preface to the 1959 play, Guo Mo-ruo says: "I want to declare one thing: My main purpose in writing *Cai Wen-ji* is to reverse a verdict that has been imposed on Cao Cao. Cao made great contributions to the development of our nation and of our culture. He is a great historical figure. However, since we have been trapped by the orthodox values dominant since the Song period, we have judged him very unfairly."²⁶ In his essay on Cai Wen-ji's "Xiongnu Flute Song in Eighteen Verses," Guo says: "From Wen-ji's life, we can see the greatness of Cao Cao. She was one among many saved by Cao Cao. [. . .] The decision to ransom Wen-ji back was based on lofty concerns for the nation's

culture and not personal sentiments [for Wen-ji's father]. [. . .] Cao Cao should be viewed as a national hero."²⁷

When we put these lines written in the 1950's about Cai Wen-ji next to those of the 1920's, we might have difficulty believing that both are about the same woman and written by the same man. The difference between the "main purpose" that Guo stated in 1959 and the "major motivation" he described when he thought of writing this play in 1926, as I see it, shows that Guo's general view on a father-figure as the leader of a nation has in the 1950's changed into the opposite of what it was in the 1920's, when he was a rebel towards the established order embodied and controlled by its father figures. Indeed, the social and ideological implications of "father figures" as national leaders in these two different periods in Chinese political history are of course profoundly and radically different, the complexity of the difference requires careful elucidation and has been generating articulations and re-articulations ever since 1949, as demonstrated in numerous scholarly and literary works in China. But the similarities between the two periods, intricately implicated in and at times inseparable from their difference, have been by and large submerged in all those elaborations and articulations—the similarities resulting from the long Chinese patriarchal tradition. It seems unproblematic to Guo, for instance, that the reconstructed moral order with its leading group of which he was a prominent member in the 1950's remained predominantly male in its constitution.

Guo in 1959 directly identified himself with his heroine Cai Wen-ji: "Cai Wen-ji is me!", he says in his preface (echoing Flaubert's famous line about *Madame Bovary*), "She is written in the image of myself."²⁸ The following question then arises: In which sense is he Cai Wen-ji? He indicates in the same essay that by saying this he refers to his experience with his Japanese wife. They had three children and lived in Japan for ten years. When the War of Resistance against Japan started in 1937, Guo returned to China leaving his Japanese wife and children behind. The feelings he projected into Wen-ji, feeling split between devotion to her country and attachment to her family is indeed what he, as a man and husband, once experienced.

The traumatic memories of Guo's personal life in the 1930s and his view on the father figures of a new social order in the 1950s, both made their presence felt in this historical play. The literary pattern in which the Self projects into the Other, the Present dramatizes itself through the Past, reoccurred in this historical play with new implications. This time the woman, Wen-ji, was used not as a negation of the present and symbol of the future but to build up the present father figure as the center of a positive social order.

From a more socio-historically oriented than biologically based feminist perspective, I should say that the shift embodied in Guo Mo-ruo's two historical

plays about women in their relation to an established social order with its father figures, thirty years apart, is an ironical but highly complicated shift. It would be reductively formalistic to simply conclude that Guo finally arrived at what in the beginning he intended to break away from, that is, the traditional patriarchal order. The concept of "patriarchy" as defined by the American radical feminism and psychoanalytical feminist theories appears to be insufficient to account for such a shift. Just as Michéle Barrett points out, "a general problem with the concept of patriarchy is that not only is it by and large resistant to exploration within a particular mode of production, but it is redolent of a universal and trans-historical oppression. So, to use the concept is frequently to evoke a generality of male dominance without being able to specify historical limits, changes or differences."²⁹

Taking the specific historical changes and differences into consideration, one sees in Guo's case an intrinsic logical link but not a simple continuation between his absolute negation of the male-centered morality in the 1930's and his total identification with the father figures of the reconstructed social and moral order in the 1950's: He found himself in a total unity with the image of a "good man" which had been part of his imagination thirty years before and had been an essential part of his motivation to fight the "old rotten father figures." Such a "good man" who is in favor of women's liberation in the 1930's and becomes a positive father figure in the 1950's, as I discussed earlier, is pro-feminist in his social declaration but is humanistic in his ontologized epistemology. While standing for those Chinese women and men struggling against the imperial patriarchal order in the early decades of the century, the image of this "good man" also has the potential function of erasing the irreducible particularities of historically conditioned and produced humanity such as that of gender. The fact that the two female protagonists in Guo's plays assert their moral choice and hence realize the meaning of their beings through men—Wen-jun through her total admiration for Sima and Wen-ji through her absolute gratitude towards Cao Cao—indicates a similar gender-blindness in Guo's understanding of the "good man" in his relationship with women. Certain elements of the old male-centered morality that young Guo Mo-ruo consciously fought against make their presence felt precisely through these unconscious "blind spots," registered in his dramatization. Through those "blind spots" and their development in Guo's later life and writing, one sees an interesting process in which the Chinese patriarchal tradition becomes reinscribed in a different form of cultural ideology.

This "reinscription" does not just occur in Guo Mo-ruo's life and writing alone, it manifests itself in many important modern Chinese writers as well. Cao Yu, now the president of the Society of Chinese Dramatists, for instance, was radically opposed to the patriarchal order of the Chinese society in the 1930's.

In his historical play written in 1979, in which the leading character is a woman—*Wang Zhao-jun*—Cao Yu follows Guo Mo-ruo's pattern in *Cai Wen-ji*.

The story of Wang Zhao-jun is part of Chinese folk literature. Compared to Cai Wen-ji, an aristocratic woman poet, Wang Zhao-jun is much closer to the common Chinese people's heart. According to some historical records,³⁰ Zhao-jun, an extraordinary beauty, was chosen by the Imperial Palace as one of the concubine candidates for Emperor Yuan of the Han Dynasty. Since there were too many candidates, the emperor had to choose his favorites by viewing their portraits. The court painter thus obtained power over these women which he used to extract bribes. Those who refused to submit, and Zhao-jun was one, were portrayed as ill-favored. For quite a few years, therefore, Zhao-jun had no chance to be seen by the emperor in person. When the chief of the Xiongnu paid his respects to the emperor in 33 B.C. and expressed his wish to marry a Chinese woman as a peace making liaison, Zhao-jun, out of her deep sorrow and resentment towards the Han Imperial Palace, requested to be the woman to go to Xiongnu. Her request was granted by the emperor. When she appeared in the court for the first time to take her leave, the emperor was astounded to see how beautiful she was. He wanted to make her stay but it was too late to do so. Zhao-jun left her home country alone and finally died of sorrow in Xiongnu.

As an innocent victim of the imperial patriarchal order, the beautiful, self-determining, and unhappy Zhao-jun has won Chinese people's sympathy and admiration one generation after another. In Cao Yu's play, however, although she initially feels resentment towards the living death of the concubine candidate's existence, she becomes a woman who shares the political motivation for the marriage. She even articulates this motivation in a poetic language which induces the emperor to exclaim: "Oh, Wang Zhao-jun, Wang Zhao-jun, what you have said goes right to our heart!"³¹ Zhao-jun leaves China with a noble smile and a clear purpose: "I am the daughter of Wu mountain, an ordinary young woman. From thousands of miles away, the Son of Heaven dispatched me here, from thousands of miles away, you [the chief of the Xiongnu] welcomed me here. I have come, for the happiness of the peoples in Han China and Xiongnu."³²

When he was asked why he turned Zhao-jun into such a noble and smiling woman, Cao Yu answered:

Why did I write a play for Wang Zhao-jun? Because this is a task that our dear Prime Minister Zhou assigned to me. I remember that was an afternoon in the 60s, in the meeting hall of the C.P.P.C.C.,³³ the Prime Minister was talking with us. A comrade leader from Inner-Mongolia told the Prime Minister that in the area of Inner-Mongolia, in the Steel-City Bao Tou, the Mongolian young men had difficulty in

finding fiancées, because the Chinese women do not want to marry them. Prime Minister Zhuo replied: We should promote marriage between Chinese women and minority men, we do not want Chinese chauvinism; in ancient time, there was a Chinese woman named Wang Zhao-jun who did this! Then the Prime Minister said to me: Cao Yu, you will write about Wang Zhao-jun, won't you?' He also proposed a toast, to wish that the play *Wang Zhao-jun* might be born soon.³⁴

Indeed, this is a historical play engendered by the concern of a man, the Prime Minister Zhou, about a portion of the male population in the People's Republic of China and written by a male playwright. But the central image of the play is a woman, a woman who lived thousands of years ago, a woman who, unlike Cai Wen-ji, did not leave any written words to us, and did not tell us anything about herself and what she actually went through in her life. She was a Chinese woman who married a chief of Xiongnu in the political interests of the Chinese as well as Xiongnu regimes, a woman who kept an absolute silence in Chinese history, as silent as her green grave in Xiongnu.³⁵

The idea of opposing Chinese chauvinism in the interests of the ethnic minority that the Prime Minister Zhou advocated was certainly politically significant and socially progressive. The irony inherent in this socially progressive pronouncement, however, lies in the fact that it is asserted by a Chinese man who was in an extremely powerful political position and appeared to have the authority not only to speak for Chinese women but to orient or even to organize their family lives. It is the Chinese political leadership which is predominantly male in its constitution and apparently has the authority to direct Chinese women's matrimonial arrangements that makes it possible to execute the socially progressive idea that Prime Minister Zhou advocated. The complexity of the power structure in which the Chinese male and female are engaged in different relationships with a particular minority male group, as manifested in this case, suggests that Zhou's idea to improve the relationship between the Chinese and ethnic minorities in China, although socially progressive in certain important dimensions, still resonates with the traditional patriarchal tonality in which women, a kind of social being differing from both Chinese men and the minority men in China, do not have their distinctive voice.

Cao Yu's *Wang Zhao-jun*, like Guo Mo-ruo's *Cai Wen-ji*, dramatizes a total harmony or complete identification between a woman and an established social order with its father figures, and has the same if not higher literary beauty and elegance in terms of style. However, when *Cai Wen-ji* was staged in the 1950's it was a big success—the audience admired it; while *Wang Zhao-jun*, staged in the 1980's, was not an authentic success despite the newspapers' effusive praise.

The Chinese audience found it almost impossible to feel sympathy or admiration towards this Zhao-jun. People seemed no longer to take the harmony and identification between a self-sacrificial woman and the political interest of an established order as something self-evidently sublime and beautiful; rather they found it contrived and artificial. Twenty years passed between the writing of *Cai Wen-ji* and *Wang Zhao-jun*; a twenty years process which is divided into two periods by the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. *Cai Wen-ji* belongs to the prime moment of the first period—the "Golden 50s," and *Wang Zhao-jun* belongs to a beginning of another era—the "Turbulent 80s." As an elegant echo of Guo Mo-ruo's *Cai Wen-ji*, Cao Yu's *Wang Zhao-jun* seems to be a belated birth.

In 1979, the same year in which Cao Yu wrote his *Wang Zhao-jun*, Chen Bai-chen, another important playwright in modern Chinese literature and currently the Vice-President of the Society of Chinese Dramatists, also wrote a historical play, *The Song of the Wind*, in which the leading figure was also a woman.

Chen's play draws on political events of the early Han Dynasty. According to *Shiji*, when Liu Bang, the Founding Emperor of the Han Dynasty, died in 194 B.C., the Crown Prince Liu Yin was still too young to be a real ruler. Thus the Empress Dowager Lü was in fact in control of the court and the country for fifteen years until her death in 179 B.C.. This kind of situation in an imperial patriarchal structure was bound to produce political tension. During these fifteen years, the conflicts between the Empress Lü's family and the Emperor Liu's family were intense and at times potentially dangerous to the stability of the established order. The old high officials who were devoted to the dead Emperor were threatened by the possible political changes that might take place. They strongly supported the Liu's family line but could not directly oppose the Empress. After the Empress Lü's death, the old officials finally took military action, arrested some of the Lües who were attempting to control the succession, and placed Liu Hen on the throne.³⁶

Chen Bai-chen's dramatization has moralized the characters and the events with a particular ethical standard which, at first sight, is constituted of loyalty toward the Emperor Liu and the commitment to keep the established order stable. "No one can be named as prince except those from the Liu-family"—the agreement reached between the Emperor before he died and his officials in order to avoid the possible shifts of power and political eruptions—is used in the play as the touchstone to divide characters. Those who attempt to violate it are presented as immoral characters, and those who defend it are presented as being highly moral. Empress Dowager Lü wants to name male members of her family as princes in order to strengthen her position, and the old officials oppose her in order to keep her from becoming too powerful. The conflicts between the two sides set up the basic dramatic situation of the play, and the characters'

personalities are subtly portrayed as moral on the one side and immoral on the other. Virtues such as selflessness, honesty, integrity, and above all, loyalty toward the Emperor's will make those on the Liu's side appear noble and admirable; vices such as selfishness, dishonesty, cruelty, greed, and above all, disloyalty toward the Emperor's will make those on Lü's side devils.

Worst among those devils is the Empress Dowager Lü. As an Empress Dowager, she is a living part of the dead Emperor; as a woman with the surname Lü, she is the other to the Emperor. This particular dual identity enables her to do what she wants to grasp power but to be rewarded with a general resentment at a court which consists exclusively of the male loyalists of her dead husband. She imperceptibly and yet mercilessly strips the military power from the old high officials;³⁷ she puts her son Liu Yin on the throne and then forces her granddaughter to marry this young emperor who in fact is her uncle;³⁸ she secretly burns the Emperor's will because according to the will, Prince Zhao, the son of Lady Qi, a concubine of the Emperor, is appointed to inherit the throne.³⁹ Among all the malevolent things she does, the most terrifying is her treatment to Lady Qi. She first has Lady Qi's son, Prince Zhao, poisoned, and then she imprisons Lady Qi, has her arms and legs cut off, and names her a "human pig."⁴⁰ This appalling crime deranges the mind of the young emperor and the Empress Dowager finally gains control of the throne. The old officials are outraged but do not dare to do anything to stop her because she is the Empress Dowager in a patriarchal structure in which the present father-figure is missing. At the end of the play, after her death, the Lües who have supported her fall from power and the fifteen years period under a cruel and amoral Empress Dowager comes to an end.

The Song of the Wind stirred the public when it was staged in Beijing in 1979. The response was very divided. Some were deeply moved by the play and viewed it as a courageous challenge to the Chinese patriarchal tradition of which the Empress Dowager Lü is the typical bad image. Some had more mixed feelings toward the basic tone of the play and pointed out that the sense of morality underlying the drama was itself orthodox and patriarchal. Some went a step further and argued that in Chinese history, whenever the patriarchal regime was disturbed, the women who were involved in it would be condemned and turned into scapegoats.

The divided opinions indicate that the implications of the play are not as transparent as people might think. In the play, we see that as a woman who was superbly empowered by a patriarchal structure due to her particular relationship with the father-figure of the structure, Empress Dowager Lü assumes a complicity in the patriarchal operation more than being its victim. The political identity of "empress dowager" itself and the tremendous amount of power implied by it

points to the intricate involvement in the imperial patriarchy that a Chinese woman could have. The complicated features of such a female's complicity in patriarchal power relations and her conscious exploitation of their mechanism can be further seen in Empress Dowager Lü's efforts to grasp the chance to be in the very center of the order after her husband died. What she did was made possible by the way in which that particular power relationship functioned. The result of those efforts, as dramatized by Chen, shows that Empress Dowager Lü was no longer a marginal let alone victimized element as women usually were under the same order, but a powerful representative of the patriarchy. What Chen Bai-chen projected into such an image with a passion of resentment and critical insights, in short, were inseparable from certain vital characteristics of this political mechanism that Empress Dowager Lü embodied. By presenting her as a cruelly immoral character, Chen Bai-chen in fact revealed certain dark constituents of the political mechanism with which she was actively engaged. In his critical dramatization of the Chinese patriarchal structure, Chen Bai-chen distinguished himself from Guo Mo-ruo and Cao Yu.

However, the dark constituents of a patriarchal mechanism, in Chen's dramatic vision cannot overshadow the positive father-image. Empress Dowager Lü, in his eyes, was usurping power by violating an authentic patriarchal order and thus what she did was utterly illegitimate. In order to prove her illegitimacy, Chen Bai-chen calls upon the dead Emperor and makes him a symbol of an absent order. The sentiments attached to a positive political structure were carefully preserved in this absent male father-figure; and the hatred toward the negative exploitation of this same structure was fully expressed in a present female usurper. In other words, what happens in the play is an almost unconscious displacement: Chen Bai-chen displaces the positive male father-figure with a negative "father-figure," the positive one is male and the negative one is a female. The male father-figure is absent from the immediate situation and hence forms a positive memory and conceptual entity, and the female "father-figure" functions in the practical imperial politics and takes on an absolute negative character. In short, the woman here is used to embody a destructive and immoral political mechanism which should be utterly denounced; but for Chen Bai-chen this embodiment is a false representation of an essentially constructive and moral political order because she is simply a usurper. As I have pointed out, through the explicit image of an evil woman at the very center of an operative power structure, Chen Bai-chen in fact conveys a strong criticism and denunciation of the patriarchal tradition implicated in this structure. But this criticism and denunciation are politically mediated and psychologically transferred through his conscious choice to hold a negative female historical figure—a false representation of this operative power structure—to be the immediate target.

This unconscious displacement, if not an intrinsic self-conflict in Chen Bai-chen's writing, reflects one of the paradoxical complexities of his generation; the generation which rebelled against the imperial patriarchal order since 1919 and meant to build up a fundamentally different new structure since 1949 found that the new establishment was not completely new and in some aspects still resembled its ancestors. Those who established this "new" order see in it the harsh fact that they, the rebels of the old order, are also the very products of the old tradition; the "new" society, unlike what they expected, appears to be in certain ways a continuation of the "old." They see themselves, shockingly enough, to a certain degree resembling their former enemy. Chen's preface to the play is permeated with this sense of tragic irony. Like Cao Yu, he also dedicated his historical play to Prime Minister Zhou; but this Zhou in the 1970's, unlike the Prime Minister of the golden 1950's that Cao Yu remembered, was engaged in a tragic struggle against the overwhelming political mechanism in which dark patriarchal features seem to be reincarnated and yet of which he himself was one of the essential elements.⁴¹ It is not accidental that these features of the Self in Other which Chen Bai-chen refuses to recognize as a historical part of the Self, in the case of *The Song of Wind*, should be dramatized through a negative image of woman.

Through this brief analysis of four major historical plays using female protagonists in modern Chinese literature, we may come to the following tentative conclusion: From the May 4th Movement in 1919 until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the established imperial patriarchal order embodied in particular father-figures was the direct target for rebellious young men who believed that they were the agents of a progressive future. Accordingly, as it was presented in such a historical drama as *Zhuo Wen-jun*, Chinese women were praised as being rebellious against Bad Man. After the historic year, 1949, the father-figure as it was presented in *Cai Wen-ji* and *Wang Zhao-jun*, took on a positive image. Consequently, Chinese women such as Wen-ji and Zhao-jun appeared to be either sublimely devoted to or totally identified with this positive father-figure, the Good Man. The intricate continuity between the two types of male ideology inherent in the two dramas reveals the extremely illuminating function of such Western feminist concepts as "patriarchy" and "male ideology;" the crucial discontinuity between the two plays, however, testifies to the limits of the feminist conceptualization of the "patriarchy" or "male ideology" as it was initiated and developed in the West.

From 1980 on, the relationship between a father figure and the image of women, as dramatized in *The Song of Wind*, began to appear further complicated. The destructive function of the Chinese imperial patriarchal tradition, which involves both men and women, was bitterly represented. But a positive father-

figure was carefully preserved and his presence in the play is asserted by his very absence. Almost inevitably, the father figure's other self, the woman who was placed in the position of the father-figure and functioned as such, was held to be fully responsible for the political destructions, i.e., the intrinsic products of the Chinese imperial patriarchal tradition. In its representation as well as critique of Chinese imperial patriarchal tradition, *The Song of Wind* illustrates how much modern Chinese historical plays have transformed and developed since the 1920's. In this dramatization the Chinese imperial patriarchy has been in fact severely criticized, but the criticism is conducted only through an explicit negative image of the marginal element—a woman—within the established power structure.

The complicated nature of Empress Dowager Lü's complicity in the imperial patriarchy as dramatized suggests to us that a reductive feminist reading will submerge certain important ambiguities inherent in women's engagement with the socio-political establishment. And yet the fact that a woman's image is evoked in criticizing and denouncing the Chinese imperial patriarchy also indicates how much a fundamentally feminist analysis is needed. From this perspective, we may say that in the realm of critique of the Chinese imperial patriarchal tradition, the modern Chinese historical drama in the 1980's shares in what the May 4th Movement of the 1920's demonstrated: Through the dramatic configuration of female images by male authors, one sees the self-critical reconstituting of male ideology. And the difference between the two, interestingly enough, lies in the fact that in the 1980's it is through a negative portrayal of a woman and in the 1920's it is through a positive portrayal of a woman that Chinese male authors realize their self-criticism. The images of women in these four major modern Chinese historical plays, in my view, indicate the tortuous journey that Chinese male intellectuals have undergone in constructing and reconstructing their own images by writing and re-writing Chinese social and cultural history. Through these dramatizations in which the female identity is positively and/or negatively reconstructed, one sees how the male ideology rooted in the Chinese socio-historical matrix is deconstructed, negotiated, transformed, and re-inscribed. The historical plays yet to come will show us how such a fascinating writing and re-writing will continue and, hopefully, how such a cultural and ideological deconstruction and reconstruction can be substantially changed by women's conscious struggle to articulate their various experiences, assert their particular socio-historical identities, and construct their different images as essential parts of modern Chinese cultural consciousness.

Notes

1. Qian Xuan-tong, "Some Reflections," *New Youth* 5-1 (July 1918).
2. Pu Buo-ying, "How to Make the Drama Useful to the Situation of Our Country," *Drama*, 4-4 (August 1921).
3. Guo Mo-ruo, "The Two Sons of Sir Gu-zhu—A Preface," *Creation Quarterly*, 1-4 (February 1923).
4. Due to the limited space and time, I will discuss only this first play of the trilogy.
5. Sima Quian, "Biography of Sima Xiangru," *Shiji*, (Beijing: China Publishing House, 1959), Vol. 1171, 2999-3074.
6. See Guo Mo-ruo, "An Appendix to *Three Rebellious Women*," *Complete Collection of Guo Mo-ruo's Plays*, (Beijing: The Drama Publishing House of China, 1982) Vol. 1, 193.
7. Guo Mo-ruo, "Zhuo Wen-jun," *The Complete Collection of Guo, Mo-ruo's Plays*, (Beijing: The Drama Publishing House of China, 1982) Vol. 1, 118.
8. Guo Mo-ruo, "An Appendix" 194.
9. Guo Mo-ruo, "Zhuo Wen-jun" 121.
10. It is important to note here that feminism itself is of course not a self-evidently homogeneous system of theory. There are many different schools of feminism. But the differences within feminism should not obscure the crucial distinction between the specifically anchored feminist theories, different as they are from one another, and the ontologized humanist doctrines.
11. In the sense in which Derrida uses the word.
12. Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso Edition and NLB, 1980): 53.
13. Cf. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971).
14. Guo studied modern western medicine in Japan in the 1920's.
15. "Reflections on Twenty Years of Feminism," Juliet Mitchell, *What is Feminism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986): 36.
16. The trilogy of which *Three Rebellious Women* is the first play.
17. Guo Mo-ruo, "An Appendix" 189.
18. Mao Ze-dong, *Collected Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, (Tokyo: Beiwangshe, 1972) Vol. 1, 235-236.
19. The bloody military conflicts during the revolution are often mentioned by Chinese contemporary historians to account for the almost exclusive concentration of the revolutionary theoreticians on the issues of class struggle in their works. But the cultural critique as manifested in works by such figures as Guo Mo-ruo indicates that the urgency to deal with the issues of class struggle as compelled by the military conflicts is not the sole reason for the pervasiveness and persistence of gender-blindness in the development of revolutionary consciousness.
20. Barrett 8.
21. *A Chronicle of Guo Mo-ruo's Life*, Gong Ji-ming & Fang Ren-nian, (Tian Jin: Tian Jin People's Publishing House, 1982): 600.
22. Guo Mo-ruo, "An Appendix" 197.
23. 198. "Nora": the heroine in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*.
24. 48-49. For conciseness, I paraphrase here rather than translate fully.
25. 86.
26. Guo, "An Appendix" 4.

27. 106.
28. 3.
29. Michéle Barrett 14.
30. See *The Collection of Materials for Chinese Contemporary Literary Studies*, ed., Department of Chinese Literature at Sichuan University, (Sichuan: Sichuan University, 1979): 673-756.
31. Cao Yu, *Wang Zhao-jun: A Five-Act Historical Play*, (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1979): 59.
32. Cao Yu *Wang Zhao-jun* 103.
33. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.
34. Cao Yu, "The Eternal Charm of Zhao-jun," *Cao Yu's Wang Zhao-jun and Others*, ed. Luo Kang-lie, (Hong Kong: Good Friends Book Company, 1980): 50.
35. Her grave remains carefully preserved in the area today called "Inner Mongolia" and continues to be visited by Chinese people.
36. Sima Qian, "Biography of Empress Dowager Lu," *Shiji*, (Beijing: The China Publishing House, 1959).
37. Cheng Bai-chen, *The Song of Wind* (seven-act historical play), (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1979): 48-49.
38. 34-36.
39. 22.
40. 60.
41. See "Preface to *The Song of Wind*," *The Song of Wind*, (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1979): 2-3.



A Journal
of the Arts
in the South

The Southern Quarterly

Spring 1993

Katherine Anne Porter: Special Feature

Summer 1993

Robert Penn Warren: Special Issue

Guest Editors: Eleanor Beiswenger and Steven T. Ryan

Fall 1993

Eudora Welty: Special Issue

Recent Special Issues Available:

The Southern Cemetery, Winter 1993, Alfred E. Lemmon, Guest Editor

SoQ's special issue *Cormac McCarthy* (Summer 1992, guest editors Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce) is being published by University Press of Mississippi in 1994 as part of its *Southern Quarterly Series*.

(Complete list of back issues available on request)

Please enter my subscription to *The Southern Quarterly*:

Name _____

Address _____

Individual: _____ \$10 (1 Yr.) Institution: _____ \$25 (1Yr.)

_____ Payment enclosed _____ Bill me _____ Send information on back issues

Mail to: *The Southern Quarterly*, Box 5078, USM, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5078

The Southern Quarterly is published in the fall, winter, spring and summer by the University of Southern Mississippi.