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## Five Questions (and Answers) About “Autumn Gem”

March 18, 2010 in [movies](#) by [mcunningham](#) | [2 comments](#)

By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

*At the beginning of March, Rae Chang and Adam Tow came to UC Irvine to show their docudrama about the life of Qiu Jin, [Autumn Gem](#) (see [here](#) for their blog post about the UCI event, and [here](#) for a list of upcoming screenings around the country). The movie traces the life of “China’s first feminist,” Qiu Jin (1875-1907), who was a leader in both the nationalist and women’s movements and was executed at the age of 32 for her involvement in a plot to overthrow the Qing government. Hailed as a revolutionary martyr in China, Qiu Jin is little known outside the country, but the Autumn Gem screenings are bringing her story to American audiences. After seeing the movie, I wanted to learn more about its development, and conducted this brief interview with Rae Chang by e-mail.*

**Maura Elizabeth Cunningham:** How did *Autumn Gem* come into being? Why did you pick Qiu Jin as the focus of this project?



**Rae Chang:** As a Chinese American born in the U.S., I had never heard of Qiu Jin until I came across her in a book, *Writing Women in Modern China*, about twelve years ago. It was an anthology that included English translations of her work, as well as a brief biographical sketch. What caught my attention was that she was described as a “radical feminist” from China, which came as a surprise to me because I didn’t even realize there was a feminist movement in China, much less a radical one! That led to doing more research about her life, and after collecting more material I thought she’d make a great subject for a documentary.

**MEC:** Why did you choose to include so many of Qiu Jin’s poems, essays, and speeches in the movie’s script? Aside from Qiu Jin’s own writings, what other sources did you consult when researching *Autumn Gem*?

**RC:** Qiu Jin was certainly a prolific writer, composing over 200 pieces throughout her short life, and I wanted to use her own words as much as possible to tell her story. I felt the act of writing was such an integral part of her life, and helped shape who she was in both public and private. Her political speeches and essays were fiery, passionate diatribes meant to stir up the people, while her poetry revealed this intensely turbulent inner life. Listening to her own words, we wanted the viewer to have a more intimate sense of who she was.

I unfortunately can’t read Chinese, so I relied mostly on English translations of her work. The scholars we interviewed for the film – [Hu Ying](#) from UC Irvine, [Amy Dooling](#) from Connecticut College,

and [Lingzhen Wang](#) from Brown University – had written excellent works on Qiu Jin in English and were wonderful resources for us. We also had assistance from the Qiu Jin Museum in China, as well as Qiu Jin’s grand-nephew, who has become a caretaker of her legacy.

**MEC:** What was the most surprising thing you learned about Qiu Jin, or about China’s early women’s movement, as you made the film?

**RC:** While she was remarkably ahead of her time in her feminist actions, speaking out in public, dressing up in men’s clothes, leaving her husband and children, she was also a very traditional Chinese woman in many ways. She had bound feet and had been set up in an arranged marriage, and was living the life of a gentry wife until her political awakening. Even the act of sacrificing herself for the modern revolution was based on the traditional notion of heroic self-sacrifice. She had so many contrasting aspects of her life, which made her especially fascinating.

**MEC:** As you’ve shown *Autumn Gem* at colleges around the country, what kind of reaction has the movie provoked?

**RC:** Most people in the U.S. have never heard of her, and were surprised to learn about this historical figure who was part of the extraordinary women’s movement. People from China knew about her story, although they generally were more familiar with her political revolutionary aspect and were not as aware of her feminist side. We also met people whose grandparents or relatives knew Qiu Jin personally; some had studied with her in Japan, others had participated in the revolution themselves. It was incredible connecting with them through the film.

**MEC:** What sort of legacy do you think Qiu Jin has left to the women of China?



**RC:** While she wasn’t the first women’s rights advocate, she was inarguably the most prominent, as her martyrdom brought national attention to the women’s movement. I think her image resonates strongly with feminist activists today. It’s been over a hundred years since her death, and she’s still ahead of her time.

**Tags:** [Chinese Women](#), [Qiu Jin](#)