

## On Bing Xin's Maternal Love: *Women and Chinese Modernity* as the Case

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**Abstract:** Rey Chow's *Women and Chinese Modernity* offering a psychoanalytic restatement on Bing Xin's maternal love is a well-known book in the field of overseas Chinese literature studies. It takes *The First Dinner Party* as a case and quotes Masochism, Negative Oedipus Complex, or other western theories to illustrate Bing Xin's texts, declaring its' overflow and overindulged characteristics, and questions traditional and male-centered criticism on Bing Xin. The comment is adventurous, theorized and westernized to some extent, even forming discourse hegemony with blind estimation. The paper considers Bing Xin's descriptions of maternal love individually and historically, which are on the realistic background of her own experiences. *Women and Chinese Modernity* reflects the sign of over-interpretation in Chinese research with breaking off the specific social and cultural contexts. Concerning on the issue is of great necessity for Chinese modern literature study.

**Keywords:** *Women and Chinese Modernity*, Maternal love, Bing Xin, Subversion

### 1 Introduction

The paper introduces Rey Chow's interpretation on Bing Xin's maternal love and gives new criticized comments. During the turbulent first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bing Xin's warm and pure descriptions of maternal love are quite sole and rare in China's literary world and long live in our cultural memories. Still they also initiate certain doubts or discussions in later studies. *Women and Chinese Modernity* by Rey Chow, which has a profound influence on overseas Chinese literature research, was originally published in the USA in 1991 and won the first Publication Award of Chicago female. In China it has been translated in traditional characters version (Maitian press in Taiwan in 1995) and in simplified character version (Sanlian Press in 2008), and the author has been widely known in one of the most representative people in postcolonial studies. The book has a subtitle named *Reading Politics between the East and the West*. In the modern contexts of western theories and Chinese texts, the book pursuits new academic practicing interpretations on Bing Xin, and a study on her novel *The First Dinner Party* is just one of the cases.

### 2 Text

Maternal love is an important theme in Bing Xin's literary works. Her works, such as collection of short stories *Superman*, poetries *Numerous Stars* and *Spring Water* and essays *The Past* and *Giving Young Readers*, etc, all involve maternal love, which has been an essential part of Bing Xin's Philosophy of Love with childlike innocence and nature. During the stormy first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bing Xin's warm and pure descriptions of maternal love are quite sole and rare in China's literary world and long live in our cultural memories. Still they also initiate certain doubts or discussions in later studies. *Women and Chinese Modernity* by Rey Chow is just one of them among overseas Chinese literature studies and has its certain world's influences as well.

*The first Dinner Party* is a Bing Xin's short novel containing no more than 5000 words, which was written in November, 1929 and published in volume 2, issue 6/7 of *New Month*, 1930. The protagonist, newly married Ying invites her husband's former foreign friends in their new house, and she expects the first dinner party of her marriage should be warm, comfortable, refined and elegant. While at that time her mother is seriously ill and they are late for the renovation of their new house. Some flower vases

presented by her mother as her wedding gifts memorize her mother's disease and considerate love, and she can't help crying heartbreakingly. At last, the vases help her housework and decorate the room perfectly, and the first dinner party is wonderful just as what she has expected, as if her mother is always secretly providing shelter for her. After the party she is still immersed in great grief for her mother's illness. Meanwhile, for fear of disturbing her husband's comfortable feelings, she only tells him, "I'm just too tired".

The story focuses on maternal love and typically practices Bing Xin's style of women's virtuousness. Rey Chow explains it for about 8,000 words, much longer than Bing Xin's original text. She disagrees with Mei Yici, another overseas scholar, who criticizes Bing Xin and her fellow women writers' over-indulgence on their own experiences and lack of deep and reasonable thoughts on the outside world, "unable to move on to a broader vision of reality".<sup>[11]</sup> Rey Chow adduces Silverman's theory of Negative Oedipus Complex, explaining Ying's deep concerns and uneasiness to her sick mother as the guilty of heterosexuality with the desire of her mother. It's the continuation and compensation of her female subjectivity in a male-dominated society. In the novel Ying thinks "she regretted that she got married, or she could have stayed and served her mother permanently", which is interpreted in *Women and Chinese Modernity* as that "heterosexuality symbolized by her bond to her husband is thus interpreted by a bond with her mother that obsessively reasserts itself precisely at the moment of Ying's changing of status".<sup>[12]</sup> That is to say, Ying's missing to her mother is the continuation and compensation of her Oedipus Complex which has certain desires more or less. And again, from Laplanche's theory of Masochism, Rey Chow explains Ying's inseparable attachment to her mother as the shaping of new identity on the ideal of her mother. Self-sacrificed mother abusively loves her daughter and the daughter also abusively loves her mother as her repayment. Ying's unlimited missing and dependency on her mother is interpreted by Rey Chow as a kind of shaping identification on her mother. Thus, the "'sympathetic' and 'sentimental' understanding in Bing Xin become the site of that 'conjunction of identity and desire' and for with understanding comes the most intense feelings of physical interaction with the mother but feelings that are in turn expressed in ways that violate the decorum of proper aesthetic restraint and come across as what some would call 'purple prose'".<sup>[13]</sup>

Rey Chow breaks through Mainland China's traditional understanding on Bing Xin's maternal love. As far as the year 1931, Huang Ying remarked Bing Xin and *The Second Dinner Party* as such, "it is still her continuous theme of maternal love. A slight variation is that these works focused on the heroine's dilemma between her mother's love and her husband's love, not just on maternal love itself. She is always the bourgeoisie writer and her works *The First Dinner Party* is just the one reflecting her recent thoughts."<sup>[14]</sup> Chen Xiying, another famous scholar at that time also said in *Modern Criticism* 72, "most novels in Bing Xin's collection *Superman* evidently comes from a smart girl student within her college campus, and their figures and plots are both far from the social realities." Up to China's post-Mao time, Fan Boqun and Zeng Huapeng still hold on the disharmony between Bing Xin's Philosophy of Love and the radical revolutionary in the end of 1920s in their cooperative essay *Studies on Bing Xin's Work*, "this kind of trans-class love (Bing Xin's Philosophy of Love) can't stay long, because extremely class divisions are more intense than ever before under the conditions of radical revolutionary. And if anyone who still has the illusion of reconciling contradictions will be looked as 'the negative comedy characters' (by Gorky). So she can't know how to do and has few works later, if any, they are reluctant, just as *Three Years* and *The First Dinner Party*."<sup>[15]</sup> All the remarks concentrate on the limited abstractness and non-historicism of Bing Xin's Philosophy of Love and their lack of social, class and actual significances in a revolutionary time. They are basically the same as Mei Yici's viewpoints we mention above. Bing Xin's maternal love and its over-indulgent style has weakened and narrowed its social, historical and ideological literary effects, even leading to the "petty-bourgeois sentiment", has become the main standpoint in Chinese academia.

Nevertheless, Rey Chow doubts it. She searches for new studies on formation of women's subjective personalities and thus to puzzle out the orientation of Bing Xin's "overflow" of maternal love from the perspective of psychology theory. To tell the truth, Rey Chow is not the first one to interpret Bing Xin's

works from the perspective of psychology theory. Historically speaking, there was a precedent case, the article is *New Literature and Art of China and Abnormal Desire* in 1927 and its author is Zhao Jingshen, a famous writer and reviewer at that time. In the article Zhao treats Bing Xin's prose on loving sea as alternative way of Electra complex, and finds out sexy consciousness from the dream she portrays in the novel *Loneliness*<sup>[6]</sup>. Whether Rey Chow has drawn inspirations from Zhao Jingshen's article remains unexplained. The definite point is that her interpretations on Bing Xin's *The First Dinner Party* are more theorized and westernized, which is permeated with extraordinary appreciation to the theory of psychoanalysis such as the ideas of Freud, Laplanche, Deleuze, Silverman, etc. As we know, psychoanalysis is also called "a kind of romanticism with reasonable appearance", its doctrines as desire, universalized sexuality, neurosis, etc, have been controversial issues in later ages, because it prefers the physiological and pathological interpretations of human beings and the whole societies. From this point of view, Rey Chow's explanations on Bing Xin appear to be biased theorization and westernization, self-willed determination or estimation.

*The First Dinner Party* is almost Bing Xin's only autobiographic work directly coming from her own life experience, instead of the others. In *Biography of Bing Xin*, Xiao Feng points out, "the novel's heroine Ying and hero Zhen undoubtedly are assumed names of Bin Xin and her husband Wu Wenzao", "In the autobiographic novel *The First Dinner Party*, Bing Xin describes how her loving mother concerns over the daughter's marriage with deep feelings."<sup>[7]</sup> Bing Xin married Wu wenzao in 1929, the same year as *The First Dinner Party* was firstly published. Their marriage was quite happy, nevertheless, Bing Xin's mother was in serious illness at that time. Bing Xin described it in details in her prose *Returning Home to the South* in 1931, which is the actual background of *The First Dinner Party*. Due to the mother's literary figure, the novel's relative simple plot has come to be more vividly and substantially significant. And owing to the actual backgrounds of deep emotion between Bing Xin and her sick mother, it does touch numerous readers deeply. Bing Xin has discussed it herself as such, "Wenzao and my families are experiencing lots of trouble shortly after our marriage. At that time my mother and Wenzao's father passed away in succession and we spent all our time on domestic affairs. During that time I only wrote two novels *Three Years* and *The First Dinner Party*." Bing Xin's prose *Returning Home to the South* is just for her mother. She prefaced the essay with a shot sentence "it's dedicated to my deceased mother's soul" in the title page. As for her mother's specific illness, she described, "her bone-ache is from her fingers to her arms, then to her shoulders and back and still then to her knees. The pain gradually moves to her lower body and she becomes wholly lame just as in shackles all days and nights. She will suffer unbearable pities and tortures once she turns over her body. If I were her, I would cry bitterly and shout intensely, course everything and reject everything, while my lovely and respectable mother accepts all her sufferings and acts as kind and tender as usual."<sup>[8]</sup> We can say *The First Dinner Party* is both an actual reflection of Bing Xin's strong sensibilities of her own mother individually, and an ideal literal portray on the relationship between daughters and mother generally as well.

Unfortunately, these backgrounds are ignored by Rey Chow. She utterly disregards the age and backgrounds of *The First Dinner Party*: the deep mother-daughter relationship between Bing Xin and her mother, the worried and tired emotion and great agony of her at that time, and Bing Xin's relatively traditional personality (as for women's liberation Bing Xin is much closer to what Mao Dun says the so called "new virtuousness of being a dutiful wife and loving mother"). All there are not considered by Rey Chow. She just arbitrarily identifies the strong rhetoric maternal love descriptions in *The First Dinner Party* as "promiscuous tone", "overflow and overindulged", "over-luxuriant pretension". And on the basis of psychological explanations she introduced it into "psychoneurosis", "desire", "masochism". To some extent, it has come into the mistaken ideas of breaking off its social and cultural context, even tends to be what Umberto Eco has calls "over-interpretation", which I have criticized it in a previous paper<sup>[9]</sup>. As above mentioned, Mei Yici treats Bing Xin's maternal love works as weakly and compromisingly with the measuring standards of "great works", if we considers it an pragmatic and stereotyped point of view, Rey Chow's consideration of them as artificial overflow feelings and

abnormal sentiments has go to another extreme, or we can say that it's too narrow and biased, at least it is not reasonable and objective enough.

It is said that Ailing Chang, the well-known Chinese modern woman writer in 1940s, disagrees with Bing Xin's literary ideas, either. She has expressed such discontentment by means of publicizing the works of her good friends Su Qing (another popular Shanghai woman writer of that time, whose representative works are *Ten Years of Marriage* and *Ten Years of Divorce*, and her works focus on townspeople's daily material and emotional conflicts, just as Ailing Chang's works). In Ailing Chang's famous essay *My Views on Su Qing*, she begins with such words, "If women writers nowadays should be especially classified into different groups, I really could not feel glorious and graceful to be mentioned in the same breath as Bing Xin or Bai Wei. Only when categorized with Su Qing can I be voluntarily glad to do so." The words are usually treated as Ailing Chang's public contempt and challenge towards Bing Xin. There is really a wide gulf between Ailing Chang and Bing Xin's ideas of literature. Bing Xin is fond of describing the good and the beautiful of humanities, and her works are ideal and romantic while Ailing Chang is obsessed to the deep truth of humanities and her works are just anti-idealism and anti-romanticism. Ailing Chang's popularity nowadays has evident social and cultural backgrounds. If we say Ailing Chang's depressed and decadent works cater to this depressed and decadent time, Bing Xin's warm and pure works being suffered all kinds of doubts and critics is also due to the depressed and decadent time. It is true that Ailing Chang is good at selfish, cool, suspicious and exclusive unusual emotions between mother and daughter and consequently gained lots of readers, but as a saying goes, "one man's meat is another man's poison", how can we reject Bing Xin's maternal love just because of Ailing Chang's popular "maternal resentment"? In fact, the madwoman Cao Qiqiao who destroyed the happiness of her own son and daughter due to her unsatisfactory desire in Ailing Chang's representative work *Notes of Golden Lock*, is just an abnormal imaginary figure rarely emerging in our actual lives. Psychologically and morally speaking, she is a real psychopathic case. However, the deep love between mother and daughter what Bin Xin positively and truthfully portrays has always been regarded as stubborn and surplus overabundant feelings, how strange it is! Is there anything wrong with Bing Xin's works or with the time?

In my opinion, Bing Xin's maternal love should be understood individually and historically. Individually speaking, we know they are natural revelations of her, who has lovely father, mother and husband and sincerely believes in the good and the beautiful, and at the same time she has always been practicing the rule of "new virtuousness of being a dutiful wife and loving mother" by herself. It's unfair for Rey Chow to consider Bing Xin's maternal love as "over-emotional" or "purple prose" and it's even more far-fetched to define gentle Bing Xin and her works with so many psychological vocabularies of "masochism", "desire", "Oedipus Complex", "negative Oedipus Complex", etc. At the historical level, Bing Xin's Philosophy of Love gives an unusual thread of warm and light in the dark, cold and troubled Chinese atmosphere at that time, and the more brutal and inhuman Chinese society was, the more necessary people require strength of warm and purity from Bing Xin. Her works do really provide such kind of warm and purity.

Today, influenced by various fashionable cultural tide, literature and art academy start to popularize a kind of tendency of subversion or deconstruction toward maternal love. People seem to prefer to talk about complicated emotions such as scrutinizing mother, complaining mother, resenting mother, or even killing mother. Deconstructing the "other" orientation of mother in the myth of maternal love becomes a significant part of the feminist critiques. Anyone who is familiar with Chinese contemporary women's literature, will find that theme of conflicts between mother and daughter frequently appears in China, such as *Rose Gate* and *The Bathing Woman* by Tie Ning, *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* by Wang Anyi, *Private Life and Knocking Voice of Another Ear* by Chen Ran, *Nuwa* by Xukun, *You Are a River* and *Go and Never Return* by Chi Li, *Hungry Daughter* by Hong Ying, *Quetzalcoatl* by Xu Xiaobin, *Meinu on the Shore* by Chi Zijian, *Love Gallery* by Zhang Kangkang, *End of August* by Ani Baobei, *Pledging Birds* and *Narcissus' Gone by Carp* by Zhang Yueran, etc. And if we are more patient, the list will go on with more writers and works, which almost contain all important women's literary texts around China. A famous Chinese literary theoretician has argued that "different from the construct of various

methodologies in 1980s, deconstruct of values and methodologies are stressed in 1990s, deconstructing discourses pervading the literary field, rather than overall constructing discourse. Subversion, struggle, rebel, or marginal become the popular current writing focuses".<sup>[10]</sup> Such modernism and postmodernism culture naturally effects women writers' descriptions of maternal love, and the judges or comments on their existing descriptions. Rey Chow's *Women and Chinese Modernity* is appearing in this cultural trend and is just a symbol of the trend. It's a serious problem in Chinese literature studies, which should be concerned possibly and necessarily by the academy, not just feminist research.

### 3 Conclusion

Rey Chow's criticism on Bing Xin belongs to today's post-modernist culture. People, especially feminist scholars, seem to prefer complicated maternal love such as scrutinizing, complaining, resenting, or even killing mother. Rey Chow is just one and get popular at the same sense. It focus on the inner psychological mechanism of female figures with self-sacred and self-eliminated maternal affection, breaks Chinese conditional standpoints that women's self-sacred spirits only come from their individual virtues such as unselfishness, kindheartedness or showing consideration for the other. So it has certain feminist significance to revolt male-dominated culture, offering a quite new and deep "other" perspective for Chinese modern literature studies. While on the other hand, her ignorance of the actual history and literary backgrounds of Bing Xin's novel drowns itself into misdirection of theorization and westernization, which should be greatly cared about in Chinese modern literary and cultural studies.

#### Notes:

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