

Women, Homeland and Memories: Feminist Yan Geling's Writings

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Abstract

Yan Geling, a feminist of Chinese origin, is a gifted and successful storyteller and creator of characters. However, despite a widespread contribution, Yan Geling's writings are not popular in the West and remain in a marginalised position. A qualitative case study of Yan Geling's writings will fill in the literature gap to understand those marginalised Chinese women's voices. This study examines the work of Yan Geling by applying various observations and data sources. It concentrates on her depiction of her homeland: her fiction takes place in realistic settings during the turbulent years of the 20th Century. Nevertheless, Yan Geling's works, particularly her writings on women's situations using a feminist lens, have rapidly increased in recent years. This perspective is an attempt to reflect on Yan Geling's novel, the analysis of which are more likely to contribute to future Chinese feminist studies.

Keywords: Yan Geling; Feminist; Homeland; Oppression; Women; China; West

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Introduction

Yan Geling (n.d.; see Figure 1), born in November 1958, is a contemporary Chinese-American writer. Since 1985 she has written a steady stream of novels, essays, and scripts depicting a variety of women in her writing, including sex workers (prostitutes) in *The Flower of War* in addition to female intellectuals, educated female youths, and female soldiers participating in the Cultural Revolution in *Celestial Bath* and *Female Grassland*. Besides, she has also written about rural women in remote mountainous villages. Yan Geling's novels —*Female Grassland* (Yan, 1989) and *Celestial Bath* (Yan, 2008) describing female “sent-down” youth during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution has been

reviewed by Katherina Li (2021). Li (2021) used the term fragmentation, which she argues had been chosen to highlight women's experiences. For example, the relationship between wife and husband.

In general, Yan Geling describes the life experiences of women of different identities between the 1930s and 1970s, particularly during the turbulent years of the 20th Century in China. This study begins with a brief overview of the historical background of China. Following this, it discusses Yan Geling's background. The study then goes on to discuss the methodological issues employed. It then goes on to critically analyse Yan Geling's Works.



Figure 1: Yan Geling

Source: <https://paper-republic.org/pers/yan-geling/>

Historical Background

Chinese history in the 20th Century, especially from the 1930s to the 1980s, is very significant to understanding Yan Geling's novel. However, she expresses that she focuses on her female heroes rather than history. In 2012, David Der-Wei Wang (1954–) demonstrated that Yan Geling's documentation recalls common Chinese everyday experiences. Besides, her novels bear witness to the brutality of history.

The Second Sino-Japanese War was between the Empire of Japan and the Republic of China which started on 07 July 1937 and ended on 02 September 1945. This war which occurred almost simultaneously with the Second World War (1939-1945) started from a dispute between Chinese and Japanese troops on the Marco Polo Bridge in 1937 and escalated into the Japanese army's invasion of China.

Between 1945 and 1949, the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party conflicted with each other in mainland China. The Chinese Communist Party defeated the Nationalist Party in 1949. On the 01 October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party claimed this victory, officially announcing the liberation of the Chinese people and the unification of China and calling unified China the People's Republic of China.

Following this, the central government of the People's Republic of China published a Land Reform Law on 30 June 1950. The law abolished ownership of large farming lands by landlords and wealthy farmers to introduce peasant land ownership. The Three-anti Campaign (1951) and Five-anti Campaign (1952) were reform movements issued by Mao Zedong after the founding of the People's Republic of China to eliminate corruption and enemies of the state. The result turned into a series of campaigns that consolidated Mao's power by weakening corrupt political opponents and wealthy capitalists. The movements negatively impacted the economy of big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing. Those campaigns forced many businesspersons to lose their assets, and some even committed suicide (Chen & Chen, 1953). The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) was a nationwide craze for catching up with the West

in terms of producing iron and steel that eventually led to large-scale starvation. (Hsu, 1983)

This study first concentrates on Yan Geling's depiction of her homeland: her fiction takes place in realistic settings during the turbulent years of the 20th Century, depiction of Yan Geling's background, analysis of recent studies of Yan Geling's works towards contributing an imagination of Chinese women.

Overview of Yan Geling's Life

Born in Shanghai, Yan Geling served with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during the Cultural Revolution, starting at the age of twelve as a dancer in an entertainment troupe. She holds a bachelor's degree in literature from Wuhan University and a Master's in Fine Arts in Fiction Writing from Columbia College.

Yan Geling's family background and experience are complex. Perhaps, the complexities triggered several interesting memories in her writing. Her mother was an opera actor, and her father, Yan Dunxun (1930–2011), was a writer under the pen name Xiao Ma. Later, Yan's father divorced her mother and married an eminent actress Yu Ping (1940–). In 1980, at 21 years old, she married her first husband, Li Kewei, the son of Li Zhun (1928–2000), a famous writer. Yan Geling gained the experience of two marriages. She married her second husband, Laurence A. Walker, in America in 1992, which fostered her better understanding of western culture. When she first arrived in America, she underwent several difficulties and hardships, including her divorce, a harrowing experience of overseas study, and transnational marriage. These experiences granted her the skill of capturing sensitive emotions from life, via which she created vivid, diverse characters in her stories. As she said in a recent interview (Huang, 2015, my translation):

I am a writer living a gypsy's life. In my youth, I lived in Shanghai and moved to Anhui after becoming a soldier in Chengdu and later travelled to Tibet. I stayed in Tibet for three months each year. I also stayed in Beijing and then went to the United States. I stayed in

Europe, Africa, and Asia. This travel among different countries gave me power and inspiration.

Yan identifies herself as a feminist, and her work is likely to show her understanding of marginalised women and the oppression of womanhood. The illustrations of her characters are based on her rich personal life and travel experiences. Although Yan Geling bravely pursued her goals and achieved success, apparently having security, love, reputation, and self-development, she also experienced pain, suffered from depression, and attempted suicide. Yan Geling's novels present different characters of women with their varying ambitions, backgrounds, desires, resistance, and destiny. Many female characters portrayed by Yan Geling are far more complex than their traditional gender roles would suggest. Yan Geling's literary world depicts the awakening of female consciousness across different social classes in this special historical period. This research studies the experiences of typical female archetypes in Yan Geling's novels, analyses the oppression Chinese women suffered from political, social, and cultural sources during this special historical period, and explores various factors that hinder the liberation and freedom of Chinese women. This research will provide guidance and suggestions for Chinese women's future liberation and development. The background of Yan Geling's novels is based on the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937–1945), the Land Reform Movement (1950–1953) and The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), periods which have been discussed in the previous subsection.

Critics recognise Yan's contribution to women, their homeland and their memories. The overseas Chinese literature research expert Professor Rao Pengzi (1935–) believes Yan is the most distinguished writer in the last ten years in Contemporary North American Chinese Writing (Rao Pengzi, 2006). From Chen Sihe's (1954–) point of view, Yan's work represents overseas Chinese literature after the 1990s (Sihe, 2005). Liu Denghan (1937–) holds that the rise of a female writer caught people's attention in

American new immigration literature; among writers of this genre, Yan is the most representative. Liu Denghan believes Yan's novel on her homeland theme is the best among North American Chinese Writing in the 1990s.

Methodology

Quantitative and qualitative method is used to understand Yan Geling's contribution to the literature and feminist studies in China and globally. Chinese feminist study is not a popular topic in China compared to western countries. However, as the most well-known feminist scholars in the western countries are Lee Haiyan (2004) and Barlow, T (2004). Barlow's foundational Chinese feminist book is *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. She sets forth the theories and conceptual categories that Chinese intellectuals have developed to describe the collectivity of women in twentieth-century China. She also gives a panoramic view to addressing the problems of Chinese women utilising social theory, psychoanalytic thought, literary criticism, ethics, and revolutionary political ideologies in a comprehensive scenario. Barlow's theory focuses on the collectivity of women to address the problem of gender inequality. Her work gives a positive side to exploring Chinese women's modern development. However, the information gap occurs because she has not provided the basic knowledge of case studies.

Thus, a qualitative case study is useful to fill the gap in redefining women's oppression and Chinese feminism.

Yan Geling's Works

Yan Geling's works have received widespread attention in mainland China and abroad from both scholars and critics, mainly during the period (2012–2020). Yan Geling's work is previously heavily discussed in Chinese literature, although its discussion remains very poor in English. For example, the database I created for this work between 2019 and 2022 includes five doctoral dissertations, 313 Master's theses, and over 1433 articles mainly drawn from internet services, including China National

Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), Wanfang database, and Google Scholar.

The first book about Yan's novels is Zhuang Yuan's *The Study on the Female Writer Yan Geling* (2006), followed by Dong Na's *A Narrative*

Ethical Study of Fictions by Yan Geling (2016) and Liu Yan's *Discussion on Yan Geling* (2018). In addition, *The Textbook of Contemporary Chinese Literature History* (2005), written by Chen Sihe (1954–) involves a case study about Yan Geling's short story *Xiao Yu*.

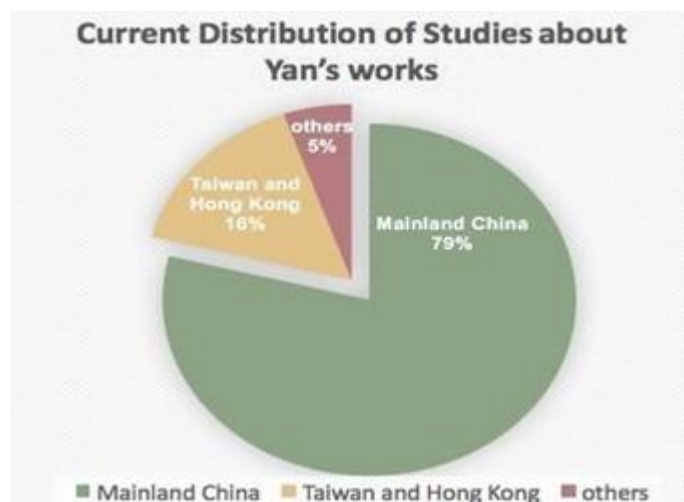


Figure 2: Current Distribution of Studies of Yan Geling's works

Source: Author

Figure 2 unveils the current distribution of Yan Geling's work in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Others. Roughly 5% of the studies are published in other countries. Most articles written in English are published in England, the US, and Australia, while a few articles are published in France and Japan. Among all her works, *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* (2002) is discussed the most, followed by *The Flowers of the War* (2012). *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* (2016), and *White Snake* (2012) have also been discussed to a large extent.

In 2003, discussions entailing Yan Geling's work made an entry in English dissertations, which included *The Feminine Stage of Women's Writing Within the Nowadays Chinese National Literature in the U.S.A: The Interpretation of the Texts by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and Geling* (Chen Xiaohui 2003) and *The Conceptions of Freedom in Contemporary Chinese and Chinese American Fiction: Gish Jen, Yan Geling, Ha Jin, Maureen F. Mchugh* (2004), respectively. However, the studies about Yan Geling's novels

in Western countries have not been widely discussed.

In contrast, studies of Yan Geling's works have rapidly increased in China. Table 1 above summarises the topics of discussions of 300 pieces of studies about Yan Geling's work based on the database. It finds that women, humanity, film adaption, and culture occupy a considerable portion, while other topics include human ethics, language, and feminist studies.

The works of Yan Geling vividly describe many aspects of women's plight in China without regard for political or ideological correctness. This is because the real women's experience in China is normally incomplete and hard to collect due to political censorship and cultural gender taboos. Indeed, Chinese women are afraid to discuss their oppression, and if they do discuss it, it may be unreliable and dishonest. Reliable information is not only challenging to obtain, and the result is hard to evaluate (Yu-Ning, 2015). As a result, this author uses Yan Geling's fictional stories as idealised evidence, a valuable collection of case studies to understand

the oppression of Chinese women during the historical period between 1930 and 1970. In this period, major revolutions, wars, and political changes directly impacted the feminist movement. In the aftermath of these events, women were further fragmented, which

continues to keep their oppression in Chinese society alive. Katherina Li examines the fragmentation of women during the transformation of contemporary Chinese society through the lens of Yan Geling’s novel.

Table 1: Discussion of Yan Geling’s works on Various Academic Subjects

Category	Percent	Number
History	10.0%	30
Females	27.7%	83
Humanity	14.0%	42
Narratives	10.0%	30
Film Adaption	12.3%	37
Males	3.7%	11
Culture	10.7%	32
Others	11.7%	35
Total	100.0%	300

Source: Author

Yan Geling’s novel is an idealised fictional resource focussing on an individual female’s story based on an actual historical event. Yan Geling constructs her female protagonist in the most straightforward way to narrate female lives under stressful circumstances. Her novels present different female characters with varying degrees of ambitions, backgrounds, desires, resistance, and destiny.

A case study helps to explore a phenomenon within some particular contexts using various observations and data sources. It undertakes this exploration through different lenses to reveal the phenomenon’s multiple facets (Baxter and Jack 2008). In a case study, a phenomenon is explored within its context; having that naturally occurring context is vital in predicting and explaining behaviour (Kaarbo and Beasley 1999). Therefore, it benefits to discuss the different contexts of the female protagonists within the environment of historical China. This study, in a way, is useful to fill in the gap to redefine women’s oppression and Chinese feminism.

Conclusion

Women portrayed in Yan Geling’s novel show a great interest to scholars and researchers. Her works are exciting contents to discuss about

Chinese women’s situation and their marginalised voices embedded in varying ambitions, backgrounds, desires, resistance, and destiny. Reading the works of Yan Geling could assist in discovering the difficulties of Chinese women’s reality. This short perspective on Yan Gelling’s feminist perspectives and ideologies could ignite Chinese scholars and researchers alike to further their studies.

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Conflict of Interest

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

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