

The Evolution of Female Images in Chinese Historical and Literary Narratives: Taking “The Biographies of Virtuous Women”, “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio”, and “The Golden Cangue” as Examples

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Abstract:

This paper examines how female characters in Chinese historical literary narratives, who were previously merely “written” objects subject to male discourse and definition, gradually transformed through textual practice into “self-writing” subjects. Through a comparative analysis of historical biographies represented by *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, male literati novels represented by *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, and modern women’s novels represented by *The Golden Cangue*, this study aims to reveal how the patriarchal-centric narrative constructs women as the “Other” by means of “ethical symbolization” and “aesthetic objectification”, and to analyze the subversive paths and inherent causes of women’s writing against this tradition. By integrating the analytical frameworks of narratology and gender theory (male gaze, disciplinary power), the study reveals that the suppression and regression of female subjectivity not only relate to the selection of themes but are also profoundly manifested in the changes of narrative forms. This paper points out that, from the moral discipline in *Biographies of Exemplary Women* to the desire discipline in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, male narratives consistently serve to dissolve the complexity of female experience. In *The Golden Cangue*, Eileen Chang delves deeply into the inner world of the characters, presenting the complex entanglement of trauma and desire, thereby subverting and reversing the traditional narrative paradigm. This study will analyze the deepening focus of Chinese feminist literary criticism, shifting from image critique to narrative mechanism, and also reveal the cross-era endeavors and feasible paths by which women reclaim their discourse power and reconstruct their subjectivity through writing.

Keywords: Feminist narrative, male gaze, subjectivity, Chinese literature, Eileen Chang

1 Introduction

In particular terms, the patriarchal system and paternalistic social structure relegated women to a marginal position in the public sphere. At the cultural level, Confucian ethical concepts such as “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” and “A woman’s lack of talent is considered a virtue” profoundly restricted the social roles and expression space of women. In historical writing, the traditional “Spring and Autumn Style” and the historiographical tradition centered on scholar-officials further reinforced the narrative model where men were the sole subjects of history. For instance, the typical woman depicted in *The Biographies of Virtuous Women* often emphasized their chastity and sacrifice while neglecting their individual will and diverse achievements.

The stereotyped female characters, such as talented women, beautiful women, and abandoned wives, frequently appear in Tang legends, Yuan zaju, and Ming-Qing storytelling scripts, reflecting the male author’s imagination and discipline towards women. However, since modern times, many works have shown resistance to the patriarchal narratives. Some female writers have turned their attention to the female figures who have been hidden in the single-gender perspective of historical records for thousands of years, such as Zhang Ailing’s *Farewell My Concubine* and Shen Zufen’s *Ma Weipo*. Just as Helene Cixous once said, women must write themselves into the text, just as they have inscribed themselves into world history through their own struggles. Previous studies on historical images of women have primarily focused on textual collation and historical research of biographical works, such as *Biographies of Exemplary Women*. Studies of this kind, such as the annotations and commentaries on Liu Xiang’s *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, textual collation of its versions, and the verification of historical figures and events (e.g., Wang Zhaoyuan’s *Supplemental Annotations to the Biographies of Exemplary Women* from the Qing dynasty), focus on the authenticity of the biographical content and the traditional function of moral cultivation. Since the 20th century, works such as Chen Dongyuan’s *A History of Women’s Life in China* (1928) have begun to criticize the oppression of women by traditional ethics. However, their methods still mainly involve literature review and moral criticism, and have failed to deeply deconstruct the power mechanism inherent in the narrative itself. This paper argues that the traditional narrative mechanism has exacerbated the predicaments faced by women due to their gender identity, yet existing studies still predominantly focus on the field of pure literature, with the analysis of narrative mechanisms in historical texts such as official histories, notes, and epitaphs remaining relatively insuffi-

cient. Meanwhile, the majority of discussions still center on canonical texts and historical materials, lacking attention to marginal sources and folk narratives. Moreover, with the introduction of feminist perspectives, scholars have begun to critique the oppressive nature of traditional ethics. However, as scholars such as Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann have pointed out, many studies still fall short in providing more nuanced historical contextualization when applying Western theories to the specific patriarchal and Confucian cultural mechanisms unique to China. Therefore, this paper will analyze historical materials and the classic female figures portrayed in ancient Chinese novels and literary works, revealing the shortcomings and limitations inherent in historical records and literary creations shaped by patriarchy. It will further examine the social-cultural factors contributing to these phenomena. This article aims to further explore the biases in the portrayal of female characters within patriarchal narratives through an analysis of literature. At the same time, it examines the social life and ideological and cultural background that have contributed to this phenomenon. This article helps to awaken people’s reflection on this unfair situation and deepens their understanding of feminist thinking. By sorting through a series of representative texts ranging from *Biographies of Exemplary Women* in the Han Dynasty and *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* in the Qing Dynasty to *The Golden Cangue* in modern times, this paper reveals that patriarchal narratives reduce women to an “Other” conforming to social morality and ethics through the means of typification, ethicalization, and aestheticization. This study integrates narrative theory and gender theory to analyze the power operations logical behind the text, and demonstrates logic behind the text, and demonstrates how female writers, such as Eileen Chang, through anti-narrative practices, challenge the single male perspective, thus opening up a possible path for achieving gender justice in historical writing.

2 Literature Review

Within the millennia-long textual tradition of China, female figures, though frequently represented in historical biographies, poetry, and fiction, were mostly confined within the bounds of social ethics. From the chaste exemplars portrayed as moral symbols in the official histories’ *Biographies of Exemplary Women* to the beauties and fox spirits subjected to the desiring gaze in Ming-Qing fiction, women in narratives are often “represented” yet rarely “given voice”; they are “defined” yet seldom permitted “self-narration.” This gender power structure, deeply embedded in the texture of the text, not only shapes historical perception but also profoundly influences cultur-

al psychology and social reality. As feminist critics of historical writing have long emphasized, single-gender historical narratives not only silence the voices of women and non-binary individuals but also actively construct historical knowledge through a particular lens. For instance, Oats-Indruchova (2022) criticized the Czech historiography for resisting gender analysis (Rosenlee, 2023). However, narration itself is also a domain of power struggle. Existing scholarship has either sorted out women's life experiences through textual research, critiqued institutional oppression from a social history perspective, or analyzed gender representations in literary works by drawing on Western theories, yielding abundant achievements. The core unresolved issue lies in the specific formal strategies through which patriarchal-centered narratives construct the "otherness" of women, and how female writing subverts such constructions from within the narrative framework to reconstruct the obscured subjectivity. The author focuses the research on the narrative itself and adapts an analytical framework that combines feminist narratology and gender theory. This article selects three typical texts that form a dialogue relationship in terms of time and type: *Biographies of Exemplary Women*, which serves as the original official historical narrative, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, which represents the fantasies and regulation of male literati, and the *The Golden Cangue*, which is a subversive practice by a modern female writer. This choice aims to construct a clear analytical thread evolving from being written about to self-writing: *Biographies of Exemplary Women* presents the initial paradigm characterized by ethicalization and symbolization; *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* reveals the intricate operation of aesthetic gaze and typological discipline; while *The Golden Cangue* demonstrates how women ultimately recapture narrative authority through inward excavation and formal innovation. This paper selects three representative textual sequences spanning from the Han Dynasty to the Republican period for a case study: *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (an official historical record), *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (a literary work by male literati), and *The Golden Cangue* (a literary work by a female author). It aims to clearly delineate an evolutionary trajectory from "being gazed upon" to "self-perceiving", and from "being written about" to "self-writing".

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Feminist and the Narratology of the Male Gaze

Feminist gender theory posits that the formation of gender roles is not solely determined by biological characteristics

but is rather the result of a co-construction between sociocultural norms and power dynamics. Previous studies have predominantly focused on literary works as objects for examining gender systems. Due to the „objectivity“ upheld by historiography, many scholars have overlooked the analysis of female representations in historical materials. However, an investigation into the gendered power differentials in the field of historiography reveals that men, by monopolizing historical discourse, have systematically obscured women's subjective experiences and narrative agency (Xiang, 2014). From the perspective of literature throughout history, both the history of civilization and the history of literature have been centered around men. Women, as the subjects of existence and discourse, have long been absent, resulting in the long-term loss of women's truth and subjectivity (Jiang, 2010). For instance, in Tang Dynasty legends, there is recognition of traditional female images, and the importance of women is manifested only through the success of men's careers (Liu, 2025), and many Chinese classical dramas strictly categorize women into the roles of jealous wives, homesick wives, and virtuous wives, which have become a "nightmare" that has long haunted the art of opera. Since the modern era, a growing number of scholars have focused on and conducted research on the issue of silencing women as a social group. For instance, Eileen Chang's novel *Interlocking Rings* profoundly exposes the oppression of women under feudal patriarchy. The protagonist Nixi, however, never reflects on the fundamental flaws of this dependent model. Rather than simply criticizing her choices, Chang offers an incisive analysis of how the feudal order distorts human nature by depicting the social background of the character's life (Wei, 2025).

3.2 Biographies of Exemplary Women: Discipline in Official Historiography

The biographical work *The Biographies of Virtuous Women* is not an objective record of the life trajectories of outstanding women, but rather a sophisticated device for producing ethical symbols that serves the function of moral education. Its narrative core lies in abstracting the specific female lives into moral models that conform to Confucian norms. Liu Xiang pioneered this form and established a mechanism for screening and evaluating based on the values of male scholar-officials. Here, the individual's diverse achievements of women are of no significance; what matters is whether they can perfectly fulfill the moral roles of „being a woman, wife, and mother“ and „be virtuous, filial, chaste, and heroic.“ Qiu (2011) pointed out that its essence lies in the male perspective's appropriation, pruning, and ideological reconstruction of women's life

experiences.

Since the Tang and Song dynasties, the standards for „virtuous women“ have narrowed from the earlier emphasis on „having outstanding conduct and talent“ to an extreme focus on „chastity and heroism“ (Liu, 2024). This shift in narrative strategy does not reflect a change in women’s actual virtues, but is rather the result of a deliberate collaboration between ruling ideologies and historical writing to actively construct moral benchmarks. Historical narratives filter out women’s psychological conflicts and emotional experiences, extracting only behavioral fragments that conform to feudal ethical codes, thereby reducing female figures to flattened moral symbols subservient to doctrine. Such writing functions as a form of Foucauldian “discipline”: by establishing exemplars and excluding heterogeneity, it silently promulgates behavioral norms for all female readers, internalizing external social regulations into self-imposed demands. The biographies of virtuous women from different dynasties are narrative-based female biographical literature, which inevitably carries a large amount of subjective elements from the narrators and the political and educational nature of official histories. Since entering the patriarchal society, Chinese society has established strict norms and admonitions for women based on Confucian moral ethics. For example, *Biographies of Virtuous Women* was written by Confucian scholar Liu Xiang from a male perspective, with a strong color of feudal moral guardianship, becoming a typical case of the perspective differences between men and women - that is, the “viewing” of men and the “being viewed” of women (Qiu, 2011). Under the male perspective narrative, women are clearly “symbolized” and confined to the chambers of the imperial harem, as well as the fields of weaving and farming. Their wisdom and virtues are not used for themselves but are used as appendages for the men around them, such as husbands, brothers, sons, etc. Many stories in *Biographies of Virtuous Women* emphasize how women use their wisdom to help these men. They lost their individuality and sense of self, becoming instruments for propagating the ethical and ritual norms of Confucianism—such as the tenet that the husband is the guide of the wife and the Three Obediences and Four Virtues—and serving as archetypal models of “virtuous women” for subsequent generations. During the Tang and Song dynasties, official perceptions and criteria of exemplary women shifted from pluralism to uniformity, with the focus moving away from “exceptional talent and moral excellence” toward “martyrdom for righteousness and chastity”. Compilers of official histories centered their attention solely on women’s conduct in three roles: as daughters, as wives, and as mothers, with an increasingly prominent emphasis on their role as wives (Liu, 2024). Rosenlee (2023) notes that this phe-

nomenon can be attributed to the pivotal role of the patriarchal system in shaping China’s family institution. Similarly, in the Qing Dynasty’s *Biographies of Women* from the *Collected Biographies*, male scholars and officials observed the life trajectories of women from their perspectives. The individuality of their lives was submerged in the backdrop of writings about their wisdom, chastity, and loyalty. Their true identities and actions were also shackled by the male-dominated discourse. After a comprehensive review of the miscellaneous biographies of women in *Collected Biographies of Women*, it can be summarized that the fates of the women recorded there roughly fall into four categories: remaining chaste after the death of their husbands, committing suicide upon their husbands’ death, suffering from family and social violence, and sacrificing themselves heroically in wars (Zhang, 2022). The perception and regulations of women in an era largely depend on the prevailing ideological trends at that time, such as Confucianism in the Eastern Han Dynasty and Neo-Confucianism in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

3.3 The Male Gaze in Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio: Ethicalized Symbolic Construction

In traditional fiction, especially that of the Ming and Qing dynasties, women were invariably positioned as objects of the male gaze. Their words and deeds in the texts were generally tied to the value they could bring to others—that is, to men. Such a gaze was not a mere act of looking; rather, it embodied the operational mode of power in ancient times, shaping and disciplining women through the morality, fear, and desire embedded in the patriarchal society. Take the *Qing Dynasty novel Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* as an example. In it, women are typically categorized as either “angels” or “demonic women”. The “angelic” image reflects men’s aesthetic expectations and moral ideals, specifically manifested in the objectification of women’s appearance, the subordination of their character, and the expectation of self-sacrifice in gender relations (Li, 2024). In traditional Chinese novel narratives, women generally lose their own subjectivity. Firstly, they are required to be “outstanding in appearance”. In Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, there are many detailed descriptions of women’s appearances, such as “Weak and charming, with eyes as bright as autumn waves” for Qingfeng in *Qingfeng*; “Lotus petals drenched in dew, apricot blossoms moistened by smoke” for Hu Sijie in *Hu Sijie*; and “As beautiful as peach blossoms and plum blossoms” for the heroine in *The Female Swordsman*. These descriptions all emphasize the gentle aspects of women’s appearance and often use flowers as metaphors, highlighting an attitude of appreciation towards women’s

looks. Such depictions are consistent with the principle of visual pleasure proposed by Laura Mulvey, whereby women are objectified through the active male gaze and reduced to consumable objects that satisfy visual desires. Second, in terms of moral character, women categorized as “angels” typically exhibit a strong sense of family and devotion; they are willing to sacrifice themselves, remain loyal to their husbands, and dedicate everything to their families. In many tales from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, the core conflict lies in the collision between the female characters’ non-human identities and mortal ethical norms. The so-called “happy endings” of these stories typically involve the women abandoning their original identities and reintegrating into a secular society that conforms to moral and ritual codes. For instance, in the story *Nie Xiaoqian*, the female ghost Nie Xiaoqian, under the influence of the “righteousness” of the scholar Ning Caichen, repents and gives up her identity as a monster. She learns to weave and serves her husband’s family, eventually integrating perfectly into the “normal” family order by giving birth to a child, becoming a “legend”. Such a narrative of saving a prostitute greatly satisfies the subjective moral superiority of men as the dominant and savior figures, while also embodying the expectations and desires of feudal civilization for women to become traditional, virtuous wives and good mothers. When it comes to gender relations, women depicted as “angels” tend to be characterized by their infatuation and unwavering fidelity. The male protagonist may sever all ties with the female lead or even inflict harm upon her, yet she remains wholeheartedly devoted to him, never abandoning him, as if she were nothing more than a personal possession. Similar situations even emerged as early as the Han Dynasty. For instance, the story of Sima Xiangru and Zhuo Wenjun was highly praised and widely sung by later generations. Zhuo Wenjun, as a young lady from a wealthy family, gave up her originally privileged life and followed the impoverished Sima Xiangru. To make ends meet, she even had to “sell wine at the tavern”, losing all her dignity. Yet, in contrast to Zhuo Wenjun’s devoted affection, Sima Xiangru’s actions reflected the inherent inequality within the gender power structure of his time: after rising to prominence in his official career, he gradually lost the love and deep affection he once had for her and sought out a new lover instead. Even in such circumstances, Zhuo Wenjun did not despair of him; on the contrary, she composed poems for him, hoping that his conscience would be stirred. From a modern perspective of gender concepts, it has obvious limitations. However, it has been passed down for thousands of years as a traditional love story in Chinese history. Similarly, in the famous folk narrative poem *The Peacock Flies to the South*, the female pro-

tagonist Liu Lanzi devoted herself tirelessly to her male partner Jiao Zhongkang and his family for many years, only to end up being divorced. And she never reflected on whether it was the family of Jiao Zhongkang that brought misfortune to her life. At the end of the story, she even chose to remain chaste and drowned herself. In contrast, the male protagonist Jiao Zhongqing remains silent in the face of pressure and accusations from his mother, offering no defense or support for Liu Lanzi. It is only at the very end of the story that he follows Liu Lanzi in choosing to “hang himself from a southeast branch.” A similar logic persists in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. In the story *Huan Niang*, the female ghost Huan Niang falls in love with Wen Ruchun, yet due to the inherent separation between the human and spirit realms, the two ultimately face parting. However, Huan Niang secretly facilitates the marriage between Wen Ruchun and Ge Liangong before departing with regret (Li, 2024). Pu Songling, along with many other literati, crafted a series of idealized female characters who possess both peerless beauty and traditional feminine virtues such as loyalty, gentleness, and moral integrity. These figures simultaneously satisfy sensual desires while posing no threat to familial ethics. At the same time, the traditional writing style also reflects the fear of men towards the power and resistance of women in a patriarchal society. The women that men detest usually have peculiar, odd, and ruthless personality traits, which are quite different from the traditional image of women. The narrator uses the predetermined tragic endings of the anti-traditional female characters to exert the punitive function of literary narration and psychologically discipline and intimidate potential deviants. Just like in the story “Ma Jiefu” in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Yin treated her husband, Yang Wanshi, with commands and orders, and would scold or even whip him if he was not compliant. She treated her father-in-law as a servant and subjected her concubine to severe punishments. This directly overturned the ethical norms of “husband being the head of the family” and “filial piety comes first”. Yet Yin Shi was ultimately abducted by bandits, sold into another family, and subjected to extreme torment. By the time Yang Wanshi redeemed her, she had truly repented and turned over a new leaf. Such a karmic retribution-style ending underscores the author’s fear and rejection of women who defied traditional norms. Similarly, in *The Lady Shao*, Jin Shi, who had no children of her own, firmly opposed her husband’s idea of taking a concubine and adopted a form of cold violence. However, the protagonist of the story, “The Lady Shao”, voluntarily became a concubine. She was extremely patient and submissive towards Jin Shi’s attitude, and at the end of the story, she even used her virtue and wisdom to persuade Jin Shi. This stark dichotomy

is the author's establishment of an absolute standard of what should and should not be for female readers.

All of this stems from the severe oppression of women in the Ming and Qing societies. In Ming and Qing legal codes and public discourse, jealousy was listed as one of the "Seven Grounds for Divorce" and regarded as a serious moral flaw and pathological condition. It should be noted, however, that this concept of jealousy differs from its modern social interpretation; it primarily emphasized women's obligation to remain submissive and refrain from objection when their husbands took concubines or engaged in similar actions. In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, any display of jealousy by female characters is invariably pathologized as a symptom requiring external intervention. Moreover, jealous or malicious women in these tales seldom meet favorable ends. These novels invariably employ terrifying tactics to intimidate against deviant behaviors. Firstly, the authors exaggerate the moral flaws of "vicious women", causing readers to immediately develop an aversion towards them and thereby neglect rational thinking and critical analysis. Secondly, through these stories, the authors convey a clear message to female readers: any act that challenges male dominance and disrupts family harmony will ultimately come at an extremely heavy price. Only by living in accordance with social norms can one obtain ultimate blessings. The image of „vicious women“ in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* is a literary projection of the collective anxiety of male intellectuals during the Ming and Qing dynasties, serving as a powerful tool for them to participate in the construction of gender society. In terms of plot structure, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* develops a stable "rescue-submission" model, where the heroines are ultimately "rescued" and thereby reintegrated into a normative social life that conforms to ethical and moral codes.

Liaozhai Ballads, another work by the same author, is also replete with images of virtuous and filial women shaped by ritual discipline. Against the backdrop of daily life, these portrayals embody the notion that "amidst the sociocultural context where the powerful state, society, and family jointly mold exemplary women, women have no choice but to adapt to the environment and accept such cultural conditioning" (Shen & Liu, 2025, p. 82). In these narratives, women similarly lose their subjectivity—a tendency linked to Pu Songling's personal life. His own wife, Liu, was introverted and gentle; she was the most taciturn and serene among the women in his family, and thus Pu lavished praise on these qualities. On the contrary, he resented the loquacity and aggressiveness of his other sisters-in-law, especially his eldest brother's wife and his younger brother's wife. He depicted such figures extensively in his works, even describing his eldest sister-in-

law as a "shrewish and aggressive village woman".

In classical literary works represented by *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and *Liaozhai Ballads*, women have always been confined to a position of "being written about". However, with the awakening of female consciousness in the modern era, a subversive form of self-writing began to emerge.

3.4 A Feminine Gaze on The Golden Cangue: The Awakening and Distorted Resistance of Subjectivity

On the contrary, in the works of modern female writers, women gradually moved from being „observed“ to „observing themselves“. Female writers, by depicting the extreme distortions and madness of characters' personalities, transformed this into a profound indictment of the „human-eating“ essence of the feudal patriarchal system. The tragedy of Cao Qiaojiao in *The Golden Lock* precisely proves that women's suffering stems from being „objectified“, being used as a means of procreation and an appendage of property. Her crazy behavior is essentially a powerless resistance; she cannot overthrow the system that oppresses her and can only impose her malice on the weaker ones. It is worth noting that Zhang Ailing refused to glorify Cao Qiaojiao. By realistically presenting the dark side and ambition of her human nature, she demonstrated the essential differences between female writing and the traditional male literary narrative. Her works reflect the female self-identity, identity formation, and self-meaning. Women from different cultural backgrounds hold varying perceptions, values, and expectations (Fan, 2024).

Cao Qiuqiao's tragic fate began with the lack of resources and the confinement of female identity, resulting in the loss of her subjectivity. She could only survive by relying on men. This precisely is the most important cause of the plight of Chinese women over the past thousand years. Cao Qiuqiao's family owned an oil and hemp store, and she herself had a somewhat attractive appearance and was not lacking in the pursuit of young men. However, due to her greed for money and feudal customs, her elder brother Cao Dianian, under the guise of concern, rejected Cao Qiuqiao's complaint and regarded her as a commodity for transaction, treating her as personal property. Cao Qiaojiao was never valued in her family, nor was she ever regarded as an independent individual—not even her maid, Xiaoshuang, looked up to her. Simone de Beauvoir, the renowned feminist scholar, pointed out in *The Second Sex* that "the subject can be established only in opposition... This means that they must unquestioningly accept the truths and laws tailored for them by other men. A woman's destiny

is decency and obedience” (Zhang, 2022, p. 145). After marriage, Cao Qiqiao’s love became even more passive in a patriarchal society, constantly restricted by traditional marriage norms. She was like a “butterfly specimen in a glass case”, seemingly glamorous but actually in a miserable situation. Therefore, in the later stage, she began to rebel crazily. Such rebellion was distorted and had a nature of revenge. Cao Qiqiao was not a traditional virtuous wife in the conventional sense when she was in the Jiang family. She was bold, her speech was rude, and she made the people in the Jiang family steer clear of her. She abandoned the virtues of loyalty and integrity and boldly expressed her emotions. She also actively defended her own rights and interests when the family was divided. Cao Qiqiao completely broke away from the behavioral norms of patriarchal society in an extreme and unconventional manner, thus launching a fierce struggle for individual rights and dignity (Zhang, 2022). After the division of the family, she used almost crazy actions to ruin the future of her children and destroyed the always glorious, holy, and loving image of the mother, which was the template set by men for the superior woman. Eileen Chang’s fiction is characterized by frenzied and extreme female characters. Confronted with the oppression of feudal and patriarchal society, they have no choice but to arm themselves through such means, shattering people’s perceptions and prejudices about women. They make people see that women can also express their emotions freely and defend their own interests—they are worldly, materialistic, and cling desperately to survival in this less-than-ideal world. Chang’s portrayal of female images is meticulous and nuanced; Cao Qiqiao is not merely a distinctive figure, but an epitome of countless women in that era. Since time immemorial, women have lived under the discourse of men, and it is through resistance that they have manifested their own value within a male-dominated culture (Zhang, 2024). Zhang Ailing’s narrative does not glorify this resistance, but rather profoundly exposes the alienation of the oppressive system on human nature. By creating a complex character like Cao Qiaojiao, who is not chaste or virtuous but full of desires, calculations and destructive tendencies, Zhang Ailing achieved a dual subversion of the male narrative tradition: on the one hand, she dismantled the template of the perfect woman; on the other hand, she directed the critical focus from individual morality to the deep social and cultural structure that causes the tragedy. This is precisely the practice that Eleonore Szubin called for: “Women must write themselves into the text.” Through writing her own trauma, desires, and complexity, women were embedded in the world history that had been monopolized by a single perspective. By conferring narrative authority on the inner experiences

of women and rejecting any pre-established moral and ethical framework, Zhang Ailing practiced what Szubin advocated as “female writing.” She directly presented suffering and strength in the text, allowing the subjectivity of women to be presented to the public.

4 Conclusion

This article conducts a systematic analysis of a series of texts, such as *The Biographies of Virtuous Women*, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, and *The Golden Lock*, and arrives at the following core findings.

First, the patriarchal-centered narrative systematically undermines the subjectivity of women through ethical and aesthetic textual strategies, causing them to be in a state of „speechlessness“. In terms of historiography, this is primarily manifested by simplifying women into symbols of ethics and morality. In literature, it presents characteristics of aesthetic objectification and typification, often by objectifying women as objects and shaping binary oppositional images. Second, this narrative paradigm is not isolated but deeply rooted in the power network constructed by the patriarchal system, Confucian ethics, and traditional historiography. Narration is not only a product of power but also an important tool for the operation and maintenance of power. Third, the „self-writing“ of female writers marks the awakening of female subject consciousness, achieving a historical leap from passive acceptance of definitions to active construction of identity, thereby challenging and deconstructing the single patriarchal narrative.

As macroscopic cross-historical research, this article sketches out the general evolution pattern, but the analysis of internal narratives in different periods has not been fully developed. Future research may conduct more detailed chronological histories and literary studies and attempt to expand the research objects to letters, diaries, operas, and other marginal historical materials. At the same time, it creatively combines feminism with local Chinese experiences to form a more persuasive analysis. Deconstructing historical gender biases is not only to restore the diverse appearance of history but also to provide a model for constructing a more inclusive and just narrative ethics for the present.

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