

## ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЕНИЕ

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Family gender roles at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century  
in Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines"

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The paper is the examination the Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines" as historical resource to study the position of women in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in China. Literature can be accurate in assessing changes in mentality of a certain society. The process of the women's role transformation is still one of the most complex and insufficiently studied topics. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty and China experienced a great influence of the Western culture. This era was also characterized by the rising movement for women's rights. In the novel "Wives and Concubines", Su Ting demonstrates the harsh reality of women from province, where the traditions, sexual policy, gender and class hierarchies were the means of women's oppression. Within the narrative of novel, women are abused by the androcentric culture. In 1911, the revolution didn't change the rules that govern the Chinese society. The strong perception of power-related norms in people's ideology about marriage still persevered, traditional role of women was linked to family, thus limiting the career development and ambitions. Women were to be defined as obedient and dependent on support from their husbands, even if they sacrifice their own careers.

**Keywords:** Chinese modern literature, Su Tong, marriage, Xinhai Revolution, concubinage, women's issue.

## Introduction

The gender issue is very urgent today. It is defined by the fact that studying the history of gender relations offers a scientific explanation to modern political processes and their consequences. The matter is that in the conditions of the current globalization, there are transformations of the family as a social institute. Nowadays, women's issue represents

sexual difference as a politically salient topic by classifying women as a special class of citizens. The women's issues — which is equated with emancipation — is a concept which is complex and broad. It includes three main problems: ethical-psychological, political-civil and that of economic equality. All these aspects are closely interconnected; therefore, it is possible to say that women's issues are connected with all spheres of public life. Studying literary experience of China within history, we can scoop the important ideas to see how they are embodied in the modern world.

The lack of historical perspective in the developing literature is, in some ways, surprising, seeing as many aspects related to unequal treatment of women in comparison with men have to do with deeply-seated cultural phenomena, such as the overwhelming Chinese preference for male offspring. Recently, a new direction of research has been formed in historiography: the study of interaction between the male and female aspects of society in historical space.

Use of fiction as a historical source is interesting for modern science because a novel includes information about social moods and thoughts of a country in different periods of its life. As Prof. Ranald Mitchie pointed out: "Novels provide a glimpse of the opinions of contemporaries which cannot be captured from facts and figures" [1].

The period of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century became a turning point for China. This is the era to which women's movement also belongs. It evolved under the influence of Confucian and Western ideas about humanity, freedom and the public initiative stemming from the individual, equality of men and women, as well as new family relations. The intellectual elites claimed women did not acquire wisdom due to their weakness, but because they had never been guided to that path.

For instance, Chen Duxiu, an active participant in this movement, wrote an article entitled «The Way of Confucius and Modern Life» [2, p. 355–356] («孔子之道与现代生活») in New Youth Magazine (新青年), in which he criticizes Confucianism and explains how Confucian ideals do not fit with the modern world. There was no personal independence and if any deviation were to be made from the teachings, shame was brought not only to the individual but to the family as well. Chen women can choose to remain single if they are widowed because "they have nothing to do with what is called the chastity of widowhood" [2, p. 121]. Under this doctrine, a woman in China is looked down upon because it is seen as "shameful and unchaste for a woman to serve two husbands" [2, p. 121]. This is significant because to avoid bringing shame to the rest of the family, in-laws have forced their daughters-in-law to remain a widow [2, p. 122]. So Confucianism sacrificed the individuals' rights for the sake of families and society. The universal comprehensive education for men and women recognized it as essential to create independent personalities and self-assertion. The author conducted a detailed comparison between provisions on social order in traditional Chinese culture and Western society while showing relevance and applicability of many Western approaches in the struggle for the liberation of women in China.

The literary world has long been a place for women to tell their stories. For quite a while, it has been mainly male writers in China who raised the demands for women's liberation. In the early 20th centuries it was Lu Xun, Mao Dun etc. Among the writers of a "New Wave" writing in China he names of Su Tong also merits a mentioning.

Su Tong (born 1963) is a bestselling novelist in China who became well known as one of the writers of the so called Chinese avant-garde. At the age of 46 Su Tong won the

Man Asian Literary Prize in 2009 for “The Boat of Redemption” (河岸). And in 2015, he won the 9th Mao Dun Literature Prize, one of China’s top literature awards, for his novel “Yellowbird Story” (黄雀记). His novels are full of symbolism and witty dialogues.

In his narratives of Chinese women’s lives, Su Tong portrays a broad range of character types, such as wives and concubines in “Wives and Concubines” (妻妾成群), spinsters in “Embroidery” (苏绣), and prostitutes in “Blush” (红粉), simple girls from rural area in “Umbrella” (伞). In his novels the author shows harsh reality of women from the province, where they were significantly repressed by the traditions, sexual policies, gender hierarchies, and class.

Su Tong became established internationally mostly through the success of the Oscar nominated film “Raise the red lantern” by Zhang Yimou, adapted from the “A Bevy of Wives and Concubines”.

The story is set in pre-Mao China and presents the main character Lotus as a victim of patriarchal order of the Chen household.

The study of the problem through the author’s vision has its advantages. Literature is accurate in assessing changes in the mentality of society [3]. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine the Su Tong’s novel “Wives and Concubines” as an historical resource through which to study the position of women in the first quarter of the 20th century China.

Su Tong’s works are different from other modern Chinese writers in the manner of narration, due to which the author manages to convey human feelings and reveal characters. Among the method of Su Tong’s artistic expression scholars mentioned psychologism [4], abnormal collocations of synaesthesia and oxymoron [5]. In the writer’s touch on the simple and plain ethics of survival and folk life, the reader can gain a glimpse of the warmth of humanity and the bright side of the gloomy life in his sinister novels [6]. Due to all of these, as Hua Li pointed out, Su Tong’s novels well illustrate the history of everyday life [7]. So she uses Su Tong’s novels to study Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, survey the author’s unflinching depictions of family dysfunction, juvenile delinquency, rape, and suicide.

Women’s issue in Su Tong’s novels has been studied little, mostly by female Chinese scholars. Wang Jian-then explores how female figures in fiction have a tendency to rely on male power and mentioned that Su Tong has a shortcoming of his reflections of a male-dominated culture with the use of women’s tragedies [8]. The reform of the prostitutes has been observed by Chen Le on the example of Su Tong’s novel “Hong Fen” [9]. The analysis said reform of the prostitutes means not only a change of themselves but also a change of the moral sense of the masses. On one hand, society required them to reform; but on the other hand, they were never accepted. They were still living at the bottom of society.

## Conceptual issues

The concept of “gender” in the meaning of the category of historical analysis gave rise to a gender history as an historical retrospective of the study of gender relations. Gender stratification, gender inequality is one of those objective characteristics of the social state of society that are increasingly attracting the attention of historians. Women, who are a specific socio-demographic group of the population, have different access to privileges, prestige, and power compared to men.

The theory of gender roles, which received theoretical substantiation in the works of T. Parsons and R. Bales, is based on the idea of “naturalness” and functionality of the separation of male and female roles in the family, logically derived from the classical provisions of structural functionalism about a stable family as an essential element of a normally functioning society. T. Parsons proceeded from the fact that, although the role of the housewife remains the main social role of the woman, only the balance of the “different but equal” roles of the wife and husband ensures the harmony, integrity, and stability of the family, based on the division of household labour [10]. Thus, the problem of inequality in the distribution of power resources in the family, directly related to the differentiation of gender roles, remains outside the approach of T. Parsons. At the same time, the main provisions of the theory of gender roles are used in gender studies to analyse the inequality caused by the prescribed traditional roles of men and women. Gender analysis reveals the nature of relations between men and women as those of social asymmetry. Therefore, gender studies raise issues of the distribution of power resources, the legitimacy of the normative social order, and justify a “gender-sensitive” policy, the goal of which is achieving gender equality.

In contrast to the theory of gender roles, the constructivist approach, based on the works of P. Berger, Th. Luckmann, E. Goffman, H. Garfinkel, gender acts consist not so much of a set of roles, characteristics, or properties of individuals, but rather of a system of social relations constructed during everyday interactions at the micro level of the social system. This undermines the very basis of ideas about the “natural” division of gender roles based on the absolutization of gender differences. In modern approaches, gender is defined as “changeable, fragmented, controversial, re-constructed every time concept” [11]. The principal point of modern theories is the emphasis on the active nature of the process of doing gender, or on creating and recreating differences and gender boundaries between women and men, as well as among women and men [12].

### **Women's role within the family**

The defeat of China in the Opium war in 1840 was the beginning of Chinese integration into the global community and the influences of globalization on China were the causes of the changes in its socio-political thought. Changes have also affected ideas of women's role in society.

However, the imperial system brought in their wake, the custom of concubinage remained surprisingly resilient. Concubinage as a semi-legitimate form of marriage was common through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Republican society continued to view concubinage in much the same way as late imperial society had viewed it.

In Imperial times, concubines were symbols of status and wealth to the men that possessed them. A concubine occupied an intermediary position between the main wife, her children and domestic maid. Their own status was less than that of a wife and their children legally belonged to their master's wife not themselves [13, p. 124].

Literatures that paint life in Republican households with multiple wives suggest that the custom of concubinage largely unchanged from late Imperial times. The Su Tong's novel “Wives and Concubines” narrates the experience of the Chen family, which consists of the Old Master, four wives (3 concubines), their children and a servant.

A university student in 1920s China, Lotus has been forced to leave school as a result of her father's recent death and her family's subsequent financial difficulties. Su Tong

describes her as a practical person. With precious few options available to her, she has decided to get married, and as far as she has concerned, she may marry for money. So she became a forth and less influenced mistress of Old Master Chen Zuoqain. During the whole story Su Tong proves the Lotus position as a lower one.

Upon entering the house Lotus was introduced to Joy, an old-fashioned aged first wife and Cloud, the Second Mistress. Joy favoured previously, is now out, her main function in family having changed to observe family customs.

While, spending time with Cloud, Lotus recognizes Cloud's potential power over the Chen, so she names her "Elder Sister". She is friendly with the new wife, but shortly reader will discover her sinister intentions. One of the characters, Coral, the Third Mistress, says Cloud has "a Buddha's face, a scorpion's heart", as Cloud tried to poison her.

However, Lotus encounters Coral later. Coral refused to host a new concubine. To assert her influence over Lotus, she sends for Chen at their first night together.

Lotus and Coral have something in common. Coral was a famous opera singer. Thus they are both young and progressive women, who were independent in the past.

To understand the hierarchy at Chen's family it is also important to learn about children and their status in the household. Coral has only one son. In addition, Cloud has two daughters. In this regard Lotus mentioned a son is better than a daughter, perhaps because having boys would improve her status. Soon after the reader learns of Chen's impotence and Lotus's respective inability to give birth, which would have increased her rank within the family. For the reason that Old Master is weak, his own health and stamina are waning, and indeed nobody truly loves him. Without love a human being is sinking fast.

The other two characters are First Mistress (daughter) and Feipu (son), Joy's children. They use greater privileges comparing with the main heroine. It is showed through the scene of welcome home banquet, which was organized for Feipu and was far more resplendent than Lotus's. Moreover, Feipu addresses her not as "Mistress", but with her own name. In contrast Joy called children of other women "Whore's brats", maybe to highlight her legitimate status relating to concubines.

Competing for the Old Master's attention and status mistresses could insult each other. It is on full display in the incident with Cloud's daughters. Allegedly Coral has paid a boy to beat up two girls. All the mistresses' energies are thrown into winning the Master's favour, bringing out the worst in them in the process, such as lying and scheming.

After a time, Lotus loses interest in competing. Others understand it as a defeat, while she does not see the point any more. At the first part of the novel she takes an advantage of others, yet subsequently she has lost it completely, and nobody even congratulates her on her birthday.

Drawing this complex tangle of relationships between the characters, Su Tong doesn't judge or accuse them. He describes a psychological state of characters forced to follow Chen family's customs. The stories of their lives involve imposition of gross and severe injustice through years of suffering, disappointment and unbearable conditions. The best description for the sinister atmosphere in the house could be Coral's comment that "There is only a breath's difference between a person and a ghost..."

The high point of the novel is Coral's death. Due to her adulterous relationship with the doctor she was forced to jump into a well. Chen explains to Lotus what must be done to Coral as he does not see any other variant of punishment. There is no choice and the

woman is subject to customs. The domestics also take it for granted. After this incident Lotus loses her mind.

The winter weather atmosphere of the novel's end is reflecting Lotus' condition of cold and loneliness.

It is also interesting that towards the end of the novel the author introduces one more concubine — the Fifth Mistress Bamboo as a symbol of perpetuating the story. Like it was in the Lu Xun's "Madman's Diary" and Lao She's "Teahouse" the characters assume a role at the top of the society.

From the first page to the last one the reader can feel psychological tension. It is quite clear from the Lotus point of view. She is the fourth wife of a wealthy gentleman, forced to live in an enclosed space with his three older wives. Susanna Schantz called this psychological situation "claustrophobic". She linked Su Tong's novella with Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison". The order at the Chen family is that of disciplinary structure translated through custom, obedience, and punishment. This house is a prison for wives. On the one hand they could feel very lonely, on the other hand Lotus complains of the lack of privacy, because her servant always looks spies on her.

And as it usually in prison that the relationships among members are based on power. According to Hobbes, power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance [14, p. 122]. Therefore, the relations within the Chinese family could be named power-based.

The traditional concubinage system of Chen's family illustrates intersectionality, where the intertwining of gender with other social positions complicate power relations and inequalities between men and women, as well as solely among women. Due to men's resource advantage and socio-cultural influence, a traditionally accepted marriage norm is for the husband's independency and the decision-making role, while the wife remains submissive and dependent.

In these circumstances the Old Master due to the customs has a power over his wives and concubines. He also highlights this with the phrase: "Women can never be more important than men". As though responding to this Lotus comments: "A woman is just that sort of creature". She says that all women play games. But do they act according to their will or do they have to play games to survive and achieve an illusion of power?

### **The fate of educated women**

According to Confucian ideals, owing to their natural reality, women are little adapted for the correct perception of antiquity, and the habit to reflect too much can only instil wrong ideas in their heads which would not be fitting to be established in society. They could not participate in public life or apply to civil service exams, which were restricted to men only and served to recruit new people for bureaucracy. This approach could be well illustrated by a widespread idiom: "a woman's virtue is to have no talent" («女子無才便是德»). The aim of traditional women's education was limited to the teaching of social ethics and family traditions with an emphasis on how to become a virtuous wife and good mother. These skills were acquired through their parents or nannies if the girls had come from a wealthy background, and not as a result of formal schooling. Women would be unable to take up painting or writing and, most of all, they would be barred from politics [15, p. 346]. Therefore, women did not get classical education very often.



During the late Qing dynasty and early republican period, there were widespread discussions about the roles of modern women versus traditional women. In numerous articles on magazines authors expressed the opinion on a status of women, their education and on the nature of women, etc. supported their economic independence and a possibility of participation in public work.

In 1907, the women's private educational sector was given the official seal of approval when the Qing government announced regulations covering the administration of private colleges and primary schools. In the late 1920s girls were officially enrolled in Beijing University [16, p. 353].

The Chinese revolution of 1911 had overthrown the last Chinese emperor—the symbol of the Chinese feudal system and indicated that China had entered the era of the republic. However, the revolution actually only changed the top leader of China, but it did not touch the grassroots of Chinese society. After the revolution, the foundations of Chinese society remained the same. The status of Chinese women had not changed at all.

And Su Tong's novel illustrates it well.

Lotus had been a student before marriage. But once she had joined the household, it did not matter that Lotus had attended a university or that Coral had been a talented opera singer, except insofar as those qualities could please the Master. Their lives were no longer their own, not as they used to be.

At these circumstances the conflict between traditional women (Joy and Cloud) and modern women (Coral and Lotus) could be observed. While Coral pretended to follow the custom, her adultery could be viewed as a kind of protest. She was not afraid of being murdered as the past wives.

In contrast to other three mistresses Lotus was not familiar with the customs due to her university background. And it becomes one of the reasons of her fall.

For example, she gives a simple birthday present to Chen different to those of the other wives. And the fact that she even did not put a formal red strip on it made the domestics confused. Trying to improve the situation Lotus decides to give a special kiss to the Master, but she makes it worse. The others seem to consider the kiss as an inappropriate act that only serves to highlight Lotus's misguided behaviour. The result of her nonconformity is her madness.

Yet still Lotus understands this world is very different. In her conversation with Feipu she notes the absence of books at Chen's house. Her past life as a student is over and maybe the knowledge of science she got at school does not fit her reality anymore. What is interesting to mention, Joy's daughter is also away from school. Nevertheless, she has the same fate with all women of her generation- one day she will marry a rich man.

Examples of Coral's and Lotus's behaviour show how higher education and career success, respectively, transformed women's self-identities, and how these qualities in turn influence their attitudes and choices in regard to marriage and family.

In some way Chen family has the influence of modernity and education. It is represented by Cloud's desire to cut her hair. However, the life has its own hierarchy and it could not be changed in one moment. The transformation in socio-political thoughts ignored the specific roles of women in society. As one of the servants, Mama Song puts: "As soon as people are born, they are fated to become masters or servants; if you don't believe it, you still have to believe it".

## Conclusion

The analysis of fiction as a historical source allowed us to identify the changes that occurred in the life of a Chinese woman at the first quarter of the 20th century.

In short, the Su Tong novel demonstrates that social identities are shaped and transformed in response to shifting environments, even though the traditional social roles have not changed yet. Educated women (Lotus) still do not have any opportunities for self-realization outside the family. There is still a strong perception of power-related norms in public ideology about marriage, the traditional role of women linked to family, limiting the career development and ambitions. Women shall be defined as obedient and dependent in supporting their husbands even if they sacrifice their own careers (Coral).

Clearly there is more information in the story. Even so there is enough evidence to claim that within the narrative women are abused by authoritarian male culture. Su Tong follows the tradition of social critique by Lu Xun and Lao She.

Feminist anthropology posits that gender, class or nation are essential categories and should be investigated in specific cultural and historical contexts. They represent and shape people's realities, serve powerful political purposes and could influence social and structural inequality [15, p. 153].

In China women's movement formation and development were in historical framework and inseparably linked with the process of profound transformations in state system including social, economic, and cultural spheres of society.

Meanwhile with all the changes that fall of the Qing dynasty and the end of the imperial system brought in their wake, the custom of concubinage remained surprisingly resilient. It was not only that the customs were intact well into the twentieth century, but also that Republican society continued to view concubinage in much the same way as the late imperial society had viewed it. Thus progress does not always mean charging ahead.

Speaking about the impact of the intellectuals' work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for most women achievements were inconspicuous. With the exception of obtaining the right to primary education and the abolition of foot binding, the issue of gaining political, economic, legal rights of women were little different from previous decades.

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## Гендерные роли в начале XX века в романе Су Туна «Жены и наложницы»

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В статье рассматривается роман Су Туна «Жены и наложницы» как исторический источник для изучения положения женщин в первой четверти XX века в Китае. Литература точна в оценке изменений в менталитете общества. Процесс трансформации роли женщин является наиболее сложным и недостаточно изученным вопросом. Синьхайская революция XX века свергла династию Цин, на Китай оказывала большое влияние западная культура. Именно в XX веке происходит коренной перелом в сознании молодежи по поводу революций, новых мнений и взглядов и именно к этому историческому периоду относится начало женского движения в Китае. Су Тун строит такие психологически напряженные сюжеты в произведении, которые помогают читателю точнее представить процессы, происходящие в обществе, и влияние зародившегося женского движения на них. Через анализ психологизма сюжетов, ситуаций, характеров персонажей, описаний природы и вещного мира, взаимоотношений героев в произведении Су Туна показаны социальные и политические особенности положения женщин в начале XX века. В романе «Жены и наложницы» автор показывает жизнь женщин из провинции, находящихся под гнетом традиций, гендерной иерархии, класса. Автор демонстрирует, что, несмотря на прогресс в менталитете, китайская революция в 1911 году не изменила основных правил, регулирующих общество, и стереотипы, касающиеся

положения женщин в китайском обществе, не изменились. По-прежнему сохранялось влияние норм власти в представлении людей о браке, традиционная роль женщин была связана с семьей, ограничивая развитие ее карьеры.

*Ключевые слова:* китайская современная литература, Су Тун, брак, Синьхайская революция, институт наложничества, женский вопрос.

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