

The Suffering of Times: Description of Nanyang Female in Yuan Shang Cao's Fiction

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Abstract: Yuan Shang Cao was a well-known Malaysian-Chinese male writer. His fictions mainly focus on the descriptions of women living in Nanyang during 1950s-1960s. The Nanyang society (Malaya) back then, people's education level was low and lack of consciousness about their human rights, and this led to the tragic fate of the female. Yuan Shang Cao's characterization of women in his works has reflected the issues of the prevailing society and the destiny of women. This paper attempts to analyze the Nanyang social environment then and the form factors through the different female characters in fictions by Yuan Shang Cao's, to finally discuss the concern towards women by the senior Malaysian-Chinese writer.

Keywords: Mahua Literature; Yuan Shang Cao; Consciousness; Femenism; Multiple Oppressions

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Introduction

Yuan Shang Cao¹ was a well-known Malaysian-Chinese writer during the mid-

1 Yuan Shang Cao was born on November 5, 1922. During the wartime, he wanted to return China to join the army, but in vain. After that, he wished to further his studies in China and also failed. Anyway, he persisted and contributed in arts and literary more than 50 years. In 1978, when the Malaysian Chinese Writers Association established, he was elected as the first Chairman. He passed away on October 13, 1999.

1940s. His real name was Gu Dexian (古德贤) and he was from Meixian, Guangdong Province of China. Yuan Shang Cao followed his parents came to Malaysia when he was 4 years old. After that, they settled down in a small town, Sungai Lembing, Pahang of north Malaysia. Yuan Shang Cao graduated from Sungai Lembing Chinese Primary School and later graduated from junior high school, Chung Hwa. He has worked as clerks, movie admen, association committee, mobile hawkers, coffee shop owner, teacher, editor and so on. He liked to write and he has many articles published in various newspaper using different pen names. After 1959, he successively served as an editor for “*Xuesheng Zhoubao*” 《学生周报》, “*Jianguo Ribao*” 《建国日报》, “*Dazhong Wanbao*” 《大众晚报》, “*Malaiya Tongbao*” 《马来亚通报》 and “*Xiezuoren*” 《写作人》. In 1978, The Writers’ Association of Chinese Medium of Malaysia was established and Yuan Shang Cao was elected as the first chairman of the association. His major fictions which have been published including: “*Jiucai Huakai*” (《韭菜花开》, The Blossom of Chives), “*Shui Dongliu*” (《水东流》, Flow to The East), “*Mitu*” (《迷途》, Get Lost), “*Fangke*” (《房客》, Tenant), “*Wanjia Denghuo*” (《万家灯火》, Lights of Million Families), “*Luanshi Ernü*” (《乱世儿女》, In Times of Trouble), “*Fengyu Liulian Keng*” (《风雨榴莲坑》, Storms in Durian Pit) etc.. In 1998, he won the fifth Malaysian-Chinese Literature Awards; and he passed away on 13th October of the following year.

Before World War II, the residents stayed in Sungai Lembing were mostly local indigenous and migrant workers. School education was not common then; even the cultural development was relatively tardy. Due to the lack of high level education among the people, it has resulted backward thinking in the society. Yuan Shang Cao was only high school level and he has intended to continue his studies to the mainland China. Anyway, he lost the opportunity to further his studies due to the war. Yuan Shang Cao’s ideological constructions came from reading. When Yuan Shang Cao was studying in junior high school, he served as a head of librarian in the school. He had read a large number of books regarding Modern Chinese Literature and he believed that literature can change the society. In Yuan Shang Cao’s fictions, the qualities of characters were significantly shown and the characters descriptions were strongly demonstrated. He attempted to evoke the people to re-examine the value of life, spirit of democracy, old traditions and new thinking through the description of the literature. The expression of such rational thinking had a direct impact on the Malaysian-Chinese Literature throughout the publications from 1950s to 1960s; these formed as popular themes during that era. In the fictions of Yuan Shang Cao, we can see the fools and wise men were in sharp contrast, the story background is always forming a situation of dualism. The readers can easily found that “the teacher” was always set to be the “guider” amongst the characters in his fictions. Yuan Shang Cao raised issues, discussed

them and solved the problems through the educated intellectuals like the character of “the teacher”. Although these articles were too rational to form a rigid on the artistic expression, but that was indeed the intentional way of expression by most of the Malaysian-Chinese writers during that time. They believed that literature was able to reflect the phenomena of a society and that they can restore things to order through their writings.

Yuan Shang Cao came from a poor family and he felt compassion for the poor and the needy. Yuan Shang Cao also cared for the female, he felt sympathetic towards them for being unable to control their own destiny in the patriarchal society. The lamentation about life in his articles was a synthesization from his personal experiences and the fate of a generation. It was a reflection of an ambitious writer yearning for a brighter future from an occlusive social environment. Yuan Shang Cao was trying to find the balance point between the ideal and the reality of life through literature. There were a lot of themes or topics being discussed in his fictions which are including love between men and women, family, education, humanity and such on. Then, the most remarkable part was the analysis of the oppression of women. Apart from this, the reflections of the social problems were also sophisticatedly performed in his writings. However, this paper mainly discusses about the writings of women’s characters in Yuan Shang Cao’s short stories in order to discover the unavoidable tragedies through the women’s fate from the 1940s to 1970s.

Multiple Oppressions: The Sorrow of Vulnerable Women

Women have always been oppressed in the traditional Chinese society, they were in a very low position whether at home, family, society or country. Women had no rights to inherit family properties nor asked for a divorce, they did not even have the opportunity to have education. Furthermore, the traditional and feudalistic concept in China prefers that “nǚ zǐ wú cái biàn shì dé” (女子无才便是德, inability constitutes the very virtue of a woman). This kind of mind-set has been implanted among the people for a long time; therefore it cannot be changed in a short period of time. Even the Chinese who came to Nanyang to make a living were still keeping the old thinking.

By the way, the girls’ school of Singapore has been founded in 1899 and the first Chinese girls’ school was also founded in 1908 in Kuala Lumpur, peninsular of Malaysia, however, they were facing the same problem: lack of students. It was due to the failed attempt to persuade parents to send their daughters to school for education. It was also because of the hard life of the people of that time since many of the families were living in poverty and did not have extra money to send their children to schools. In the society during that time, children usually needed to help their parents to work in

the farm and feed poultries, especially the daughters. They must assist their parents in housework or take care of younger siblings. Due to the reasons as above described, the progress of social status of women was changing slowly.

The tradition in Chinese society has always been son preference and women's rights have always been ignored. With the rise of feminism through the French Revolution in 18th century, the voice of demand for equality between men and women has arisen, evoking human to re-examine the role of women in the development of civilization. After a long time, this ethos has finally spread to Asia in the early 20th century. Thence, an unprecedented level of openness was offered to women in the field of education, arts and literature. They positively participated in cultural development and were free to express themselves boldly. China writers of the May Fourth Movement were also concerned about the liberation of women. Women were writing about themselves while they have also become the object of literary writing. Yuan Shang Cao was familiar with modern Chinese Literature since he was studying in high school. Therefore, he was deeply influenced by the May Fourth New Literature especially in the fields of humanistic concern, anti-feudalism and scientific thinking. He employed female as the main character in many of his fictions and these female were hard-working, kind-hearted, wise and gracious. However, fate did not bless them. They have experienced all kinds of hardships in life and suffered a lot in that era of misery. He sympathized with the sufferings of women and it caused him to stand and defend them against injustice.

In the patriarchal society, women were dependent on men to live. During that time in the Nanyang society, it was also a male dominated society as the old China, where men worked and earned money while women took care of household duties. In other words, the financial burden of a family fell on the father or husband or son. Thence, once the breadwinner fell ill, women's living conditions will be threatened. In these circumstances, their possible reaction was to think and act rational. They wanted to get rid of the predicament but were not capable of doing so, they could only rely on others. Therefore, they chose to rely and depend on men which they admired and trusted. In other words, they eventually let their sensibility to dictate their rational thinking. They entrusted their destinies to their emotions or feelings, once the emotions disappeared for some reasons (death or betrayal), their spiritual pillar collapsed. They eventually had to give in to fate.

At that time, there were very few educated women, most of them were illiterate. Women failed to achieve financial independence and therefore unable to maintain their daily lives, the only way out was to depend on men to survive in order to improve the financial problems of their own families. In Yuan Shang Cao's perspective, the traditional concept inhibited the personality development of women; they had no

choice in order to survive. His first short story anthology “*Jiucai Huakai*” (《韭菜花开》, The Blossom of Chives) was published in 1961. This anthology collected a total of 13 works completed in the 1950s and 1960s. The story began with a male teacher who was sent to the suburban school for the first time opening the fence gate of the Shi family when the chives farm were in full blossom, from then on he was involved in the fate of several women. The man of Shi family died young, leaving behind three elderly women and children. Due to the family’s financial predicament, his wife had to remarry another man in the city as the man’s concubine, so that she can financially support her own children and her ex-mother-in-law whenever there was a chance. However, her ex-mother-in-law cannot forgive her ex-daughter-in-law for being remarried with another man, thus she had prohibited her grandson Ah Fa and her granddaughter Xiumei to meet with their mother. Ah Fa missed his mother and always cried in the school, this tragedy of three generations came to light due to the curiosity of his teacher.

The women depicted by Yuan Shang Cao were simple, sincere and capable of distinguished between right and wrong. However, they were uneducated and had no idea about equality between men and women. When these women faced the ups and downs of fate, they tried to resist and make a change, but it never helped. It was because once they escaped from a predicament, they tend to fell into another predicament. They could never escape from the unfortunate fate. The unfortunate fate of women was sometimes exacerbated because of the persecution of the elderly female members in the family. The mother-in-law in the story was such a decisive role (master role). They had experienced the feudalistic which oppressed women, yet they continued to remain preference for sons, superstitious, ignorant thinking and stubborn personality. Their ignorance was always the main cause of a series of unfortunate event of other family members. After the mother-in-law’s husband passed away, she depended on her son to live. Then her son died young, she shifted her hopes to her only grandson, Ah Fa. Due to her widowed daughter-in-law remarrying another man, she regarded her as an enemy and even prohibited Ah Fa to meet her. When Ah Fa was sick, she insisted on not letting her ex daughter-in-law to take Ah Fa to seek medical treatment. She even superstitiously believed that drinking the amulet water was the most effective treatment and it almost caused a tragedy in the family. The daughter-in-law of Shi Family has always been submissive; their source of livelihood has become a problem since her husband died. In despair, she remarried another man so that she could secretly provide financial help to the children from her previous marriage.

In order to finance the medical expenses, the grandmother of Shi family wanted her granddaughter Xiumei to marry Ah Rong, a vegetables-selling vendor. Xiumei ran away from home and asked for her mother’s and stepfather’s help. But Xiumei’s stepfather had evil intentions on her. Xiumei’s mother was unwilling to see her daughter

being insulted, therefore both of them escaped from the stepfather's home. As a result, they fell into another financial predicament. In despair, Xiumei promised to marry the vegetables seller. They thought that the marriage of Xiumei and Ah Rong was a good thing to Xiumei, but they did not expect that Ah Rong already had a wife and children. In less than two months, the conflict between Xiumei and Ah Rong's first wife finally broke out and the verbal conflict had even turned into a scuffle. Xiumei's grandmother wanted to safeguard Xiumei against Ah Rong's wife, but in the end she died in the conflict due to being overly angry.

If women did not have the ability to self-reliance to guarantee their life qualities, they could only consider to depend on men for a lifetime. They relied on their father before getting married; they relied on their husband after marriage; they relied on their son if their husband died. Whenever there was a crisis in their lives, the solution of these women was to find a man they can rely on. Thus, Xiumei's mother remarried and Xiumei chose to marry a man who already had a wife as his second wife, but all these decisions were made out of despair. Xiumei actually wanted to make her own choice, but she did not have the right conscious to help her to escape from the traditional thinking. She wanted to find a trustworthy man to rely on. She had a crush on a teacher teaching in Ah Fa's school. She eventually found the teacher's address and tried to look for him at his hometown, but the teacher has already left his hometown to teach in another small town. Xiumei was very disappointed but to return home and accepted her own fate. In fact, not even Xiumei's mother's second marriage nor Xiumei's marriage as a second wife to a man could end their suffering, yet it further more caused tragedies in their lives.

“Hou Lai Niang” (《后来娘》, The Stepmother) was another work by Yuan Shang Cao. It was written about women's ignorance and sorrow. After Zhen's mother died, her father remarried another woman with a daughter from her previous marriage. Since then, Zhen stayed together with her father, stepmother and her stepsister. Zhen's stepmother always scolded and beat Zhen and she didn't even give Zhen food to eat. On the contrary, her stepmother always gave a large piece of meat to her own daughter. Although Zhen's stepsister was still young, yet she could feel how her mother treated her stepsister, it caused her to follow suit and often bullied Zhen.

She saw her mother abusing her stepsister from time to time, she chose to follow suit. Whenever she felt dissatisfied, she would thumped her back with fists or twisted her arms, cheeks and thighs with her fingernails. (Yuan, 1961, p.175).

Zhen was only seven or eight years old, her father was always not at home in order to make a living. When her father was working, her stepmother always abused her, but

Zhen was just a weak little girl, she did not have the courage to complain to her father. There was once a cold night where she was locked outside of their home. She was not wearing much and kept shaking. Fortunately a kind old neighbour let her come into his house to sleep. Both Zhen and the old neighbour thought that she could go home once her father came back. But things did not turn out how they wished. Zhen's suffering has never ended even though her father had come back. Zhen's stepmother deliberately slandered the relationship between Zhen and the old neighbour. Zhen's muddled father believed to the words of his wife, he scolded her daughter angrily and accused her of being a slut. He eventually sold Zhen to someone else.

The economic conditions in Nanyang society was in a slump during the 1950s and 1960s, even the cultural level among the people was low during that time. People's thinking was still left behind. The burden of life has distorted the human nature and caused people to behave more selfishly. In the case of scarcity of resources, the role of the stepmother in the story had to protect herself and her own daughter. She could not love Zhen as her own children in order to protect herself and her daughter's interest. She abused Zhen, slandered her and finally kicked her out of the house. In this story, the father was the breadwinner, in order to fight for all of the obligations from her husband; she did not hesitate to push out her stepdaughter. The young Zhen lost her mother and the only one she could depend on was her father, yet her father chose to believe the other woman who depended on him and it eventually caused herself to be sold by her father to someone else. The person who caused Zhen to suffer was the elderly female in her family. Sometimes, the persecution from the elderly female towards the younger female was even more serious than social norms. From what has Zhen encountered, the despicable acts of her stepmother and the ruthlessness of her father show us the helplessness and sadness of women in that time.

There were a lot of distinctive female characters in the fiction named "*Fangke*" (《房客》, Tenant). It was one of the masterpieces by Yuan Shang Cao. The women in the stories such as "Lady Boss" (事头婆), "Madam Tofu" (豆腐婆) and "Mrs. Wealth" (财富娘) were the representatives of women in real life during that time. They were able to be self-reliance in the aspects of financial. The Lady Boss collected rental for a living, yet she could still able to deal with a distant nephew who was always asking for money. The business of Madam Tofu was only moderate, but there was no problem for the basic necessities of life. She even played a few hands when she had leisure time (Yuan, 2012, p.131). The husband of Mrs. Wealth had a descent income. She was always well-dressed and loved wearing a gold grape pendant to show off her wealth. She loved gambling as well. Although these women have emerged from the stage of poverty, yet they were poorly educated. They had no other amusement for their leisure time and were addicted to gambling. They did not plan ahead for the future and therefore it

finally caused tragedies in their family.

The husband of Mrs. Wealth suddenly fell sick, they had no income and at the same time they had to spend a lot of money for medical treatment. Mrs. Wealth liked gambling very much, she even borrowed money from the others in order to gamble. Her bad habit had led herself to a family tragedy. She eventually found herself heavily in debt and was forced to run away leaving behind her sick husband and her very young daughter Guifang. Although Guifang's father was working in a bank and her mother always dressed up nicely and beautifully everyday, yet Guifang was always ignored by her parents and was always left hungry. Fortunately, the landlady liked Guifang and always gave her food to eat. When Guifang's mother took away all their money and left them, she could only relied on her father. But her father committed suicide due to the despair of life. They left little Guifang to face the unknown future alone.

Yuan Shang Cao's fictions have described the tragic lives of the women during that era. In the time of inequality between men and women, female had to face multiple oppressions.² The tragedies happened on women were related to the concepts of traditional social ethic, cultural awareness, ethnic customs, education system and so on. Women were generally uneducated during that time and it caused them to be unable to free themselves from the shackles of tradition. Women had to rely on their male family members throughout their lives. For example, Mrs. Wealth relied on her husband, Guifang relied on her father, even the "Lady Boss" subconsciously dependent on her distant nephew and secretly discussed about the dismiss of Mrs. Wealth family. They all were dependent on men for survival. Due to the inability to be independent, they could only accept their fate.

As many writers in that time, Yuan Shang Cao advocated that literary works must reflect the phenomenon of the toiling masses. They also advocated the idea that literature was to serve the community. Yuan Shang Cao put into practical action to practice the fundamental task of the social responsibility of literary. He raised the questions through female role in his fictions. Those questions including problems in the patriarchal society, education of women and marital issues. He revealed the ignorance and backward thinking of his generation. In the conflicts between the ideal and the reality, Yuan Shang Cao's pursuit of self-comfort mentally and psychological compensation have inspired the readers to rationally pursue a better future. However,

2 Frances Beal first mentioned "multiple oppressions" in "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female". After that the French Revolution, women fight for the self-determination or autonomy. Then begin to discuss the problems of oppression. Until 1980s, feminist further expand the concept of "multiple oppressions" to describe the social status of women.

the author has revealed the darker side of human nature in his works. Due to the reflection of reality, the literary works were more contemporary and had a sense of national significance and educational function.

Obstacles of Innovation: Social Norms and Bottleneck of Thinking

Malaysia achieved independence in 1957. The background of Yuan Shang Cao's stories was mostly in the early days of social transformation. The Nanyang society was generally lack of resources, there were only several cities such as Penang, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur and most of the states were considered as countryside. Thus, the works of the writers were largely based on the rural life and most of the objects in their works were about the naïve and unfashionable girls in the rural areas. Simplicity and realism naturally became a sign of the Malaysian-Chinese Literature of this period. This was actually contributed by the mental of the people and the state of the society during that time. As a common literary phenomenon, themes regarding to the life experience of individuals, the pursuit of life and ideal goals in life have formed a positive spirit of romanticism. Nietzsche once said that romanticism was not a disease but a prescription to cure disease. Basically, the author was good at using words to describe the ills of society of the past and to look forward for a hopeful future. He stressed that only being positive and brave helped to achieve the desired.

Yuan Shang Cao highlighted the women's desire to become independent with the social issues then. Due to the social backwardness and the lack of self-awareness among the women, many women encountered a lot of obstacles, frustrations and misfortunes in the pursuit of self-worthiness. They have borne multiple sufferings including sexual harassment, prejudice, rumors, contempt, illness, disability and even death in order to change their own fate. These stories attempted to reveal the awareness of women to their own destinies. This kind of bold performance regarding female consciousness was not common at that time, but it seemed that Yuan Shang Cao still retained the traditional social consciousness and did not have profound insights regarding female consciousness as well. He set a moral boundary but the division vaguely contained the shadow of a patriarchal society. However, in respect of the time of the publication of this novel, this could be interpreted as common social perceptions during that time.

In Nanyang society during the 1950s and 1960s, there was a polarization of the lifestyle between city and countryside. People who stayed at the countryside had lower level of education but they were honest and sincere; while the city was a paradise for adventurers, it was full of temptations and most people grew up being materialistic. The story of "Yili Qingyan" (《一缕青烟》, "A Wisp of Smoke") was about a girl from countryside to look for her dreams in the city. Xiaohua, the girl in the story, was very

assertive. In order to alleviate the burden of her father, she decided to work at the site located a few miles away from her home. Unfortunately, she suffered sexual harassment by the foreman. Hence, she left her hometown and moved to the city to work in a funfair. Since then, she slept during the day and worked during the nights. She also frequently visited Getai (歌台, outdoor performance)³ and pub after work. Funfair and Getai were the unique sights of the Nanyang city as well as the small towns near the city and they were the entertainment venues for the locals. Such venues were very complex and full of all kinds of people from the bottom of the society. Young women were more susceptible to the lure of money and eventually gone astray. Xiaohua had a lover back in her hometown. When her lover came to the fairground to visit her, she acted indifferently. Her lover knew that the love and feelings between them has faded. In this story, Xiaohua had to move to the city and worked as an entertainer in order to make more money. Although she has made a great effort to improve her family's financial status, however, her life was ended easily by disease.

Xiaohua was just as many of the young girls of those times; they have more or less been educated. During the changes in society, they realize that life needs to be changed at the same time. If compared to their previous generations, they had some certain abilities to make a choice with more autonomy. However, they did not fully understand the true meaning of freedom and happiness. They resolutely gave up their good moral characters and pure feelings. They fell into the trap of money and material and thought it was real happiness. Xiaohua has not only failed to live up to her true love, but she has also wasted her time for a beautiful life, especially when her life was being too short.

In the story of "Mama Ku" (《妈妈哭》, mother cry), the madwoman cry for the sinister of society and human selfishness. She is a country girl with secondary education, simple and beautiful. Since the family is poor, so she had to work earlier. She was yearning for love as other young girls but unfortunately coaxed by the young master. They had a relationship and she pregnant. The young master refused

3 In the early time, the Nanyang social is lack of material but people still looking for entertainments. Getai or the outdoor performances is an essential and irreplaceable part when there have some occasions; for example during the Chinese New Year celebration, Chap Goh May and mid-year festival. As Getai is a vibrant embodiment of our local flavour and culture. Every lunar 7th month is known as the mid-year festival, or more commonly known as "Ghost Festival" or "Hungry Ghost Festival". In celebration of this period, festive events include paying respects and praying to the deceased, bidding for auspicious items and definitely not to be missed, the "Getai" staged for the dead. Today, Getai is still playing a central role in the celebration of the mid-year festival in Malaysia and also Singapore.

to be responsible and abandoned her. Anyway, she insisted to deliver the illegitimate daughter, but suffered by the ridicule and satire from all the family members and people in the small town. Her parents, they cannot even get to discuss the unfortunate daughter of justice; the best friend advised her to give the child for adoption. After that, she had taken the baby to seek refuge to her aunt who always loved her. Because of the rumors, the aunt feels helpless. She had to live on the streets. The last, the daughter was kidnapped by an old woman. She lost everything and became madwoman, crazy looking for the missing daughter on the street. We can see the indifference and sorrow of a woman from this story. The attitudes of public toward an unmarried mother are not mercy and protection, but rather of ridicule and rejection. The indifference and ignorance of moral thought especially from friends and relatives push the innocent girl to a corner.

People's thought are pedantic, women not only cannot be independent and decide for their own destiny, single mother is under multiple pressure including spurned by social, despised by the world, and even dragged down their parents, bring shame to the family. If there is a sequel, the missing baby girl in the story "Mama Ku", she as a illegitimate daughter, more likely suffered supercilious and repulsion of the society, she can never escape the tragic fate.

From Yuan Shang Cao's fictions regarding women, it is obvious that he intended to expand the experimental writing on women topic. The profound character image and the depiction of the characters in his fictions seemed to be particularly notable among the writers during the same period. Especially the psychological descriptions about the women, it was more than fine and brilliant. For example, the single female who was still a virgin trying to resist sexual harassment. These characters were Xiumei in "*Jiucai Huakai*" as well as Xiaohua in "*Yiliu Qingyan*". As for the married women in Yuan Shang Cao's fictions, due to the untimely death of their husbands, they had to give up the mental and physical desires to being chased for their deceased husbands. From the stories by Yuan Shang Cao, we may feel the self-repression of women of that time. However, when women were yearning for change and fighting for autonomy, the harsh moral values forbade them to show their true inner desires. Even if they had the courage to pursue their own happiness and willing to bear the rumors and slanders, yet they could never escape from the unfortunate fate. They had to withstand a barrage of tribulations and the tragedies never ended.

In Yuan Shang Cao's fictions, he largely described women characters in the traditional society, where they were living in cruel and injustice conditions and struggled very hard in order to survive. Some of them have distorted their own personalities and some of them have turned themselves into oppressor. They persecuted the younger females in their families in more brutal ways. In the fictions, the female

characters wished to have their own freedom, whether physically or mentally, to look for the happiness they have been longing for. However, due to the instability of the person that they were attached with or due to the spiritual desolation, these female characters could never escape from the tragic fate.

Self-salvation: Repentance of Intellectuals

Love and marriage was an integral part of the Women Writing proposition. “*Shui Dongliu*” (《水东流》, Flow to The East) described the conservative ideas of society which brought oppressions to women. It also explained the setbacks the female have encountered in the pursuit of love. The story began with “I” reunited with a former colleague. This old friend looked depressed and talked about his previous love life with a tone full of remorse and regret. The lover who remained deep in his memories was a young widow. She had an arranged marriage. After her husband died, the young widow got back to her own home and took care of her old and sick father. After that, in order to escape from another arranged marriage, she planned to elope with a teacher that she loved. Even though the teacher was not able to give her any guarantee in life, she still followed him to escape from the predicament. In that conservative Nanyang society, women were taught to depend on men for survival since they were born. They did not have goals and could not be independent. Therefore, they needed courage to fight for their own marriage. It took a lot of determination especially to make the decision of elopement. The young widow in the story made promises with her lover over and over again to make sure that their elopement ended well, but eventually the young widow’s lover had left her without any notice. Most of the Nanyang women of that era comply with ideological San Cong (三从, obedience) which are Cong Fu (从父, Obey her father), Cong Fu (从夫, Obey her husband) and Cong Zi (从子 Obey her son). They are not allowed to make their own decisions but only follow the instruction by the head of family. There is only men can be the head in the family.

The social atmosphere in the 1950s and 1960s was conservative. No matter how strong the women were, it was difficult to withstand the rumors. However, the tragedy in “*Shui Dongliu*” was caused by cowardice of men. The teacher in the story did not want to take responsible on the consequences if he eloped with the young widow; therefore he violated his promise and betrayed the love and trust of his lover. The story also raised the topic about freedom of marriage. Most of the men and women could not against the orders of their parents in the old practice of society. They had to accept the arrangements of their parents or a matchmaker in order to get married. They did not feel happy after married and the marriage usually did not end well. Most of them ended with either the women became widowed or divorces because of the men were still thinking about their first love. In this story, at the end, the younger daughter of

the teacher had also become the victim of this failed marriage. The divorce of that “old friend” (the teacher) was actually a self-punishment to the wrong decision he has made in the past. For him, it was also a kind of self-redemption.

“She had promised the people of the matchmaker, so you just decide to leave?” I was shocked by his thinking.

“What did you say?” He opened his eyes bigger and look at me, this reaction was telling that my question was unexpected. “No, no! She told me that a man who owned a coffee shop came to her father and requested to have matchmaking. But she refused and said that she actually loving me. I decided to leave the small town because I want to avoid those gossip, and I think this is the best way for me and the girl.”

“So, you do not really love her?”

“What should I do to be considered love? Marry her? Take her run away from the family quietly? But I was a teacher! I could not do that!” (Yuan, 2012, Pg.252)

The intricacies of the emotional entanglements of the previous generation were in fact involving the issues of love and responsibility. The “old friend” was born in a poor family. He strongly understood the burden and commitment to have a family. Therefore he did not dare to give promise easily. He felt regret to give up his love and chose to run away from the problems. Now he could only sigh with regret for the mistake he has done in the past. The focus of “*Shui Dongliu*” was not the failed tragic love story, but rather to reflect the social attitudes of the past. It has strangled the dreams and freedom of many young people, not to mention love as well.

Superficially, “*Jiucai Huakai*” written the tragedy of three generations of women in Shi family; it also written the feeling of remorse when the male lead to live up Xiumei. Xiumei always take initiative to approach the teacher, but between the lines, it always implies the male lead (narrator) like Xiumei. Xiumei in his eyes “like a small swallow on the eaves”, Xiumei’s voice “Like silver bells ringing”; he could not even say why visit to Xiumei’s home frequently.

She looked up to the moon, the moon on her round face bathed in silver.

For a long time: “Sir, why do you think to leave here?”

“I want to change an environment.”

“Are you scaring the people’s mouth here?”

“No. Not because of them.”

“I know. Sir, you are a coward.”

I’m speechless. I do not know what the coward she means. I can only

silence.

Xiumei has been actively sought for her own happiness. However, the male lead because of his identify and occupation as a “teacher”, he does not admit that he actually love Xiumei. Later, he heard that Xiumei engaged, and then he feel eager seeing her and send the last wishes to her. After a few years, the teacher returns to the small town but everything have changed. He heard that Xiumei cannot wait for his appearance and reluctantly married to other. Finally, he left sadly with “*countless tears in his hearts*”.

Summary

Yuan Shang Cao's fictions have been widely welcomed by the readers during that era. It was mainly because most of his fictions were related to the daily lives of the people. He was good at creating a distinctive character from the grass-roots of society which was close to the lifestyle of his readers. The contents and characters in his fictions reflected the Nanyang Chinese community, conditions of economic, living standards and consciousness of the people in the 1950s and 1960s. There were many different female characters in Yuan Shang Cao's fictions, they barely received education, lack of awareness and they knew nothing regarding their own human rights. All these were the factors which led to their frustrated fate. Yuan Shang Cao as a Chinese concerned about his community and ethnic group. His did not only concern about the people's daily lives but his concern also including education and culture. Although being male, but he spoke up for female and encouraged them to fight for freedom and independence. This was really commendable especially in the society then.

Most of the fictions by Yuan Shang Cao were explored to the Nanyang women's psychological state. They were generally dependent on men to survive and their abilities have always been undermined in the patriarchal society. On one hand, they wanted to make a change in their lives, but on the other hand, they were acquiescent and succumbed to their fate. This psychological state formatted a special personality trait which included both the characteristics of the times and the characteristics of region. The local fictions of Malaysian-Chinese Literature which emphasized on reality reflected the daily lives of the people who were living at the bottom of society. The depictions of the characters in the fictions were very close to the authors' own lives. In other words, the real-life experiences of the authors have more or less been infiltrated in the contents of the fictions. Therefore, the memories of life of the authors can be found by the readers through the authors' literary works.

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