

# Combined with the Fate of Women in Old China: Explore the Awakening of Women and the Influence of Feminism in *Midnight*

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## Abstract:

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western feminist thought began to be introduced into China, and under the impetus of the May Fourth Movement, it was widely concerned and accepted by the old Chinese intellectual circle. Mao Dun was the first scholar to translate and spread Western feminist theories during the May Fourth Movement. The potential text of Mao Dun's novels can be seen in her representative work *Midnight*. Based on the background of the old Chinese era, this paper takes the typical female characters in Mao Dun's *Midnight* as the research object, and uses three methods of text analysis, comparative study and literary criticism to analyze the fate of these classic female characters in Mao Dun's *Midnight* and explore the awakening of women and the influence of feminism embodied in them. Then it reflects the awakening of women and the influence of feminism in old China. Moreover, the awakening of women and the influence of feminism had a profound impact on China and the world at that time and even later generations.

**Keywords:** Mao Dun; *Midnight*; the awakening of women; the influence of feminism.

## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western feminist thought was introduced into China, and promoted by the May Fourth Movement, it was widely concerned and accepted by the old Chinese intellectual circle. Mao Dun was the first scholar to translate and disseminate Western feminist theories during the May Fourth Movement. As the editor of the Novel Trend column of *Novel Monthly*, he translated foreign literature and fostered realistic literature, and at the same time, he actively wrote articles to express his opinions on women's issues and introduced the situation of foreign women's movements in translation [1]. Mao Dun translated a large number of original works and articles on western feminist theories, which involved the origin, history and factions of feminism, and made in-depth elaborations and comments on these contents. If people re-study Mao Dun's three novels in the 1930s, *Corrosion*, *The Rainbow* and *Midnight*, from a feminist perspective, they can see that the underlying text of Mao Dun's novels is feminism, and Mao Dun's efforts to transcend the May 4th Movement for feminism [2].

Studies on Mao Dun's discourse on women and female images have been abundant for decades. *Analysis of Female Images in Mao Dun's Works* and other typical literature reviews analyze the images presented by women

under the influence of patriarchal society and explore the reasons, but they are absent from the topic of feminism [3,4]. Combined with the background of the old Chinese era, this paper takes the typical female characters in Mao Dun's *Midnight* as the research object, and uses three methods: text analysis, comparative study and literary criticism. The purpose is to analyze the course of these classic female characters in Mao Dun's *Midnight* and explore the awakening of women and the influence of feminism embodied in them, so as to see the big from the small and to the profound. Then it reflects the awakening of women and the influence of feminism in old China. Although the female characters in Mao Dun's works are not absolute protagonists, they will not be soulless shadows or bodies walking in the world, but connotation souls and vibrant roles. Through shaping the fate of these female roles, it profoundly reflects the awakening of women and the influence of feminism in the old China period. The awakening of women and the influence of feminism had a profound impact on China and the world at that time and even later generations.

## 2. The Awakening of Women in Old China in the Face of Old Oppression

The social background of *Midnight* is Shanghai in the early 1930s, when China was in the semi-colonial and

semi-feudal stage and faced with the dual oppression of imperialist and feudal forces. From the political point of view, the political situation in China during this period was unstable, warlords were divided and wars were continuous, which brought great suffering to the people's life. From the economic perspective, with the infiltration of Western powers and the rise of national capitalism, old Shanghai has become one of the most developed areas of capitalist economy in China. These realistic social factors have laid a deep foundation for the portrayal of characters and environment in *Midnight*.

*Midnight* has created many classic female images, such as Lin Peiyao, Wu Huifang and Xu Manli. Their awakening to the oppression of the past is manifested in three main aspects.

First of all, women in old China were widely oppressed at the family level. Women's marriages are often not based on love, but on considerations of family, status and interests. Lin Peiyao, for example, was deprived of her right of free choice and forced to marry Wu Sunfu, becoming an appendage and victim of family etiquette.

However, it is mentioned at *Midnight* that A tattered copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and a withered white rose. Lin Peiyao's eyes then focused on these two things, looking at them fondly, and the gnawing anxiety that Lin Peishan had temporarily interrupted was kneading her and hoping her more tenaciously [5]. She realized that she was not satisfied with the status quo, but wanted to struggle with the idea of bondage, which was the awakening of women in old China in the face of old oppression.

Secondly, it is mentioned at *Midnight* that women in old China were oppressed by feudal ethics. As for Wu Huifang, she was bound by feudal ethics and could only be in a passive position in the family, unable to express her will and demands.

However, it is also mentioned at *Midnight* that she is forgotten, like the same old dress! So in the curl of incense smoke, holding the *Taishang Induction*, she began to hate her brother, hate her sister-in-law, and even hate the bird-like Lin Peishan. She felt that everyone had happiness, that everyone had the freedom to be happy, and that she was the only one who had been forgotten and deprived! She felt that she had been forced to do this, not by her own will, in her room; They had conspired to deprive her of her right to life in this ingenious way [5]! From this passage, people can see her melancholy and discomfort in the face of the new trend of thought in Shanghai in the new era, and she hopes that someone can take her out of the dilemma. Although this is a fear that makes it difficult to accept the new trend of thought, she has been bound by feudal ethics since childhood, but at this moment, she wants to violate the discipline of her relatives, has the idea

of running away from home, wants to pursue their own ideas, which is the awakening of women in the face of old oppression.

Finally, women in old China were subjected to widespread economic oppression. Women are mostly economically dependent on men and their families. Even women who seem to have some economic conditions and social status, like Xu Manli, are ruthlessly exploited by capitalists. The way they exchange money and status is unequal and tragic. Xu Manli has a clear understanding of her own identity and situation. She clearly knows that she is a social butterfly and needs to seek material needs by serving upper-class men. Although this lifestyle is not accepted by the mainstream society, she can find her own positioning and value in it, and has her own ideas and opinions. In the face of different men and various choices, she can make rational judgments according to her own needs and interests, which is also the awakening of women in the face of old oppression.

The group of women in Mao Dun's works is a clear and complex group, and they experience the pain of the spirit of that era. However, these women of The Times have made qualitative progress in history, and they pursue individual freedom and realize the transformation of Chinese women from non-human to human [6]. Despite all kinds of difficulties, the process of these female characters' pursuit of self-happiness and value is the embodiment of women's awakening at that time. Their different fate tracks fully show the awakening of women's self-consciousness and the tenacious vitality of resistance when facing the feudal forces and the oppression of the patriarchal society.

### 3. The Progress of Women in Old China in the Face of Old Oppression

With the awakening of women's self-consciousness, women in the 1930s were more active in fighting for their rights and freedoms. Affected by the social environment at that time, although some enterprising activities did not play a substantive effect, these enterprising activities also liberated women's body, minds and souls to a certain extent. In the face of oppression by various forces in the old China period, women carried out specific resistance activities, reflecting the specific enterprising spirit. These acts of resistance and enterprise are vividly reflected in several typical female characters in *Midnight*.

#### 3.1 Lin Peiyao

Lin Peiyao is not satisfied with her marriage with Wu Sunfu, and longs for more care, understanding and love in her marriage. She was not satisfied with the rich material life provided by Wu Sunfu, but was more concerned about

the high degree of spiritual freedom desired by her heart. These inner desires are fully reflected in the book through her subtle language and behavior. For example, she did not just passively accept the existing life, but through reading *The Troubles of Young Werther* and other literary works and recalling the past love affair with Thunder to seek inner comfort, seek her own inner spiritual freedom and romantic love. In addition, Lin Peiyao also participates in social activities outside of family life. She teaches singing to poor children in the church choir. Or, while her husband Wu Sunfu was busy with his career, she took the initiative to take on most of the things within the family, such as preparing for Wu's funeral, handling family affairs and coordinating interpersonal relations. In particular, the chapter on the death of Old Master Wu is vividly reflected in the book, where it is written that Lin Peiyao grabbed a white silk handkerchief on Zhang Susu's lap and wiped the things on the old master's mouth, and then winked at Sunfu [5]. As well as her words and deeds when teasing and comforting Zhang Susu's questions about the topic of death appear in the small details of this chapter, it can be seen that she plays a role in handling family affairs and coordinating interpersonal relations in the family, and she has her own ideas and is not a woman who is completely dependent on men. This is her progress in the face of old oppression, and it also reflects the progress of women in old China in the face of old oppression.

### 3.2 Wu Huifang

Wu Huifang finally cannot stand the existing living situation, so his brother Wu Sunfu put forward the request to go home. Although her request was ruthlessly rejected by her brother, this time she chose to fight bravely and leave. In the face of her brother's rejection and family oppression, Wu Huifang showed unprecedented courage and stubbornness. She no longer chose to be as obedient and patient as before, but bravely resisted and decided to leave home. According to the article, where it is written that Zhang Susu suddenly put out a sharp thorn to Lin Peishan, gave a long smile, and left with Wu Huifang [5]. It can be seen that Wu Huifang followed Zang Susu out of the house to pursue her own life. This is her progress in the face of old oppression, and it also reflects the progress of women in old China in the face of old oppression.

### 3.3 Xu Manli

Although Xu Manli pursues material benefits, she is also striving for self-worth. She tries to change her fate through her own efforts. Although this behavior of pursuing material interests and self-worth is not completely independent and in line with values, this kind of self-enterprising spirit against oppression is also a concrete manifestation of

aggression against the old oppression. Instead of female characters like Arkin, Lao Jiu, Feng Meiqing, they simply cling to power and wealth, and finally gradually lose themselves. Xu Manli's enterprising performance is not the traditional sense of positive enterprising, the pursuit of personal growth and progress. However, it is a survival strategy in a specific social environment and historical context. Therefore, this is also her progress in the face of old oppression, and it also reflects the progress of women in old China in the face of old oppression.

Although the resistance of these female characters in Mao Dun's works is limited and restricted by various factors, they do not achieve complete independence and autonomy, but these behaviors and spirits all reflect various forms of enterprising, reflecting women's indomitable efforts and enterprising in the pursuit of self-rights and self-freedom. The images of these classic female characters in *Midnight* not only enriched the connotation and theme of the novel, but also provided certain enlightenment and influence for the cause of women's liberation movement in society at that time. As Jiang Zihua accurately pointed out in his research, *Midnight* writes about the fates and struggles of several female characters, who are linked with the entire nation and era, participate in the completion of the mainstream narrative of masculinity, and show the women in the modern environment of Chinese cities. The Wu Mansion, the living environment of the women in *Midnight*, resembles the Grand View Garden in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. It is a fairyland on earth in troubled times, accommodating a group of people who are outside the trend of The Times [7]."

## 4. Translation, Dissemination, Inspiration and Influence of Feminism at Home and Abroad in the Old China Period and Even Later Generations

### 4.1 Translation and Dissemination

Influenced by the Western trend of thought, Mao Dun paid attention to the issues of women and feminism, and actively engaged in the translation and dissemination of the issues of women and feminism in old China. Lu Xun once said that creation is not easy, and translation is not easy. Mao Dun also thinks so, when he refuted Guo Moruo's emphasis on creation and light translation, he also lamented that the difficulty of translation is no less than that of creation, or it is sad to create. It is said that translation and creation are equally important. Literature is to express life. The life that writers want to express is not the life of a single family, but the life of a society and a nation [8]. This concept of emphasis on translation and dissemination, both at that time and for the later generations, has made

outstanding contributions to readers' more comprehensive understanding and perception of women and feminist thought.

At that time, the images of these classic female roles in *Midnight* showed the difficulties and challenges they faced in the male-dominated society, as well as the power relationship and interaction mode between the sexes. While men oppressed and exploited women, women also made specific resistance and progress in pursuit of their own destinies. *Midnight* is Mao Dun's work showing the current situation of Chinese society in the 1930s from a full perspective, focusing on the life situation and spiritual outlook of women at that time. The rich female images in *Midnight* reflect the situation of women's liberation at that time to a certain extent, and the three states of women's liberation at that time are vividly expressed: leaving, returning and wandering [9]. *Midnight* and many works translated by Mao Dun at that time reflected the spread of feminism, which helped to enhance the feminist consciousness of the readers at that time, so that they paid more attention to the psychological state and realistic situation of women, and realized the importance of gender equality.

For later generations, as Mukarowski said that there is always something in a work of art that is linked to the past, and something that points to the future [10]. *Midnight* has been selected into various literary anthologies and textbooks, and has become one of the required reading works for students of the Chinese department. In the process of literary education, teachers often guide students to pay attention to feminist ideas in works, to promote students' awareness and understanding of gender equality and feminism. With the development of The Times and the progress of the Internet, the reader group of *Midnight* is expanding. Many readers will pay attention to the embodiment of feminism in the work during the reading process, and share and express their feelings and opinions about the work on social media, network forums and other platforms. This form of public reading and discussion also promoted the spread of feminism to a certain extent. At the same time, in addition to the traditional way of communication reading, *Midnight* has also influenced many directors to direct it into the form of communication of film and television drama. "In the mass cultural atmosphere characterized by communication and entertainment, how to avoid commercial utilitarian operations such as cutting and legend and maintain the unique character and charm of the original literature? After the history of the dust bubble mulberry, the stars have changed. How to narrow the distance between history and reality, so that the classical words narrative is transformed into a visual art based on the picture, which can not only restore the

original appearance of history, but also fill the complex multi-dimensional cultural needs of modern people? This is undoubtedly a difficult problem in television art. *Midnight*, a 14-episode TV series produced by Zhejiang Drama Production Center, provides a delightful answer to this problem [11]. The success of the production of the TV series will also positively affect the successful dissemination of *Midnight*, and it is easy for the audience to notice the awakening of women and the influence of feminism in *Midnight*.

The different female images and their fate paths in Mao Dun's works spread the concept of gender equality, advocated the trend of feminism, appealed the attention of readers to feminism, and promoted the development and dissemination of feminism in old China and even later generations. Mao Dun's translation and dissemination of feminism has received extensive attention and response from later generations, at the same time, it also influenced the public's perception and enlightenment of feminism.

### 4.2 Revelation and Influence

Before writing *Midnight*, Mao Dun had already published such works as *Corrosion*, *The Rainbow* and *The Wild Rose*, all of which embodied women and feminism. Among modern writers, Mao Dun pays the most attention to women's issues. Compared with Ding Ling after she turned to the left wing, her attention to women's issues only appeared occasionally in *When I Was in Xia Village* and *in The Hospital*. It can be seen that although Mao Dun is a left-wing literary giant, many of his novels, such as *Midnight*, focus on giving readers the inspiration of women and feminist thought. Although the contradiction focused on the old Chinese society, *Midnight* not only had a profound impact in China, but also had a certain impact on foreign literary circles through international exchanges. It shows the unique Chinese style in the world literature vision.

As far as China is concerned, *Midnight* is the first successful realistic novel in China, which marks the mature stage of Mao Dun's novel creation, and is also an important achievement in the creation of the left-wing literary movement. It established Mao Dun's lofty position in the history of modern literature. Among them, Mao Dun's concern and influence on feminism laid the foundation for the development of Chinese female literature. His work has inspired more female writers to devote themselves to literary creation, to write their own stories and voices with a female perspective and experience as the starting point. Under the influence of Mao Dun, these female writers gradually formed their own writing styles and literary schools, and made important contributions to the diversity and prosperity of Chinese literary creation.

As far as the world is concerned, *Midnight*, as a classic of modern Chinese literature, the display of its feminist thought also provides a window for the world literature creation to understand the style of Chinese feminist literature. Through this work, international readers can feel the unique charm and profound connotation of Chinese feminist literature. *Midnight* has also been translated into many languages, spread and read around the world, so that more and more foreign readers can understand the state of mind and reality of Chinese women. Such international literary exchanges not only enhance the understanding and respect between different cultures, but also provide strong support for Chinese literature to enter the world literary world. The feminist thought in *Midnight* has provided the feminist resources belonging to China for the world literary circle. These resources help international readers to have a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity and complexity of feminist thought, and promote the diversified development of feminist literary creation in the world. No matter for China or the world, the influence of *Midnight* and many feminist literary works has promoted the diversity of literary creation, encouraging writers to pay more attention to female roles and gender relations in their creation, so as to create more diverse literary works. The influence of feminist thought is conducive to promoting social progress and development, prompting people to reflect on the drawbacks of traditional gender concepts, promoting the realization of gender equality, and contributing to the construction of a more harmonious and just society.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, combining the fate of women in old China, Mao Dun vividly demonstrated the awakening of women and the influence of feminism through the description of different fate tracks of different female characters in *Midnight*. His active translation and dissemination of feminism not only inspired and influenced the feminist thought in old China at that time, but also provided far-reaching and extensive significance for the inspiration and influence of later feminist thought. This influence not only made a difference at home, but also indirectly influenced the international feminist movement and inspired the development

of global feminist thought. This push contributes to the formation of a broader and deeper feminist network that promotes the globalization of the cause of gender equality and women's liberation. Therefore, the awakening of women and the influence of feminism presented by the typical women in Mao Dun's classic literature *Midnight* have had a profound impact on the old China and even the later generations, China and even the world, which is worth thinking about.

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