

GENDER AND SEXISM IN CHINESE LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

By Angela Jung-Palandri

Language and literature both reflect and express social attitudes and values. That sexism exists in most languages and literatures is not a mere feminist fabrication; it is a fact. Were there no sexism, there would be no need for feminism. Nowhere, however, is sexism more apparent than in the countries of the Near and Far East. This is true even in Communist China. I shall confine my discussion to the Chinese language and literature of the past.

Sociologists and anthropologists generally agree that in prehistoric China, communities were ruled by matriarchs, as the discovery of Banpo near Xian evinces. Even the Chinese character for family name, *xing* (姓)—composed of the graphs for *nü* (女) (woman) and *sheng* (生) (birth or life)—attests to the matriarchal origin of the family. For the last six or seven thousand years, however, China has been under a patrilineal system, where males have dominated every aspect of social and political activity. Chinese literature, beginning with the classic canon, illustrates this sexist attitude. In the *Book of Changes*, *Yijing* (易经), we find that the male is equated with the *yang* principle, symbolized by the sun. It embodies everything that is good and positive, and its status is identified with heaven. The female, on the other hand, is equated with the *yin* principle, symbolized by the moon. To it is attributed all that is negative, evil and lowly. In the earliest concept of the Chinese myth of creation, these two elemental forces, *yin* and *yang*, were on an equal footing, as the cosmological emblem (of the Taoists) shows.

Through later male-biased interpretations that stemmed from a patriarchal order, sexism became firmly entrenched. The Confucian commentaries further define the status of the male as the ruler, and the female as the ruled. According to the *Yijing*, man's proper function is in society or the world; while the woman's duty is to remain within the household.

Once a judgement of sexual roles was formed, sexism was solidified. In the *Book of Poetry*, the *Shijing* (诗经), we see how drastically different the births of sons and daughters are regarded:

Sons shall be born to him:
They will be put to sleep on couches;
They will be clothed in robes;
They will have scepters to play with;

.....

Daughters shall be born to him:
They will be put to sleep on the ground;
They will be clothed with wrappers;
They will have tiles to play with.
It will be theirs neither to do good nor to do wrong;
Only about the spirit and the food will they have to think,
And to cause no sorrow to their parents.

(Book IV, *Odes* vi)

In the *Book of History*, the *Shujing* (书经), women are rarely mentioned; when they are, they are blamed for the ruin of the state. Such was the case of Da Ji (妲己) and Baosu (褒姒), whose alleged evil influence supposedly caused the downfall of Jie of Xia and Zhou of Shang.

Perhaps it was because of the latent fear of women's influence on men that the ancients established rules and regulations and recorded them in the *Book of Rites*, the *Liji* (礼记). These legitimated male domination and put women under male control. Under the guidelines of "the three obediences and four virtues" (三从四德), a woman had to obey her father, her husband, and, after the husband's death, even her sons. The status of women was no better than that of a slave. In the *Analects of Confucius*, the *Lunyu* (论语), the Master is quoted as saying, "Women and inferiors (小人) are difficult to handle. If you keep them at a distance, they are resentful; if you show intimacy, they become disrespectful."

Sexism is found not only in literature written by men, but in the works of women as well. Ban Zhao of Han, daughter of the grand historian Ban Biao, and sister of Ban Gu, was a great scholar and historian in her own right. It was she who completed the *History of the Early Han* that her brother had left unfinished. But she is acclaimed not so much for her scholarly contribution to history, as she is for her treatise, *Lessons for Women*, *Nü jie* (女诫). In this work she spelled out in great detail how young women should conduct themselves and serve their in-laws as well as their husbands: with humility and submission. Her *Lessons for Women* helped to perpetuate sexism in China for centuries. It so influenced women's education that several works by women later were patterned after it. For example, both the *Female Classic of Filial Piety* (女孝经), by Chen Miao's wife, nee Zheng of the Tang dynasty, and the *Woman's Analects* (女论语), by Song Ruohua (宋若华), upheld the sexist codes that men had instituted to subjugate women.

Women's suffering caused by men's repression may account for the pervading sadness in their poetry. A famous but ill-fated woman poet of Tang, Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机), lamented her fate as a woman in these lines:

In a clear spring day clouds and
peaks fill my field of vision.
Elegant ideograms one by one leap
out under my fingers.
How I hate this chiffon-clad
body of mine which conceals my poetic talent.
With envy I scan the list heralding
the successful candidates.

云峰满目放春晴
历历银钩指下生
自恨罗衣掩诗句
举头空羡榜中名

Zhu Shuzhen (朱淑贞) of Song Dynasty, whose uncirculated poems were all burned by her parents after her untimely death, had in mind the ancient adage that "lacking literary talent is a virtue for women," when she wrote:

For a woman to dabble in letters is already an offense,
Let alone chanting of moonlight and breezes.
Wearing out the inkstones is not to be my lot;
My virtue lives in breaking needles through embroidering.

女子弄文诚可罪
那堪咏月更吟风
磨穿铁砚非吾事
绣折金针却有功

Sexism is perhaps even more revealing in fiction. Women are frequently depicted as immoral temptresses or adulteresses. The character Pan Jinlian (潘金莲), who appears in *Shuihu zhuan* as the murderer of her husband, reappears in *Jinping mei* as a jealous nymphomaniac. From a male perspective, she illustrates how a woman can degenerate when unrestrained by man's moral codes.

Perhaps to counter this double standard and the degradation of women found in these novels, Li Ru-zhen wrote his feminist novel, *Jinghua yuan*, and Cao Xueqin his *Honglou meng*; both assert the superiority of women. But their counteractions could not overcome the overt sexism of traditional narratives of the Ming and Qing.

Some women novelists or *tanci* (弹词) writers, the authors of *Tianyu hua* (天雨花) and *Yansheng yuan* (再生缘) for instance, believed that the only way their protagonists could compete in a man's world or escape becoming man's prey was through male disguise. Indeed, some female protagonists in *tongsu xiaoshuo* (通俗小说) and *tanci* occasionally seem to emerge as winners, excelling in literary or military feats by playing male roles. But in the final analysis, they could not prevail over their sex limitations set by man and succumb to convention. Ultimately they married husbands whom they happily shared with several other wives.

Turning to the Chinese language, we find that the written language, which has preserved Chinese civilization and history since their beginning, also betrays a male bias. In a Chinese dictionary, even a cursory examination of the listing under the radical 38, nǚ (女), a female sign, will reveal several words blatantly derogatory of the female sex. For instance, the word "adultery" or "promiscuous fornication" is composed of three female symbols (姦) pronounced *jian*; the character consisting of two male ideographs with a female symbol in between, pronounced *niao* (猥), means "obscenity" or "obscene." The character *ji* (嫉) meaning "jealousy" is made up of two components: "female" and "sickness." One may argue, "How about the word *hao* (好) meaning 'goodness or fine,' which is also composed of the female radical?" But the components of this character are woman (nu) and son which is the pictograph of a child. The implication is that "goodness" links a woman with child. This strongly suggests child bearing or reproduction as the primary function of a woman, another sexist attitude.

While Chinese etymology manifests irrefutable male bias, the language itself is devoid of gender consciousness, which to me is a great asset in the modern world where women are gaining influence and support in their struggle for equality. All Indo-European languages, except Armenian, have grammatical categories of gender. In the Romance and Germanic languages, all animals, minerals, and vegetables have genders assigned to them. English fares a little better by eliminating grammatical gender, but it retains the natural gender in the third person pronouns and in social and professional titles. The third personal pronouns "he" and "she" prove to be the most troublesome in our changing society today. Although attempts have been made to replace the all inclusive "he" or "his" with "s/he" or "she or he" or "his or her" in a non-gender specific situation, the problem remains unsolved, because many people refuse to accept it due to linguistic clumsiness.

No such problem exists in Chinese, because the third personal pronoun is pronounced *ta* for both male and female. In the written language, *ta* (他) is composed of the radical *ren* (人) meaning "human" or "humanity" without gender distinction. However, since the May 4th Movement of 1919, under the impact of Western literature and for the purposes of translating Western materials, Chinese language reformers such as Hu Shi, devised four written forms for the same *ta* (i.e., the third personal pronoun singular); the *ta* with *ren* radical (人) is reserved exclusively for "he" or "him." For the pronoun "she" or "her," the female radical is used instead of the original *ren* (他). The *ta* with a cow radical (牠) is for neuter gender. In addition, the *ta* (祂) referring to God or spiritual beings is given the radical *shi* (示) to signify a spiritual quality without sexual implication, thus forestalling a recent controversy as to whether God is male or female, or both. By the way, the Aztec language *Yejua* for the third personal pronoun is also non-gender specific like the Chinese, because the ancient Aztec religion believed that God or the creator was both male and female, two in one. This corresponds to the Chinese myth of creation and the *ying yang* principles I mentioned earlier.

It is a paradox that in such a strongly sexist society like that of China there should be a non-gender specific pronoun like *ta* (他). If it had a universal application, it would solve the "she/he" or "he/she" dilemma in English. Besides this genderless pronoun, the Chinese have two other

non-sexist traditions which are surprisingly modern in conception. One is that Chinese women have always retained their maiden names, a custom not yet widely used in the West, except by a few professional women. The other is the use of professional titles. In Chinese, there has never been such an anomaly as "Madam Chairman" because the term "chairman" does not bear a gender marker of "man" attached to the chair. The Chinese term for "chairperson," *zhuxi* (主席), could be either a man or a woman; and it does not have to be specified, since sex is not an issue. Ordinarily the word *ren*, meaning "person," is a suffix for titles, like *shiren* (诗人) which is for male poet or female poet, *lingren* (伶人) for actors or actresses, and the communist term of *airen* (爱人), meaning "loved one," is used for both husband and wife (which I fully approve). *Ren* (人) means "a human being or a person." Only *nanren* (男人) is a male person; likewise, *nüren* (女人) is a female person. *Haoren* (好人) then is a "good person," with no reference to that person's sex. The Chinese do accept the natural gender, and only when sex distinction is necessary, the word for male or female may be placed before the genderless, personal or professional title.

By not being obsessed with genderization, Chinese seems to be more concerned with the human being, the human quality of that being as a whole. This is one step closer to the androgynous language envisioned by Mary Ritchie Key, author of *Male/Female Language* (Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1975). In the last chapter of her book she observes: "If the conceptual treatment of human beings moves toward the human being as the higher hierarchy, then the language will likewise assume those shapes." An androgynous language is a dynamic language that will show neither chauvinism nor bitter grievances, as Key explains:

An androgynous language will be complementary rather than divisive. It will find balance and harmony in its completeness. It will establish an equilibrium in its unity rather than invidious separation. It will combine the abstract with the concrete; feeling with logic; tenderness with strength; force with graciousness. It will be a balanced tension—supporting rather than opposing. It will be exuberant and vibrant, leaving out the weak and the brutal. It will move away from the cruel distinctions that have wounded both male and female human beings (p. 147).

Mary Key's perception seems to coincide with the early concept of the dual nature of human beings posited in the *yinyang* principles and manifested in some traces of the Chinese language even today. An androgynous language is possible only in an androgynous society in both East and West, when both men and women can live in mutual harmony and understanding. If language and literature reflect and express social attitudes, they also can have the power to influence, to shape, those attitudes and values.