

Gender Narrative Differences in Depictions of Marital Dilemmas in 1980s-1990s Literature: Focusing on Tie Ning, Zhang Jie, Lu Yao, and Jia Pingwa

Yiqi Wu

School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou Nanfang University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510970, China

ABSTRACT

Set against the backdrop of China's social transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, this study examines Tie Ning's *How Far Is Forever?*, Zhang Jie's *The Ark*, Lu Yao's *Life*, and Jia Pingwa's *The People of Jiwowa*. Employing close reading and comparative analysis, it explores narrative differences between male and female writers in portraying women's "subjectivity" and "self-worth." Findings reveal that female writers predominantly emphasize depicting "subjectivity breakthroughs," i.e., women's self-transformation, while male writers often present "objectification discipline," i.e., culturally and linguistically reinforcing labels of dependency on women. However, this study concludes that such differences do not stem from gender opposition but rather from the interplay of historical transformation, subjective experience, and cultural tradition. Collectively, these three factors depict the complexity of women navigating marital dilemmas during this era.

KEYWORDS

1980s-1990s; Marital predicaments; Gender narrative differences; Female subjectivity

1 Introduction

China during the 1980s and 1990s underwent profound social transformation. The lingering influence of Enlightenment thought and the rise of market-oriented reforms reshaped the narrative styles of most writers. Coupled with accelerated urban-rural migration, these shifts collectively redefined societal perceptions of marriage, elevating the theme of "marital predicaments" in literary discourse. Literary texts documented the anguish and struggles of women across different demographics within marriage—whether urban intellectuals fighting for divorce or rural women enduring marital dependency. Yet, when examining gender disparities in literary representation, a thought-provoking question emerges: Why do female writers like Tie Ning and Zhang Jie consistently portray marital narratives that explore female characters' self-worth and transformation, while male writers predominantly depict women in subordinate or dependent roles, often marked by symbolic labels? What factors underlie this disparity? Why do female writers predominantly focus on the growth of agency, while male writers often reduce women to "instrumentalized" representations?

Existing research primarily explores this through three dimensions: gender discipline, female awakening, and narrative differences. Li Ling points out that male writers often reduce women's status to "tools for social mobility," arguing that traditional feminine virtues are actually a revival of patriarchal moral ideology, serving to mask their true desires. Qiao Yigang reveals that women in both urban and rural settings endure oppression through gender discipline; Sang Donghui employs Bourdieu's theory to explain how cultural discipline subtly shapes female self-identity; Luo Yalin identifies early female narratives as trapped in the "gender essentialism dilemma"; Meng Lijun argues that 1990s female writing achieved a shift from personal to social issues; Meng Jun argues that male narratives essentially project desire; Jiang Zihua demonstrates that female narratives often focus on emotional regulation and shifts in self-perception. However, these studies still have gaps: first, they fail to explicitly contrast the differences between urban and rural women in their predicaments; second, they overlook narrative divisions among female writers across different periods; third, they inadequately discuss the complementary nature of gender narrative differences. Based on this, this paper focuses on four core texts. Through three levels of comparison—within female writers, within male writers, and cross-gender—it seeks to answer: Where do narrative differences between male and female writers manifest? What are the roots of these differences? Are these differences complementary or antagonistic?

2 Textual Manifestations of Gender Narrative Differences

2.1 Among Female Writers: From "Radical Breakthrough" to "Disciplinary Dilemma"

In the 1980s and 1990s, female writers depicted marital predicaments with marked contrasts, centered on the "explicit resistance" of the 1980s versus the "implicit discipline" of the 1990s. Zhang Jie's urban intellectual women actively sever

marital oppression and unite against occupational discrimination, while Tie Ning focuses on rural women internalizing the "good woman" label, questioning their lost selves.

In *The Ark*, the three urban intellectual women—Cao Jinghua, Liang Qian, and Liu Quan—all possess professional careers (editor, director, translator) beyond their identities as wives. Yet their marital struggles extend beyond spousal control—Cao Jinghua's writing is restricted, Liu Quan endures domestic violence, and Liang Qian confronts her husband's infidelity—to workplace discrimination. Cao Jinghua faces male colleagues mocking "women's creative work as superficial," while Liang Qian encounters producers' hostility due to her divorced status. Zhang Jie directly attributes these struggles to male control over women and societal stigma against "divorced women." This palpable, visible oppression naturally provokes the women in the book to mount a decisive rebellion. Facing marriage, all three women chose divorce and formed a "female mutual aid community" through shared living. Confronting workplace discrimination, Cao Jinghua countered mockery with her work, while Liang Qian rejected a producer's demand to "sacrifice personal ideas." In Zhang Jie's writing, women assert and seize agency through direct confrontation, carving out space for self-development through rupture and resistance.

The protagonist of *How Far Is Forever?*, Bai Dasheng, faces marital struggles not from workplace pressures but from self-imposed confinement within "traditional female roles." This manifests as excessive accommodation toward her ex-husband—caring for his ailing parents, becoming an unpaid housekeeper in her marriage, and shouldering all household duties while losing her voice. She internalizes the traditional virtues' "good wife and wise mother" label to the point of bone, causing inner torment and conflict. Facing abandonment, she never blames her husband or ex-partner, nor questions whether the standard of a "good woman" is flawed. Instead, she silently endures, repeatedly asking, "How far is forever?" The oppression in Tie Ning's writing does not stem directly from specific men, but from society's labeling and instrumentalization of women. Bai Dasheng grew up in this environment, her consciousness gradually internalizing these views—such as "kindness = silent sacrifice" and "a woman's worth = fulfilling others' needs." This oppression is invisible; women grow up treating societal conditioning as self-imposed demands, trapped in a cycle of "self-PUA" with no escape, repeatedly asking "How far is forever?"

2.2 Male Writers' Perspectives: From "Explicit Instrumentalization" to "Implicit Dependency"

Male writers' depictions of women's marital predicaments also diverge. Lu Yao focuses on urban-rural intersections, while Jia Pingwa concentrates on pure rural settings, revealing differences between explicit instrumentalization and implicit dependency. Instrumentalization centers on women's actions and emotions directly serving male objectives. Dependency manifests not through direct objectification, but through family order and social norms rendering it a rational choice—concealed beneath the guise of a wife's proper duties.

In Lu Yao's *Life*, Liu Qiaozhen's self-worth becomes entirely bound to Gao Jialin's "social mobility." Though she had the chance to pursue education, she relinquished it when Gao Jialin "wanted to review for college entrance exams." When Gao Jialin faced difficulties from the village Party secretary, she immediately sought her father's help to smooth relations and secure Gao Jialin's temporary job. At this point, Liu Qiaozhen becomes a tool for Gao Jialin's survival. Her repeated sacrifices reduce the obstacles in his path upward. When Gao Jialin gains an opportunity to become a journalist in the city, his attitude toward Liu Qiaozhen shifts abruptly. Now, she transforms from a "facilitating tool" into an "obstructing tool." Her identity conflicts with Gao Jialin's goals, leading to her decisive abandonment. Subsequently, she is arranged by her family to marry Ma Shuan. Lu Yao explained this as "Liu Qiaozhen compromising with reality and accepting her rural destiny." Yet throughout the narrative, no mention is made of Liu Qiaozhen's personal feelings—her hesitation over giving up educational opportunities, the humiliation of pleading with her father for help, or the heartbreak of being discarded. All these are framed as sacrifices for love, transforming her individual needs into aids for Gao Jialin's advancement. This perpetuates her role as an accessory to the male-centered narrative. Her ending is not her own choice but a contrived outcome to justify the male protagonist Gao Jialin's goals, completely disregarding female emotions and suffering. Her instrumentalization is starkly evident.

In Jia Pingwa's *Chicken Nest Hollow*, Mai Rong is a dependent figure with no agency, hidden behind the mask of "survival and duty." The arranged marriage swap originated when Mai Rong's husband, Hehe, fell for Huihui's wife, Yanfeng. Hehe first approached Huihui to discuss exchanging wives, only informing Mai Rong after securing his consent. The text merely notes that Mai Rong "wiped away her tears without voicing any opinion," for the initiative in the exchange lay entirely with the men. Her acquiescence was not consent but a refusal to dissent. Jia Pingwa portrays this exchange as a survival strategy resolving family conflicts. Mai Rong's acquiescence reveals how rural stigma against divorced women (where divorce equates to moral impropriety) forces her to submit to male decisions. This seemingly family-preserving act is actually passive dependence born of no choice. Post-exchange, multiple scenes depict Mai Rong's anguish—weeping alone by the stove at night, staring blankly when she sees Yan Feng with He He. Jia Pingwa dismisses this as "Mai Rong simply adjusting to her new life," but this explanation evades the true causes: deliberate disregard for her emotional

needs, the resentment of having her choices stripped away, and the oppression stemming from gender inequality.

2.3 Transgender Contrast: "Subjectivity Breakthrough" Vs. "Objectification Discipline"

Comparing texts by male and female authors reveals a core difference: female writers often focus on how to achieve subjectivity or express self-worth, while male writers frequently depict women serving others' goals to facilitate their objectives.

In female writers' texts, female subjectivity manifests by elevating personal struggles into societal questions. In *The Ark*, Cao Jinghua confronts workplace discrimination by asking, "Why is it harder for divorced women to survive in the workplace?" When Liang Qian feels suffocated by childcare responsibilities, she questions, "Why is caring for children always women's work?" These inquiries transform personal struggles into critiques of societal gender discipline, revealing that women's suffering is not individual tragedy but the result of structural oppression. In *How Far Is Forever?*, Tie Ning uses Bai Dasheng's experiences to question the validity of societal standards for "good women" and why kindness often invites harm. This reveals how traditional virtues themselves constrain women's agency. Female writers' texts center on women's needs and emotions; even if they don't achieve complete liberation, this reflection itself is part of awakening agency.

In male writers' works, women's "objecthood" manifests as instrumentalization or symbolization. In *Life*, Liu Qiaozhen serves as Gao Jialin's "tool" for social mobility, his "emotional solace" in rural survival, and the "price" for his urban ascent. Lu Yao never inquires about Liu Qiaozhen's feelings; she remains merely an accessory to Gao Jialin's life choices—an existence disposable at any moment. In *Chicken Nest Hollow*, Mai Rong's consent to an arranged marriage brings harmony to two families, while her compliance ensures stability in rural society. Jia Pingwa reduces Mai Rong's suffering to mere survival pressures, overlooking the impact of gender-based pressures. Male writers focus on exploring male goals and anxieties, rarely addressing the pressures women face in their existence.

3 Exploring the Roots of Difference

3.1 The Push of the Times: Enlightenment Ideology and Market Economy Transformation

During the 1980s Enlightenment movement and the 1990s market economy transition, the dominant discourse of the era directly shaped writers' narrative perspectives.

Influenced by Enlightenment thought, writers' narratives centered on "demands for equality" and "survival as priority." The collision between these two themes simultaneously promoted the liberation of human nature. In *The Ark*, Zhang Jie used the "divorce and workplace struggles" of urban intellectual women to break oppression and fight for equality in marriage and the workplace; Lu Yao, a male writer who transitioned from rural to urban life, focused more on the human struggles within social mobility. Thus, his character Gao Jialin carries "class anxiety," viewing women's sacrifices as "the price of urban survival." Jia Pingwa, in *The People of Jiwowa*, depicts a marriage exchange, framing Mai Rong's marital dependence as an inevitable choice to maintain family and rural stability.

Amidst the transition to a market economy, women gained greater developmental space while simultaneously facing the implicit discipline of traditional roles and consumerism. Female narratives now delve deeper into internal confusion and loss of self-worth rather than emphasizing fragmented resistance. In the 1990s work *How Far Is Forever?*, Tie Ning shifts resistance toward "internalized discipline." Though Bai Dasheng lacks overt oppressors, she gradually loses herself within the constraints of societal and familial conditioning, ultimately posing the existential question: "How far is forever?"

3.2 Subject Experience: The Perspective of the Participant Vs. the Observer

Women are the direct participants in marital struggles, while men remain observers—this difference directly shapes the narrative focus.

Zhang Jie infused her own experiences of marital and professional struggles into her writing. Her early struggles balancing childcare and writing while facing gender discrimination directly shaped Cao Jinghua's narrative—scenes like "being criticized for writing late into the night" and "smashing her work to counter male colleagues' mockery" authentically capture the vulnerability and struggle of women resisting: "strong in public, tears in private." After engaging with numerous readers' confessions and observations, Tie Ning crafted the character Bai Dasheng, precisely capturing the conflicted psyche of ordinary women who yearn to break free from societal constraints yet hesitate to sever ties—such as continuing to care for her ex-husband's parents after divorce, or later descending into self-reflection after being cheated on. They anchor their writing in personal experience or observational insights to evoke female empathy.

Lu Yao, driven by his own fear of being "sent back to the countryside," focused his characters on resolving the anxieties of rural youth. He framed Liu Qiaozhen's sacrifices as romantic devotion and even rationalized Gao Jialin's abandonment

after moving to the city, reflecting an outsider's perspective that empathizes solely with male struggles while overlooking women's pain. Jia Pingwa observed rural order through a male lens. Familiar with rural mutual aid systems, he defined marriage exchange as survival wisdom maintaining rural stability, overlooking women's struggles with social stigma after divorce and merely emphasizing their sacrifice. This outsider's interpretation failed to truly enter women's inner worlds.

3.3 Cultural Tradition: Traditional Discipline and Modern Resistance

The cultural DNA of "male supremacy and female subordination" leads male narratives to implicitly carry unconscious gender discipline, while female narratives distinctly bear modern consciousness of resistance.

In *Life*, Lu Yao tacitly accepts the marital logic that "men dominate marriage, women serve men." Gao Jialin freely chooses his partner, while Liu Qiaozhen passively accepts being abandoned and remarried. Lu Yao romanticizes this as Liu Qiaozhen sacrificing for love—a "simple, pure love" of the countryside—yet it unconsciously reinforces the subordination of women to male norms. In *Chicken Nest Hollow*, Jia Pingwa packages "women obeying men to uphold the family" as "survival wisdom," directly binding women to their familial roles. Arranged marriages are male-dominated, leaving women voiceless, yet the expectation of a wife's dutifulness forces them to bear household labor unconditionally—essentially perpetuating patriarchal ideology.

In *The Ark*, Zhang Jie directly challenges traditional gender roles: first, Cao Jinghua refuses to be a housewife, countering workplace ridicule through her work; second, Liang Qian demands her husband share childcare responsibilities, rejecting the internalized discipline that centers women around the family. Tie Ning's *How Far Is Forever* delves into the oppressive burdens imposed on women by traditional virtues. Through Bai Dasheng's tragic fate, she first questions the validity of the "good woman" standard, then exposes its essence as a tool of patriarchal discipline, ultimately pushing for female awakening from cultural roots.

4 The Dialectic of Narrative Differences: Complementary Rather Than Opposing

Previous studies often equate narrative differences between male and female writers with gender opposition. However, textual analysis reveals that their approaches actually constitute "complementary writing" addressing women's marital dilemmas in the 1980s and 1990s, with no inherent superiority or inferiority between them.

4.1 Complementary Dimensions of Distress: Spiritual Constraints Vs. Structural Binds

Female writers transcend mere descriptions of external structures, focusing instead on how social expectations and traditional virtues oppress women's spiritual worlds. For instance, in *The Ark*, Liang Qian faces a male producer who threatens her creative freedom with resources; In *How Far Is Forever?*, Bai Dasheng is bound by the "good woman" standards of kindness, endurance, and sacrifice. Even when treated as a free nanny, used, and then abandoned, she remains uncomplaining, even blaming herself for "not doing enough." The marital predicaments of women in female writers' works are more concentrated on societal role expectations and the constraints of traditional virtues, plunging women into self-doubt.

Male writers, however, anchor their narratives in the urban-rural dichotomy and the structural oppression of rural family systems, depicting women's passive predicaments within these constraints. In *Life*, Liu Qiaozhen's tragedy centers on the "urban-rural identity barrier." Her rural background first serves as emotional solace for Gao Jialin during his rural years, then becomes a class obstacle after his move to the city, ultimately sacrificing her as collateral for his social mobility. In *Chicken Nest Hollow*, Mai Rong shoulders the dual burdens of field labor and domestic chores, her labor value entirely overshadowed by the label of "a wife's duty," rendering her existence wholly dependent on the household. The marital predicaments of women depicted by male writers stem not merely from gender dynamics, but more significantly from structural factors like the urban-rural divide, economic conditions, and family systems.

4.2 Complementary Paths to Awakening: Active Resistance, Introspective Reflection, and Disciplinary Inertia

The paths of female awakening—from "radical resistance" to "deep reflection" and then to "realistic resistance"—gradually reveal the possibilities of female awakening while not evading its limitations, collectively shaping the complexity of women's self-actualization.

Zhang Jie's *The Ark* presents 1980s women asserting themselves through divorce and workplace resistance, offering an action template for female awakening; Tie Ning's *How Far Is Forever* depicts 1990s women questioning cultural traditions through counterintuitive approaches, embodying awakening at the cultural root level; while Lu Yao and Jia Pingwa's

narratives carry limitations of male perspective, they objectively portray the external obstacles to awakening. Liu Qiaozhen's passivity stems not from unwillingness to resist, but from being bound by social conditioning that reinforces the notion of women supporting men. Mai Rong's compliance also arises from rural social structures demanding women uphold family order. Male writers more lucidly reveal that female awakening requires not only proactive resistance and introspection but also breaking through external pressures like urban-rural barriers and social discourse—precisely highlighting the arduousness of women's awakening.

5 Conclusion

Against the backdrop of China's social transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, this study examines gender narrative differences in depictions of marital crises through Zhang Jie's *The Ark*, Tie Ning's *How Far Is Forever*, Lu Yao's *Life*, and Jia Pingwa's *The People of Jiwowa*.

Analysis reveals that female authors emphasize women's struggles for autonomy: Zhang Jie depicts urban intellectual women in the 1980s resisting marital oppression through divorce and workplace resistance; Tie Ning critically examines the societal rationalization of "good woman" standards. Male authors often instrumentalize women or portray them as wholly dependent on the family. For instance, Lu Yao depicts Liu Qiaozhen as a tool for Gao Jialin's social mobility, while Jia Pingwa renders Mai Rong powerless in a marriage exchange.

These differences stem from the era's context (Enlightenment thought versus market economy), the authors' experiences (women's lived realities versus men's observational perspectives), and cultural traditions (traditional discipline versus modern resistance). Yet these divergences are not oppositional; rather, they form complementary narratives. Women reveal spiritual discipline, showcasing proactive resistance and introspective reflection, while men expose structural oppression, laying bare the arduous path to awakening. Together, they reconstruct the authentic reality of women's marital existence during that era.

References

- [1] Li Ling. Gender Awareness and Modernity in Chinese Modern Literature [J]. *Chinese Cultural Studies*, 2005, (02): 163-170.
- [2] Qiao Yigang. Reading and Writing from a Gender Perspective [J]. *Writing*, 2019, (05): 5-11.
- [3] Sang Donghui. "Symbolic Violence" and Contemporary Feminist Pathways: An Interpretation of Bourdieu's Masculine Domination [J]. *Journal of Shandong Women's University*, 2019, (03): 18-24.
- [4] Luo Yalin. Women as Method: Reading He Guimei's *The Transformation of Women's Literature and Gender Politics* [J]. *Journal of Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, 2015, (09): 210-215.
- [5] Meng Lijun. Reflection and Adjustment: The Gradual Opening of Feminist Writing Criticism—A Review of Dai Jinhua's *Crossing the River: Chinese Feminist Writing and Feminist Culture in the New Era* [J]. *Appreciation of Masterpieces*, 2022, (20): 117-119.
- [6] Meng Jun. Gender Narratives: Feminine Writing that Highlights Differences—An Authorial Expression in Chinese Cinema Since the 1990s [J]. *Contemporary Film*, 2007, (06): 51-55.
- [7] Jiang Zihua. *Feminism and Gender Subjectivity Narratives in Modern Literature* [D]. Northeast Normal University, 2010.