Taiwanese Communist Feminist, Xie Xuehong: Li Ang’s Literary Portrait of Xie Xuehong’s Pre-1949 Feminist Activism in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

In 2000, Li Ang simultaneously published both Zhuan no xiaoshuo (Autobiography: A Novel) and Piao chu shi [A Drifting Journey]. Li Ang defined her literary story about Xie Xuehong’s life experience in three ways: first, a biographical story of Xie Xuehong’s life; second, a fiction about Xie Xuehong’s romantic love; third, a record of history. According to recent research, the first wave of Taiwanese feminist movements started in the Japanese colonial era and the second wave was the feminist activism that Nationalists’ anti-communist political forces enhanced in Taiwan. This phenomenon seems to match the repetitive patterns that East Asian feminism’s rise occurred under the supervision of male social activists and political-cultural reformers. Seldom, however, do researchers stress Xie Xuehong as the unique feminist part of both waves of Taiwanese feminist activism. This article aims to emphasize Li Ang’s literary and artistic efforts to add Xie Xuehong’s feminist stories to the first two waves of Taiwanese feminist activism.

INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Li Ang simultaneously published both Zhuan no xiaoshuo (Autobiography: A Novel) and Piao chu shi [A Drifting Journey; companion travelogue]. The former is a literary biographical fiction about Xie Xuehong’s life. The latter is a companion travelogue. Li Ang documented how she followed Xie Xuehong’s footsteps to Japan, Russia and Shanghai.¹ This article aims to emphasize Li Ang’s literary and artistic efforts to add Xie Xuehong’s feminist stories to Taiwan’s pre-1949 feminist activism.

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OLD FEMINIST ACTIVIST RECORDS

Generally speaking, current records about Xie Xuehong's feminist activism seem to be still more limited than those of her political activism. Following is a brief list of some published information about Xie Xuehong's feminist activism in Taiwan and Mainland China. In March 1991, the Association to Enhance Peace after the February 28th Incident included Xie Congming's (Hsieh, Tsung-min) interview with Xie E (Hsieh, E), and mentioned that Xie Xuehong's administrative title never reached the top in these feminist activist organizations. The interview implied Xie Xuehong's complexity in romantic relations, yet Yang Kehuang's My Memory indicated Chen Bingli's (Chen, Ping-chi) threat about Xie Xuehong's communist stance. Politically speaking, Xie Xuehong was truly a political icon in her time because some news reports and comments mentioned that she was the "first female leading character" and the "first female revolutionary" of the February Incident.

In 1992, a publication about the February 28th Incident recorded Xie Xuehong's Taiwanese feminist title during that period: Chief of the

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3 This association was advocated and established by Zheng Nanming (Cheng, Nan-jung; 1947-1989) in 1987. The president of this association is Chen Yongxing (Chen, Yong-xing). The annual conference of this association in February 28. Members of this association meet to pursue the political recognition of injustices for people who suffered from the ban related to the February 28th Incident. In 1988, Taipei City government and the Executive Yuan started the policy about the February 28th Memorial Day for Peace. After that, there are more and more news reports, public attendances, memorial halls and press conferences related to the truth of the February 28th Incident.
5 Li, Dawa (Li, Tsawal), "Er n’ba diyi zhiduyans: Taibong Xie Xuehong" (The First Female Leading Role of the February 28th Incident: Taiwanese Communist Xie Xuehong), Epoch Time. February 27, 2007.
Taiwanese Women's Team Directly Under the Central Government (Wang, Shiqing, 7-18; Chen, Cuiilan, 76-77).  

Feminist Activism, Gender Theories, and Li Ang's Literary Works about Xie Xuehong's Child-Bride Era

Before the age of 18, Xie Xuehong was too young, illiterate, poor, and resourceless to participate in collective teams or activities of feminist activism—except for escaping from her fate as a mistreated child-bride married to Hong Xinhu (Hung, Hsin-hu). In terms of anthropological gender theories, Xie Xuehong's escape from her status as a child-bride reminds readers of Ruben S. Gale (b. 1949), who published an academic article entitled "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex." Xie Xuehong might not have foreseen Ruben S. Gale's theoretical discourse; however, she happened to echo Ruben Gale when she recalled in My HalfLife Records that she was "sold" like a "desired product" at the price of 160 Taiwanese dollars. Li Ang even went out of her way to mention the Han Dynasty's international policy to exchange or "trade" princess Wencheng and Wang Zhenjun with foreign kings for the "price of varied pence."  

In addition to Ruben S. Gale, socio-biologists and other anthropologists adopted the Taiwanese-dialect phrase shihpu (child-bride) and developed the theory that childhood familiarity would result in sexual disinterest, such as the unhappy marriage in cases of child-brides or cousin marriage. Edward Alexander Westermarck, the theorist about shihpu, argued that the experience of human beings or animals living closely together in the first few years of their lives minimize mutual sexual attraction. The research outcome of Arthur P. Wolf, Robin Fox, Joseph Shepher, and Anne Pusey shares Westermarck's belief. Xie Xuehong and Hong Xinhu's arranged marriage

6 Fullan mbiel (Executive Committee Member of the All Women's Association) was Xie Xuehong's feminist activist title after 1949.  
seemed to match the above-mentioned researchers' scholarly belief. Compared with Zhang Shumin, Lin Mushun, or Yang Kehuang. Hong Xinhu won far less romantic love from Xie Xuehong.

**Li Ang's Additional Literary Work on Xie Xuehong's Feminist Activism**

At the age of 18, Xie Xuehong traveled to Japan with Zhang Shumin (Chang, Shu-min) in 1919, learned Japanese, did business and lived in the Chinatown of Kobe, Japan, for a while. Although the young age and illiteracy might be bottlenecks of Xie Xuehong's participation in collective feminist activism during this particular period, Li Ang's fiction highlights at least two sorts of Xie Xuehong's unique feminist leadership: first, capacities to (re)name/(re)define herself; second, feminist empowerment in the erotic game of writing.

**Capabilities to (R)e(name) / (R)e(define Herself**

Li Ang's *Autobiography: A Novel* and *A Drifting Journey* both reverberated how Xie Xuehong (re)named herself Jianü (Fake Female), A Na (Female), Sulun, Yamane Toshiko, Xie Felying, Kurenko, and Wu Bin. 10 The capacities to (re)name or (re)define herself and act out herself as the active subject, instead of the passive object, represent the creation of her selfhood and the gender performativity of her own gynocentric genealogy. The highlight of Xie Xuehong's capacities to (re)name/(re)define herself happened to echo feminist theories related to Judith Butler's belief in gender performativity.11 Michel Foucault's theoretical dialogues with Nietzsche about genealogy2 and history, and so forth.

**Feminist Empowerment in the Erotic Game of Writing**

When Zhang Shumin replaced a pen with his penis to write on Xie Xuehong's body, Xie Xuehong was actually the true lender or instructor to strategize and direct the erotic jouissance (Luce Irigaray's feminist theoretical term refers to sexual ecstasy). The entire seductive game was actually Xie Xuehong's own *féministe* farce (Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's French feminist theoretical term to refer to feminine writing). Within the erotic game, Xie Xuehong was the guide while Zhang Shumin was Xie Xuehong's adherent.

The erotic writing game all over Xie Xuehong’s body signified the multiplicity of Xie Xuehong's enjoyment of sexual pleasure and became the strongest feminist voice to talk back to patriarchal highlights of the singular focus on the male sexual organ. This writing strategy happened to echo several French feminist theories, such as Luce Irigaray's beliefs in the multiplicity of women's sexual pleasure against the single-ness of men's penises, *pari féminin* (women's speaking as women), and so on. While Luce Irigaray argued with male psychologists that women's two (virginial) lips and diverse sexual

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12 "Genealogy demands consideration of the meaning by which 'dispersed, heteronormative, localized procedures of power are adapted, reinforced, and transformed by these global strategies'" (Rajad, 443). Also consult theoretical publications by Michel Foucault and Kathy E. Ferguson.
zones defeat the "one-ness" or "single-ness" of men's penises,13 Li Ang's literary writing strategy awarded Xie Xuehong this feminist prestige to act out Luce Irigaray's above-mentioned feminist theoretical philosophy.

Citing legends about Fan Lihua and the Senior Goddess-Mother's incantation, Li Ang happened to "sinicize" Luce Irigaray's theoretical term "two lips": "We never forgot the mystic incantation. As long as the two lips were opened and the voice came out with vocabulary, everything could be involved—including life and death."14 This magic incantation of "two lips" was strengthened by Li Ang's strategic over-reading of the sexual incantation: "As easy as the password about sesame, it opens the door toward the stone cave full of valuable deposits."15 Furthermore, Li Ang's literary portrait combined both male and female sexual organs in the sections about faustament. On the one hand, this echoed the feminist theoretical concept of androgyny.16 On the other hand, this paved the way toward Xie Xuehong's masturbation or auto-eroticism.17

In *A Drifting Journey*, Li Ang's literary metaphor about the Japanese harbor of Kobe and the Japanese-style dress, hitoni, free from the hindrance of pants or bra to easily and carelessly access the sexual konjissei happened to match the feminist theoretical argument related to the multiplicity of women's erotic enjoyment and omnidirectional sexuality.18 When Helene Cixous highlighted women's seductive strategies, 

13 Consult Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray: Key Writings, etc. Luce Irigaray also co-authored with Sylvère Lotringer and Mary Green. Ingeborg Oeverst also published a monograph about Luce Irigaray.


15 Ibid., pp. 196-197.


17 Ibid., p. 295.

18 Ibid., pp. 76-77.

19 "The Laugh of Medusa" is one of the most stereotypical representatives of Cixous's feminist articles. For more information about Cixous, also consult the following official website: https://www.epu.edu/helen/roxane-clough/biography (online data retrieved in June 2011).

20 Jan Qin (Chen, Chien), for example, highlighted the ritual and sexual procedure of becoming a wife when comparatively decoding the Cantonese-Taiwanese comparative texts of Chinese legends about sheiangu. Actually, the sheiangu symbolizes the male sexual organ. For details, consult her journal article entitled "Ceng Shangyi de guodu shi yi jiu gui shengben sheiangu gushu—yi yue er yue yi yue shi zhechen" (Decoding the Chinese Legends about Shengben in viewpoints of the Transitional Rituals of "Becoming A Wife"—Main Focus on Cantonese-Taiwanese Comparative Readings).

AFTER XIE XUEHONG’S LITERACY: LI ANG’S FURTHER WORK ON XIE XUEHONG’S PRE-1949 FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Women’s Literacy

The proportion of most East Asian women’s literacy was in doubt during Xie Xuehong’s lifetime. There was no lack of well-known talented ladies with marvelous educational trainings even before the modern republics were established. However, the ratio of illiterate or uneducated women without outstanding family backgrounds was incredible. Xie Xuehong was only one of the convincing examples.

Financial Independence in A Room of the Career Woman’s Own

After returning from Japan, Xie Xuehong became a career woman: both a tailor and a seamstress of sewing machines (Yang, My Half-Life Records, 135-145). This financial independence echoed Virginia Woolf’s “room of [women’s] own.” With the luxurious delight of financial self-help that only the rarely seen top percentage of Taiwanese women could bravely afford, Xie Xuehong initiated, maintained and escaped from different romantic relations.

Glass Ceiling

Li Ang’s graduate-level training in drama might remind feminist readers of Virginia Woolf’s well-known theory about patriarchal social obstacles to hinder Shakespeare’s sister’s career. The globally renowned term “glass ceiling” will certainly join feminist readers’ recall of the above-mentioned aspects related to Xie Xuehong’s career and financial independence. On the job market, male communist peers’ better accessibility to positions of power than women, such as Xie Xuehong, also indirectly echoed the feminist theory of “glass ceiling.”

First Female Bicycle-Rider: Feminist and Sexual Metaphors

In Autobiography: A Novel, Li Ang mentioned that Xie Xuehong was reported in local newspapers as the first female biker in Taizhong (Tai-chung)

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22 Ibid., pp. 275-277.
23 Corinth Baldwin’s Richardus and His World.
25 Outside of Chinese-speaking areas, even educated women were not taught to understand kana (Chinese characters) or hanja (Chinese characters) in Japan and Korea in the past; therefore, they were barred from access to influential documents, such as contracts, treaties, legal data, national policies, military orders, etc, at that time. Also consult Li Ang’s Zehua de neizhuan (Autobiography: A Novel). Taipei: Huanghai (Royal Crown), 2000: http://author.crown.com.tw/hion (online data retrieved in July 2011), p. 157.
26 Consult Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own
27 Also consult The Glass Ceiling Effet and Federal Glass Ceiling Commission’s Solid Investment.
Qingling in terms of Xie Xuehong’s insistence on the same political ideal regardless of her lack of luxuriance that Soong Qingling enjoyed.

The Merger of Li Ang, Xie Xuehong, and Women

In addition to various pairs of comparison and contrasts between Xie Xuehong and many women, Li Ang established mutual connections with Xie Xuehong and even merged a part of herself with Xie Xuehong in both Autobiography: A Novel and A Drifting Journey. For example, Li Ang confessed that she was like turning herself into Xie Xuehong. She overlapped her footprint with Xie Xuehong’s footsteps, her eyes replaced Xie Xuehong’s eyes, her thoughts turned into Xie Xuehong’s thoughts, and her feeling became Xie Xuehong’s feeling.33

The experience in using sewing machines of “Singer” brand also linked Li Ang and Xie Xuehong.34 Li Ang even moved forward to portray the crimson color that Xie Xuehong identified herself with.35 Li Ang confessed, Xie Xuehong, I still cannot choose to stop standing by your side. . . . I see myself from you. We, you and I, to some extent, are doomed to be everlasting opponents or counterforces. . . . For so many years, I have written my fiction according to your life stories. You lived in my creative writing and my life. You breathed my breath. Sometimes, I even felt that we were in chorus. Yes, in chorus, it is good that we were simply in chorus, not exactly united to be the same. But I am deeply afraid that you will enter my life and merge with me. I fear that I would see you again in your grave and imagine that your ghost, which is reluctant to leave, would stick to me. . . . I realize how intentionally you are involved in my life.36

At the end of A Drifting Journey, Zhou Qing advised Li Ang that the permission for Li Ang to visit Xie Xuehong at the cemetery required Li Ang’s kinship with Xie Xuehong. So Li Ang mentioned that Xie Xuehong was born and brought up in her hometown and was her remote relative. Li Ang said that they were cousins.37 Li Ang stated, “I am no longer just a writer having you as the central figure in my novel. At that moment, you and I had blood relationship that endlessly connected us. . . . You would forever have me. I am your cousin.”38 Furthermore, Li Ang remarked that she fused not only herself with Xie Xuehong but all the Taiwanese women in the past 100 years. For instance, in A Drifting Journey, Li Ang mentioned that one of the connecting points is women’s yearning for the freedom and joys resulted from exoticism.39

33 Ibid., pp. 90-94.
34 Ibid., pp. 144-145.
36 Ibid., pp. 170-171 & 252.
37 Ibid., pp. 224-225.
38 Ibid., pp. 226-227 & 233-234 & 255.
39 Ibid., pp. 95-97.
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We greatly appreciate Professor Ya-chen Chen and *American Journal of Chinese Studies* granting us the permission to post Professor Chen’s newly published article on famous Taiwanese writer Li Ang’s work, “Taiwanese Communist Feminist, Xie Xuehong: Li Ang’s Literary Portrait of Xie Xuehong’s Pre-1949 Feminist Activism in Taiwan.”