An Investigation into the Chained Woman Incident in China

from a Historical Perspective: Revisiting Modern Chinese Literature

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The Chained Chinese Woman Incident, also known as the Xuzhou Eight-Child Mother Incident in Fengxian County, [Jiangsu Province](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B1%9F%E8%8B%8F%E7%9C%81) of China, is a case of severe mistreatment involving a woman being abused, abducted, and trafficked multiple times in China. The tragedy was initially exposed on Chinese social media in January 2022, and its video eventually was circulated online. In the [video, a mentally deranged](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%B2%BE%E7%A5%9E%E7%96%BE%E6%82%A3) middle-aged woman was chained around her neck and imprisoned in a shack, where she allegedly gave birth to eight children. The tragic event sparked public concern about who the chained woman was and what happened to her. However, on such a sensitive social and political matter, the woman's identity remains a mystery as a result of China’s Internet censorship (Zhang, 2022). In China, information on abducting and abusing this poor woman is extremely difficult to obtain because the government does not publish statistics. Worse yet, everybody in the village stays tight-lipped, obstructing reporters’ work. Villagers take this human trafficking for granted, without being aware that they are breaking the law (历史靠谱学, 2023). All the available evidence seems to point to the fact that traditional biases against women are still obvious in today’s China. The roots of this discrimination against women lie in traditional Chinese ideals. Although there are laws for protecting women’s rights in China (Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, 2005), the implementation of official policies is quite another issue. To a large extent, in rural China, village leaders are the law (Michelson, 2008). It seems the local government pretends to be ignorant of anything. It is increasingly concerning why the outside world is unaware of what has been going on with this serious crime. Unbelievably, China’s media outlets choose to fall silent, which actually is acting as an accomplice. This has amply demonstrated that the country has become benighted and bigoted. The chained woman incident cannot help but remind me of the sad lives of women in traditional Chinese society frequently addressed in modern Chinese literature. Since the first decades of the 20th century, women's issues regarding gender roles have become a prominent topic in modern Chinese essays. While these problems are not uncommon in the rest of the world, gender inequality issues are deep-rooted in Chinese history and are largely attributed to an ignorant citizenry. In this paper, I take the position that because all traumatic events stem from ignorance, the Chinese should be an educated citizenry through citizenship education, which, I believe, is a vital requisite for a better society. With the chained woman incident as a starting point, I will explore women's social status in traditional Chinese society as described in modern Chinese literary works. To perform a cause-and-effect analysis, I revisit the following four works: 1) Lu Xun's (鲁迅 1881 - 1936) short novel *The New Year Sacrifice* (祝福), 2) Lu Xun’s essay *The Evolution of the Male Sex* (男人的进化), 3) Ch’i Chun’s (琦君 1917- 2006) essay *Chignon* (髻), and 4) Mu Xin’s (木心 1927 - 2011) essay *The Bright Pearl* (夏明珠).

While the stories of the women recounted in the four articles are powerful and shocking to the readers, they are, after all, a microcosm of women's inequality in Chinese society. They tell different stories featuring Chinese female characters of varied backgrounds from different angles, ranging from a traditional rural woman to a good family-oriented woman and to urban educated women. Unlike any other modern writer, Lu Xun was highly sensitive to the issue of gender equality. *The New Year*’s *Sacrifice* is a way for social changes, and it is one of Lu Xun’s most important works in which he criticised traditional Chinese ideals through the sad story of a woman known as Xianglin Sao (祥林嫂, meaning Xianglin's Wife), the most well-known character in Lu Xun's works. In his writing, Lu Xun used the first person “I” as a narrator, who acted as a young scholar in the story. At the start of the story, Xianglin Sao was portrayed as numb, with her eyes showing no former expression of sadness. Following that, as Xianglin Sao suffered badly in her life, she asked the young scholar a question about whether there was an afterlife after death, fearing in her mind about how it would affect her after she died. The story then goes like this: After Xianglin Sao lost her first husband in her 20s, she arrived at Luzhen, a small town where the story took place. Basically, Xianglin Sao was a humble and hard-working labouring woman. When Lu Siye (鲁四爷), Fourth Mr.’s family wanted a new maid, Old Mrs. Wei, an agent, brought Xianglin Sao along to the family.

Xianglin Sao gradually gained the favour of her master's family because of her hard work. She had been living a quiet and simple life for some months, when all of a sudden, her mother-in-law appeared in the small town and broke Xiangli Sao's peace. It so happened that one day, Xianglin Sao’s mother-in-law came to the Fourth Mr.’s house and took away all the money Xianglin Sao had saved from her hard-earned income. Even worse, while Xianglin Sao was washing rice at the riverside before preparing lunch, she was tied up by her mother-in-law's family she once ran from, dragged to a boat, and taken away from Luzhen. Her mother-in-law forced Xianglin Sao into a second marriage because she needed money to arrange her younger son's marriage. In other words, Xiangli Sao was sold by her mother-in-law for money. Later on, Fourth Mr. responded to this kidnapping, commenting that “Disgraceful! Still….”( (Lu, 2003) ). What this suggests is that Fourth Mr. was not happy with the kidnapping just because nobody cooked lunch and cleaned the house for his family, but he believed that Xianglin Sao’s mother-in-law had the right to do that. Fourth Mr.’s comments could be taken to represent society’s beliefs and attitudes toward women's status in China. Put more simply, Chinese women were marginalised and could be bought and sold, and this practice could be taken for granted and considered “normal” from the perspective of the general population, which is directly associated with the phenomenon of today’s chained woman, who becomes a symbol of injustice but in the eyes of others in her community. The chained woman is nothing more than a secondary citizen.

Surprisingly, Xianglin Sao came back to Luzhen two years later after her second husband died. Sharing publicly what happened to her, she said that her second husband died from a disease, and her two-year-old son was eaten by a wild wolf. As a result, her house situated in a remote village deep in the mountains was occupied by her husband's family simply because she was a widow with no male family figures in the house. She became homeless; therefore, she returned to Luzhen to look for work to survive. From her miserable experience, we can easily see that in traditional Chinese society, men lead within the family; women are subordinate.

According to Lu Xun, Xianglin Sao told her story to seek comfort in order to help her survive through tough times, but she encountered coldness, rejection, and mockery from society. The townspeople saw her as a sign of bad luck because of the death of her two husbands. She was considered unchaste since she married twice. As Lu Xun mentioned in his work, Liu Ma, an ordinary peasant woman at Luzhen, suggested to Xianglin Sao that she should go to the Tutelary God’s Temple (土地庙) and donate a threshold to be her substitute so that thousands of people could step on and trample on it, thus atoning for her sins in this life and ending sufferings after her death. This shows that as an ignorant citizenry, Xianglin Sao was easily misled by false statements. Consequently, although she took Liu Ma's advice and spent a year's savings donating the threshold, people in the community still did not treat her like a normal person. Other people’s discrimination against her made her gradually lose confidence in her life. Eventually, she became a beggar on the street and died tragically on Chinese New Year’s Eve.

Through the traumatic events that took place in Xianglin Sao’s life along with disrespectful comments from those in her community, Lu Xun’s portrayal of Xianglin Sao shows the problems in beliefs and ideals. Many people treat women as objects that can be traded. By constantly demonstrating how those around Xianglin Sao who should care for her life remain indifferent and show no concern for her misfortunes, Lu Xun exposed these flawed ideas to the public, and Xianglin Sao’s death is an indictment of the blood and tears of traditional Chinese ideals and ethical codes.

Although the story was written in 1924, it has not lost its topicality with time. The dull-eyed Xianglin Sao causes me to think of the image of the woman with dull eyes chained to a wall inside a shed in today’s China. It bothers me when people can be so insensitive and numb to women’s rights. While the two are far apart in time and space, it is no coincidence. Apparently, both characters expose the inhumanity of traditional Chinese ethics. These problems in beliefs and ethical standards in a type of double standard continue to stay almost the same even after a century of progress. All these misfortunes result from ignorance. To be a better person and contribute to a better society, citizenship education, which plays a vital role in the processes of formation and development in modern society and modern country, can teach an ignorant citizenry to use knowledge to cope with life challenges such as sex discrimination and gender inequality (Zhong & Zhang, 2015).

Lu Xun not only showed his deep empathy for women but also was sensitive to issues of women’s sex discrimination. Gender inequality in China was unacceptable in the writer’s eyes. Lu Xun’s another essay *The Evolution of the Male Sex* can be seen as a review of the male sex development in Chinese history. At the beginning of the essay, Lu Xun pointed out that “Although there are many species of birds and beasts and their forms of 'love' are complex, one thing is beyond question: the male has no special rights to speak of (禽兽的种类虽然多，它们的 “恋爱”方式虽然复杂，可是有一件事是没有疑问的：就是雄的不见得有什么特权) ”(Pollard, 2000). In this quote, Lu Xun used a metaphor of “animal love” to symbolise male privileges regarding human sexuality, implying that unlike animal mating, the status of men and women is unequal. In other words, the system of rights is available to men on the basis of their sex.

Then Lu Xun reviewed the process of sex evolution from the matrilineal society to the patriarchal society in China. As he wrote, “...for whatever reason, women ran out of luck: round their necks, on their hands and on their feet shackles were secured, rings and bands were fixed. Though several thousand years later the rings and bands were changed to gold and silver and set with pearls and gemstones, these necklaces, bangles, rings and so on are still today symbols of female subjugation.” (Pollard, 2000). Lu Xun divided male sex evolution into different stages. He claimed that at the initial stage of the evolution in terms of men’s privileges, men started to be privileged or prioritized over women, which was manifested in two aspects: first, women were locked with chains which meant that women were treated as slaves; secondly, as a slave, a man could rape a woman anytime and anywhere. From this point of view, Lu Xun's statements above echoed the chained woman incident that is happening today: she is chained and "loved" without her consent.

Next, Lu Xun described the middle stage of the evolution, stating, “At the expense of a few coins, men could get what they wanted of a woman that men could use the money to buy sexual needs from women as a business service” (Pollard, 2000). This quote is clear that men tried to make this “exchange” as a fair trade by using money. To put it another way, men could use the money to satisfy their sexual needs provided by women who were treated as commodities that could be bought and sold. This traditional Chinese “culture” is also reflected in the Chained Woman Incident: the moment the chained woman’s “husband” paid money to the human trafficker, the “shopping” transaction was complete. After that, the woman became her husband’s personal property at his disposal. All of that enables us to understand why the woman has been chained and forced to give birth to eight babies without her permission. Obviously, the “husband” regards his “wife” as a “commodity” or “tool” rather than a human being.

Furthermore, Lu Xun gave a detailed account of the advanced stage of the evolution. He asserted that old-style marriages strongly encouraged women to marry one man only, and women had to follow the particular virtues established by the Duke of Zhou and the sage Confucius. According to Lu Xun, “From the time the bride was deposited on the bed of the bridegroom, she had only duties and obligations to perform; even the freedom to haggle over a price was denied her, let alone love. Like it or not…… [the bride] had to cleave to one man for all [her] days, and [she] had to preserve [her[ virtues” (Pollard, 2000). In contrast, men did not have to follow those moral principles and social codes of behaviour. A man could have three or more wives and use them whenever he pleased. Those standards and expectations for men arbitrarily have been created as superior to those for women. In other words, being not bound by those standards, men established obediences and virtues for women so as to brainwash them through ideological education. In so doing, women had to follow those obediences and preserve those “virtues” in order to have “good morals” in action and speech. As women had been brainwashed, we now have a growing understanding of why Xianglin Sao had a true fear of marrying twice.

Lu Xun finally satirised this male sex evolution “theory” men disseminated, the purpose of which was to make women willingly bind themselves to lifelong fidelity. Lu Xun concluded the article with ironic criticism, saying that what distinguishes man from beasts is those evolutions of male privileges that make man different from beasts, but men’s attitudes toward women were even worse than beasts. For thousands of years, gender inequality and women’s rights in China have been a huge problem.

The established virtues for women discussed above also apply to those from wealthy families. In what follows, I will briefly analyse the life of a woman from a “good” family with a focus on the essay *Chignon* (*髻*)by Ch’i Chun, a famous Chinese female writer (Pollard, 2000). Ch'i Chun excelled at writing nostalgia. She wrote mostly about ordinary people in her life. In her essay *Chignon*, Ch’i Chun told a story about family relationships. The four major characters in the story include Ch’i Chun, her mother, her father, and her father’s concubine (Ch’i Chun called her auntie). The essay centres around the changes in the *Chignon* to showcase three women’s lives.

Not worrying about anything in life, Ch’i Chun and her mother lived together happily in the countryside. Ch’i Chun’s father was a high-ranking army officer, who lived in a city. At the age of 12, following her mother, Ch’i Chun moved to the city to stay with her father, who lived with his concubine at that time. Her father’s concubine was young and beautiful, and she frequently changed her hairstyle to win affection from Ch’i Chun’s father, whereas Ch’i Chun’s mother, an old-fashioned countrywoman, refused to make changes to her hairstyle when she came to be aware that she lacked affection and love from her husband. After she lost hope in her life, her smile was gone for good. As a wife, it was unfair to Ch’i Chun’s mother; she had no choice but to be a virtuous woman with one man only.

Ch’i Chun’s mother was powerless in the face of her husband’s second woman. Nevertheless, when Ch’i Chun’s father passed away, her mother and father’s concubine continued to live together for the rest of their lives, and neither of them married again. As Lu Xun pointed out above, a virtuous woman could only marry one man, but a man was allowed to “marry” many women. Behind Ch’i Chun's calm narrative, there was a sense of an imbalance of power between the partners. This sexual inequality is vividly illustrated in the essay *Chignon.*

By the same token, the essay *The Bright Pearl* (夏明珠) by artist Mu Xin (2011)is also an essay of gender inequality. The essay is titled after Mu Xin's father's mistress, Xia Mingzhu*,* an educated, kind-hearted, and beautiful businesswoman, and she could even speak English fluently. Mu Xin’s mother lived a wealthy life with Mu Xin and his sister in a town near Shanghai. Mu Xin’s mother was also an educated woman born and raised in a scholarly family. While running his business on his own in Shanghai, Mu Xin’s father lived with Xia Minzhu. After Mu Xin’s father passed away, Xia Minzgu moved to the town where Mu Xin and his mother lived. Rather than marrying another man, she asked Mu Xin’s mother to accept her as a Mu Xin’s family member, which demonstrates that a woman should be faithful to one man for her entire life. This is true with any woman. Mu Xin’s mother and Xia Minzhu were no exception. This further shows that citizenship education in Chinese society is of moral and social significance, which can develop a strong sense of women's rights in individuals, enable people to make their own choices, and create a safe, supportive society (Team, 2023).

As can be seen, both *Chignon* and *Xia Mingzhu* address gender inequality in Chinese wealthy families. In the two stories, one thing is in common: the wife shared the same husband with another woman, which reflects the inferior status of Chinese women in society.

Finally, I conclude that China is a nation with numerous ignorant citizens throughout Chinese history as a result of a lack of necessary education. On the one hand, in terms of women’s rights women are bound and tortured by traditional Chinese ideals and ethics, but on the other hand, uneducated people's indifference and ignorance often lead to more tragic consequences. I believe that everything in life starts to collapse the day people become silent and insensible about things that matter. Therefore, citizenship education is a decisive factor, regardless of people’ credentials, residency, or socio-economic status. As indicated above, Chinese women, particularly in rural areas and small towns, have always been the primary target of forced marriages, abuse, domestic violence, sale of women, abduction, and trafficking. To enlighten the benighted “old fashioned” Chinese, we must provide citizenship education, which is the most powerful weapon that we can employ to heighten public awareness about women’s rights because it provides people with the knowledge and skills to understand, challenge, and engage with a democratic society (2024). While China seems to have passed many laws to protect gender equality, how to enforce these laws remains a complex issue in today’s society. The persistence of traditional views on women status poses obstacles to obeying the laws. With all this in mind, as China continues to change economically and socially, citizenship education implementation will promote improvement in the overall situation of women.

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