

A Woman's Tragedy in a Revolution: Love and Marriage in *The Epic of a Woman*

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Abstract

This paper examines Chinese women's love and marriage during a political and cultural revolution, and the impact on women's livelihood. This paper discusses how changing in political ideology and culture is affecting love and marriage for a female figure. The paper takes the respect, responsibility, care knowledge (RRCK) model of love to exam the female's one-sided love from a lens of Fromm's theory of the four elements of true love to shed the light on the dysfunctional relationships among in China that results in gender violence and as demonstrated in the novel *The Epic of a Woman*. This paper sets forth options for love and marriage in the mid-20th century Chinese literary and to re-examine gender violence against women. *The Epic of a Woman* (Yige nüren de shishi), by Chinese American woman writer Yan Geling (b. 1958), narrates the experiences of female protagonist Tian Sufei and her relentless pursuit of love throughout her life. The female protagonist in this novel is a reflection of Yan Geling's mother's personal experiences. Yan's mother was a popular dancer in an art troupe in the revolutionary army when she was young. The novel is set in the period from the 1940s to the 1970s, with her husband being sent to a labor camp during the Cultural Revolution.

Keywords: one sided-love, female fragmentation, oppression, sexuality

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Question

Women's love and marriage in their life make decisions about their wellbeing and personal lives. This paper reformulates the RRCK model to offer a definition of love that can encourage healthy growth without the narcissistic overtones of self-esteem, which psychology can fall into, or a mechanical set of doctrines and ideologies into which the majorities can fall. In this paper, the nature of love is considered from psychological and literature sources. The nuances of love are explored in relationship to marriage and revolutions applied to examine the female hero's personal growth and love stories. Women's love and marriage experiences establish an important foundation and interrelation for women's occupational trajectories and persona development. Thus, the paper examines fragmented self-image at work and at home. Through analyzing the case study, results further psychological insight into women's dysfunctional relationships settings outcomes in the RRCK model. This paper provide understanding to broadly inform future research in organizational and societal interventions focused on helping women thrive at work and home.

This setting leads to central questions of this paper: how did the national political ideology and local culture affect the female protagonist's—a teenage girl's—daily livelihood and long-term life choices? Does love and marriage still play a central role for the female protagonist?

1.2 Model of Love and Marriage

Love has been widely discussed and re-defined in many different approaches. Love and relationships for a female partner have been studied both quantitatively and qualitatively, often by breaking the complex issue into components that are measurable and describable. Thoman and Zelin (2020) examined behaviors at work and home among 182 employed, heterosexual, young adult women in the US. Their quantitative analyses show unique configurations of agentic and communal behaviors among women with implications for the women's job performance and the level of her romantic relationship satisfaction. *The Art of Loving* by Fromm argues there are four basic elements for true love: respect, responsibility, care, and knowledge, abbreviated as the RRCK model

of love elements. Each element is difficult to define and can differ markedly depending on the circumstances of the people involved. This book describes love as a skill that can be taught and developed, rejecting the idea of love as a mysterious and magical sensation. Fromm presents love as a permanent state of being, rather than the short-lived experience of "falling in love" or being unempowered in the face of infatuation. The belief is that a couple should be a good team, both functionally and sexually, with each having a common aim to work towards. Zhi Dan's 之丹 article, "Love, Equality and Agreement", discusses the importance of respect and understanding to love that "respect in love means the knowledge and understanding of the personality of the loved one." Based on this mutual respect and understanding, both parties can share their joy, interest, humor, sorrow, and knowledge, so that the vitality of both parties—that is, their sense of life—can be refined and sublimated in this emotional exchange. By contrast, Amy Burge argues that romantic love and sexualization are mutually dependent in a modern context and examines our current cultural sexualization crisis as part of a longer pattern of gender normativity and inequality. William R. Clough (2006) in the article *To be Loved and to Love* examines the various nuances of love that are explored with attachment theory, altruism, therapeutic schools, and some Biblical perspectives.

Marriage considered as a compulsory to Chinese women through generations till today's society; however, several research clearly demonstrate a positive relation between women's love, marriage and gender violence as followed. Scholarly literature offers a variety of perspectives on female marital quality, inequality, toxic relationships, and the culture of marriage. Wilcox and Nock (2006) discover that how men's marital emotions work is an important determinant of marital quality for women. Patricia Buckley Ebrey (1947-) examines the relationship between marriage and these social, political, and economic inequalities. Tierney and Fox (2011) investigate women's chance of enduring domestic violence; parallels become clear when analyzing women who are trapped in a toxic relationship. Cao and Lin (2019) address the relationship of neoliberal ideology to cultural values of parenting and masculinity. Young fathers' aspirations for their children's upbringing are simultaneously influenced by reading through the lens of 'yang' (raise/feed, 养) and 'jiao' (educate/cultivate, 教). Yeung and Hu (2016) point out in their article that patterns and determinants of marriage values cross different birth cohorts of men and women. Analysis reveals that across birth cohorts, there is an increase in acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation, but little change in attitudes toward out-of-wedlock childbearing and singlehood, and, surprisingly, there is a decline in approval of divorce. Wang and Zhou (2017) point out that for generations born during the 1940s–1960s, Chinese culture dictated that marriage was a must-do. All individuals reaching adulthood were expected to get married and would otherwise face heavy social pressure from families and workplaces. Thus, choosing a partner became an important social, economic, and political issue. The literature reviews in this subsection lay a foundation for this paper.

1.3 Historical Content

Yan Geling's historical setting for *The Epic of a Woman* spans forty years from the 1940s to the 1970s, a time of great social and political turmoil resulting in the deaths of millions of people in China. The tragic tales of intellectuals' lives during this turbulent history of China have been well documented. However, very little has been written about the tragedy of ordinary individuals and their sorrowful lives. This paper discusses the female protagonist's humble story during that chaotic period in China, and in particular the teenage girl's life story as set forth in Yan Geling's fictional world.

Related studies on Yan Geling's novel on *Flowers of War* describing female youth's image during the Sino-Japan war has been done by Li, K (2021), and Yan Geling's novel on *Female Grassland and Celestial Bath* describing female sent-down youth in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution has been done by Li, K (2022). A series of revolutions shaped the fate of ordinary Chinese people between 1940 and 1970. These revolutions were launched in rapid succession after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. All manner of political movements were introduced by their leader, Mao Zedong, over the following 30 years, including the "Land Reform Movement" 土地改革 (1950-1953)¹, "Anti-Rightist Campaign" 反右运动 (1957-1959)², "Great Leap Forward" 大跃进 (1958-1962)³, "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement" 上山下乡运动 (1950-1978)⁴, and the "Cultural Revolution" 文化大革命 (1966-1976)⁵.

Following the liberation and the unification of China in 1949, the central government of the People's Republic of China published a Land Reform Law on June 30, 1950. The law abrogated ownership of large farming lands by landlords and wealthy farmers, introducing peasant land ownership. The Three-anti Campaign (1951) and Five-anti Campaign (1952) (三反五反) were reform movements issued by Mao Zedong after the founding of the People's Republic of China to get rid of corruptions and enemies of the state. The result turned into a series of campaigns that consolidated Mao's power by weakening corrupt political opponents and wealthy capitalists. These campaigns negatively impacted the economy of big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and

Chongqing. Those campaigns forced many businessmen to lose their assets, and some even committed suicide (Chen, 1953). The Great Leap Forward 大跃进 (1958–1962)⁶ was a nationwide craze for catching up with the West in terms of the production of iron and steel that eventually led to large-scale starvation. A popular slogan of the movement was "metal donation is patriotic". However, metal donation became a compulsory requirement, and citizens would be regarded as 'traitors' if they don't donate.

The ambition of "total domination by the Communist Party" under authoritarian rule demanded absolute individual loyalty to the nation. These constant political movements featured intellectuals as a prominent target, aiming to discipline and punish those who were politically and socially non-conformist, anti-revolutionary, and dissident. Absolute loyalty to the nation was the mantra for individuals. However, this short period of socialism has not been sufficient to change many attitudes and customs given the preceding two thousand years of Confucianism. Chinese women's liberation is difficult and complex. Many tragedies against womanhood arose throughout a series of revolutions.

This paper examines Chinese women's love and marriage during a political and cultural revolution, and the impact on women's livelihood. This paper discusses how changing in political ideology and culture is affecting love and marriage for a female figure.

2. Love And Marriage Pressure During Chinese Revolution:

2.1 A Girl's Revolutionary Army Journey

The Synopsis of *The Epic of Woman: The Epic of a Woman* (Yige nüren de shishi 一个女人的史诗)⁷ describes the female protagonist Tian Sufei's 田苏菲 relentless pursuit of love throughout her life. Tian Sufei (see Figure 1) is a 16-year-old girl from a small town who joins the *Eighth Route Army* 八路军⁸ and becomes an actress in an army performance troupe during the 1940s. She falls in love with a male intellectual and later marries him after her accidental pregnancy in the 1950s. Despite this marriage, she struggles to win her husband's love for the rest of her life during decades of political ups and downs.



Figure 1. The innocent Tian Sufei joining the revolutionary army in *The Epic of a Woman* The innocent female protagonist joining the revolutionary army (episode 2 in the TV series)

The Epic of a Woman narrates Sufei departing from her small town, joining the revolutionary army, and finding her favorite career. This story *The Epic of a Woman* starts in the year 1947, introducing its female protagonist, Tian Sufei, as an ordinary 16-year-old girl who lives in a small town (see Figure 2). Sufei is later convinced by her ambitious childhood friend to join her in leaving their hometown to enlist in the Eighth Route Army. Thus, at the age of 17, the heroine Sufei has no idea about her life but blindly joins the revolution, because she is considered a failure in her small town by missing her sweater and other valuable items. Sufei, an ordinary girl, blindly joined the revolution from peer pressure. This revolution journal of Sufei leads her to new experiences and growth.

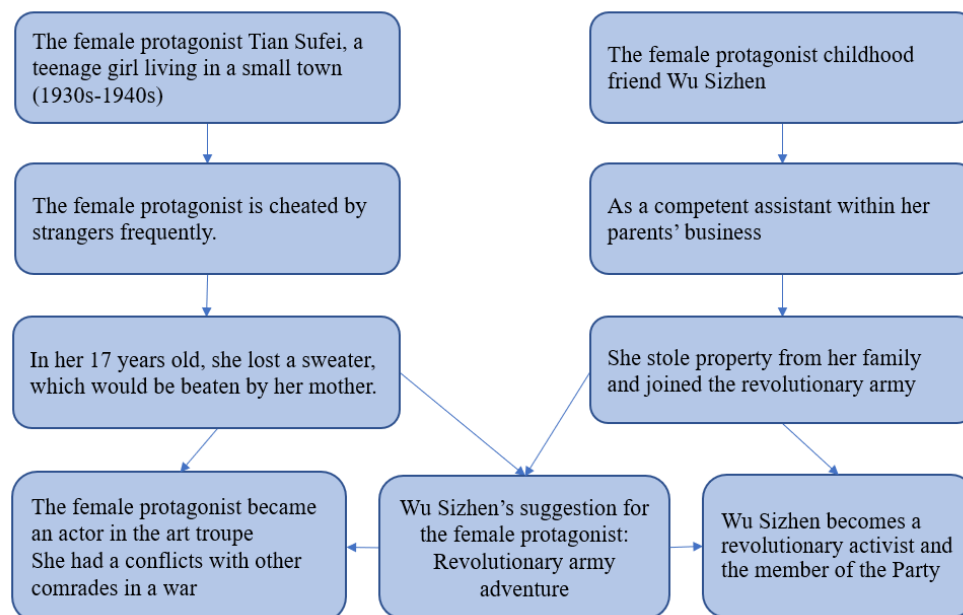


Figure 2. The Plotlines in The Female Protagonist Sufei's Narration (1930s-1940s)

2.2 One Sided Love from the Heroine's Pursuer

The novel describes that the female protagonist has an idealist suitor, Du Han 都汉, who would like to advocate for socialist patriotism. Du Han is a desirable marriage partner socially, culturally and politically. His brand of socialist's patriotism promotes men and women to marry with a shared mindset of sacrificing for the political revolution. This mindset is supported by Zhao Suisheng 赵穗生 (a Chinese novel writer of this era), who points out that individuals should subordinate their love to the interest of the state, the socialist system, and the future of the communist cause.⁹ Du Han is a brigade commander who later is promoted as a deputy commander governing the local army. A marriage with an official leader like Du Han is an honor and leads to political accolades for his contribution to the revolution. The leaders from the Art Troupe inform Sufei that Du Han's proposal is great news for her. Considering the power and personal prestige that comes with such a match, Sufei's potential marriage to Du Han would be a source of envy and jealousy among her female comrades. Wu Shanzhen says to Sufei (Yan, 2010; my translation): "You are going to become the wife of the official leader. Your elevated social position is beyond my reach."¹⁰ The mother of Sufei supports Du Han because he helps solve her practical problems. Du Han imagines himself as her future husband, looking after Sufei and her mother. Sufei's mother recommends Du Han's proposal: "A clever woman will always find a good man for herself when she is young. How lucky you are! The good man has found you."¹¹ As Zhi Dan states: "find a rich man so that a woman can avoid working hard" (1996).¹² Sufei is initially tempted to compromise and satisfy her mother's wish for her to marry Du Han, especially considering her mother's painstaking struggle to raise her alone for so many years. Sufei's mother and her colleagues place great stock in Du Han's financial and social status.

Also, by using the RRCK model of love elements—respect, responsibility, care, and knowledge¹³— we can see the heroine's pursuer Du Han loves the heroine. He respects Sufei's career and wants to take responsibility and care for Sufei. Du Han loves Sufei's drama performance: "I have watched operas for so many years. Never have I seen a person who is as energetic as you. Your performance is very relaxing for me."¹⁴ Du Han also comments that: "another attractive quality of Sufei is that she always stays true to herself."¹⁵ This is how Du Han admires the heroine during Chinese revolution. According to the stimulus-value-role theory proposed by Murstein Bernard (1929-) (1970¹⁶, 1976¹⁷) in the stimulus stage, potential mates first evaluate attractiveness by perceiving each other's external attributes such as beauty and behaviors (Murstein, 1970, 1976). Du Han thinks Sufei is "his dream girl, with white skin, bright eyes and graceful eyebrows..." Therefore, despite Communists' rhetoric during the revolution to the effect that political awareness was the most important characteristic in forming personal relationships, women's social standing and marriage prospects were still dependent on their appearance. (Ip, 2003).¹⁸ Du Han considered the heroine as his idealized woman because he appreciates Sufei's personality, appearance, and performance. Therefore, it is common to consider having partner as Du Han would guarantee a

good life during the revolution.

2.3 The Heroine's Love and Marriage

This subsection discusses national political ideology and local culture do not dominate Sufei's love and marriage option after joining to a revolution army.

1) Oppression from One-sided Love: Tian Sufei

Sex is still sensitive and negative in Chinese modern context where sex can be toxic to loose a job and reputation. Women's sex freedom is limited during Chinese revolution Sufei and Ouyang worked together and had a sexual relationship without using contraceptives. Sufei ends up getting pregnant. Sex outside marriage was illegal and classified as "hooliganism" until 1997, according to sociologist and sexologist Li Yinhe (1991)¹⁹. Sufei is punished by the authorities because of her pregnancy which later leads to Ouyang and Sufei losing their careers within the local army.

The female protagonist during the Cultural Revolution, chooses to disobey mainstream popular ideology and to support her husband.²⁰ Stephanie Tierney's theory investigates women's work and how women can elevate satisfaction with their romantic relationships (2011). Here we can see Sufei's work experience and how it bears on her romantic life.

The novel described Sufei's husband Ouyang 欧阳庾 is persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, where intellectuals are denounced as the "stinking ninth category"²¹, and were either purged or had their work heavily edited for political "purity". Ouyang Yu is politically criticized and sent to remote labor camps for "reform through labor". When Ouyang is punished and sent to remote labor camps, the heroine could give up her work to challenge political authority and bravely rescues her husband. Together she and her husband go through many political ups and downs in the period from the 1940s to the 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, and struggle under harsh labor reform camps whose aim was to purge his capitalistic tendencies.

Tian Sufei's choice, her unconditional love, and her care for her intellectual husband, obviously flies in the face of the Party's attitude toward intellectuals. It shows her courage and strength, however it worth nothing to be laudable from a feminist perspective As Ni Yan, a Chinese critic, points out, Sufei's love is crazy because she doesn't worry about her own life, her destiny, or herself (2009).²²

In *The Epic of a Woman*, although Sufei indeed wins the opportunity to work in the public sphere at the Art Troupe and thereby gains fame, her only goal in life is to look after and cook food for Ouyang Yu during these difficult years. Wilcox and Nock (2006) point out that housework is considered a feminine task, which masks an inequality in the division of household labor. The feminine task of domestic housework is unfairly burdensome to women.²³ In addition to her career, domestic duties are ever present, as Ouyang Yu's wife, Tian Sufei is demoted to a boiler office from the local drama troupe because she refuses to denounce him, becoming the only breadwinner for their family. Sufei's burdens further increase when she is forced to enter traditionally male occupations, earning a low salary and inflicting physical hardship on herself for almost ten years.

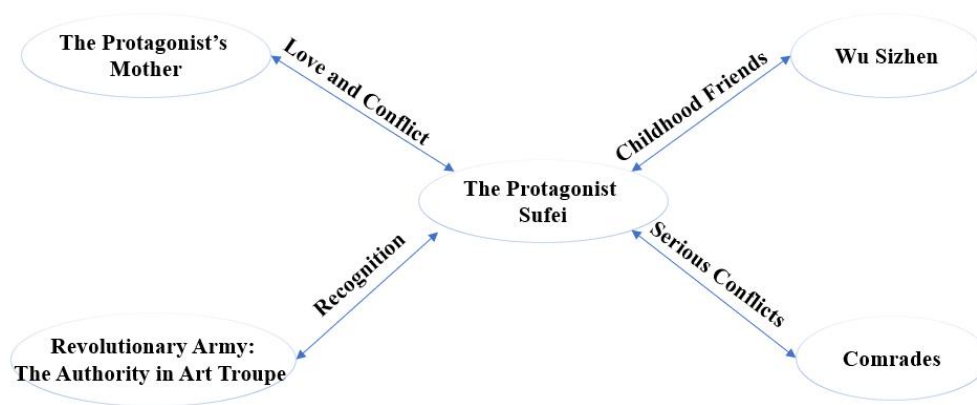


Figure 3. The Female Protagonist Relationship in *The Epic of a Woman*

From this point, both the political revolution and her marriage victimize Sufei during the revolution. A woman has to encounter with both requirements: on one hand, women is forced to work outside; on other hand, the

exploitation of love and marriage has not been established.

It also describes how the exploitation of marriage lead to an obstacle of advancing her career late in life. However, Ouyang Yu, on the other hand, becomes more successful as his career progresses with age.

Using the RRCK model, we can see that Ouyang doesn't respect nor take responsibility for Sufei and her suffering. He is unable to support the family. However, From Sufei's side, by contrast, she respects and takes responsibility for the care of Ouyang, but she lacks the intellectual capabilities that Ouyang desires. Ouyang does have the intellectual knowledge that Sufei deeply respect. As a result, the relationship between Sufei and Ouyang becomes a one-sided love relationship through the RRCK analysis.

In summary, despite attempts to liberate women, the series of political movements in modern China not only failed to provide adequate protection for women like Sufei but increased their oppression and responsibility through what an RRCK analysis reveals to be a one-sided love.

2) To Love in the Revolution

This section examines her gender violence she experiences. Although she challenges the control of authorities, including her mother and local communist leaders, her love neither grants liberation nor equality through describing her love and marriage. The female protagonist's romantic journey: how she finds someone whom she loves, before pregnant and later marrying her lover. In her marriage, she is willingly oppressed by an irresponsible husband.

The novel is set during the 1950s, when a new marriage law in China had banned polygamy and arranged marriages, purporting to promote women's equality and freedom of choice in spouse selection. Sufei has the right to select her own choice of spouse, but the question then becomes: what is her standard for selecting the spouse of her choice?

Sufei's quest for love by marrying Ouyang, and giving up an idealized communist suitor Du Han, breaks from the traditional formula of revolution and love. Sufei has no political motive; therefore, she prioritizes her love towards Ouyang Yu based on personal instincts. Despite the financial and political advantages of Du Han, Sufei marries Ouyang for sheer affection. In the end, pressure from her mother and the Party is not enough to dissuade Sufei from pursuing her idealized image of a good-looking and well-educated man reflected in Ouyang Yu, who comes from an aristocratic and metropolitan family background in Shanghai because Du Han is much older than her, with a 20-year age gap, and he is not intellectually adroit. This significant difference between Sufei and Ouyang brings a significant gap in the balance of this love and relationship, this forms an imbalanced one-sided love as discussed in the RRCK model of love.

The novel describes that Sufei's heart is captured by Ouyang Yu at first sight, particularly by his attractive appearance and native intelligence. The heroine's idealized version of a husband is very different from the popular perception of that era in terms of how a husband was to be chosen.

Love and marriage have intertwined to a revolutionary woman in the revolution. Although the pressure from the society, Sufei bravely pursues her choice of partner. However, her love and marriage are ultimately one-sided under the RRCK model of love elements. This subsection exams her love and the gender violence during her marriage.

She becomes infatuated with Ouyang after just their first encounter and immediately wants to marry him. She not only proposes to Ouyang straightforwardly by putting a slip of paper in a book with the message: "I want to marry you", she risks pregnancy and shame to be close to him. Due to the cultural pressure to get married for the sake of their unborn child, Ouyang submits to marriage. Yeung and Hu (2016) observe that due to the higher social costs of engaging in premarital sex, women are more conservative or traditional with regard to premarital sex and cohabitation. The female protagonist still wants to marry Ouyang Yu, although she knows that Ouyang Yu does not love her. However, Sufei willing to be oppressed for one-sided love and unequal marriage.

A well-educated man is also restrained by a woman's pregnancy. Ouyang Yu marries Sufei because of her pregnancy although he is in love with another woman. Having children outside wedlock was regarded as heinous and made it difficult for an unmarried pregnant woman to get married. Qualitative interviews in 2009 with adults aged 18 to 39 in the Chinese cities of Zhejiang 浙江, Guizhou 贵州, and Yunnan 云南 suggest that young Chinese describe premarital sex negatively as "shameful," "immoral," or "not good". (Zheng, 2011) pregnancy ruins the female protagonist's reputation, however the female protagonist views her pregnancy as her opportunity to marry Ouyang Yu.

Ouyang comes from a bourgeois class whereas Sufei is from a working-class background. He looks down on her

and has no respect for her career. Unlike Du Han (her other suitor), who admires the female protagonist, and says “Tian Sufei is a famous performer, having performed almost every role and thus making her No. 1 in the number of appearances on stage”. In the early 1940s, when Deng Yingchao 邓颖超 (1904-1992) discussed romantic love, she presented compatibility between two adults in age, ideology, and personality as the basic criteria for spouse choice. Ouyang never watches Sufei’s performances even though she asks him to come. Ouyang tells Sufei: “You overreact on the stage, and you can try to be more reserved”, considering her exaggerated performance to be boorish and uncultured. Ouyang’s educational background is used as a tool to suppress Sufei.

Wilcox and Nock (2006) argue that in marriages, women should feel like they have the power to speak their minds and men should feel a greater responsibility to shoulder their share of the emotional work associated with marriage. The novel narrates that Ouyang refuses to acknowledge Sufei’s intellectual growth and does not engage in any intellectual conversations with her. Intellectual incompatibility oppresses her. However, even while Sufei works difficult jobs to ensure her family survives through difficult times, she is regarded by Ouyang Yu as “stupid” because she fails to live up to the ideals of free love, gender equality, and female independence.

Moreover, Ouyang Yu has numerous romantic affairs, both before and after marrying Sufei. His marriage does not cause him to be a loyal husband. The novel narrates that although Ouyang’s good looks and literary talent are attractive to numerous women, none of them wish to marry him because as discussed earlier, he is not an idealized marriage partner. The heroine is the only one who wants to marry him.

However, Ouyang Yu has no hesitation in betraying Sufei through these affairs. Therefore, Sufei is insecure about their relationship and remarks: “You also love her and other women, don’t you?” The pain of the heroine result from their different attitude between love and marriage. The novel narrates that Ouyang Yu retains his loneliness and sexual desire toward every woman. As Zhi Dan indicates, one can “reduce human love to the satisfaction of material and sexual desires. Under those desires, a human being’s dignity degrades to the level of animal desires.”(1996)

Ouyang and his family later become a financial burden to Tian Sufei because of their unrealistic lifestyle. Although as intellectuals they were not officially in a separate social class, they usually regarded themselves somewhere within the bourgeoisie according to Suzanne Pepper (1939-) (2000).

Sufei’s husband’s concern about the politics does not take domestic issue into account. the heroine’s husband is depicted in the novel as an oppressor against the heroine’s gender equality. Ouyang Yu’s extreme hypocrisy is highlighted by his sustained concern for politics and the state of society contrasted against his distance from reality in his personal life. When he suffers isolation and persecution under Mao Zedong’s political movements, he desperately says to Sufei: “How many people have starved to death?”

Rather than mutual equality and mutual independence, the female protagonist regularly engages in her one-sided love and sacrifice under the RRCK model. During the Cultural Revolution, Sufei commits to her love of Ouyang regardless of the political pressure and financial consequences she may suffer. The novel narrates that Ouyang Yu is persecuted due to his newly tarnished status as a scholar. The leaders of the Art Troupe order Sufei to report Ouyang Yu for his anti-revolutionary behaviors, and her childhood friend (Wu Shanzhen) urges Sufei to distance herself from Ouyang. Tian Sufei not only refuses to abandon Ouyang Yu because of his lowered social status and the resulting adverse effects on her work and life, but secretly rejoiced that she could possess such a man as Ouyang Yu by herself. She says to her daughter, “Your father has been punished and made to work in the countryside. Now, he has a low social status, and no woman will love him except me. Then, we can move to a quiet village, and live a life.” All this shows Sufei’s one-sided love for Ouyang despite the danger to her and her family that such a love could bring. Love becomes an addict without boundaries with Ouyang Yu during her entire married life. This kind of life is referred to as ‘limerence’, a term coined by psychologist Dorothy Tennov (1928-2007) in her 1979 book *Love and Limerence: The experience of being in love*. (1998) “Limerence is considered a cognitive and emotional state of being emotionally attached to or even obsessed with another person and is typically experienced involuntarily and characterized by a strong desire for reciprocation of one’s feelings a near-obsessive form of romantic love.” (De Munck Victor C. 1998) Sufei requests Ouyang’s love, however, she cannot receive it from him due to his dysfunctionality.

She comes to place greater importance on Ouyang Yu’s state of mind than upon her own suffering. Sufei immerses herself in pitying Ouyang; her compassion for his desperation and worries leads her to become not only submissive in their marriage, but also self-sacrificing in the extreme. The inequality between Sufei and Ouyang only grows, until Sufei completely lives her life through her husband. After the Cultural Revolution, Sufei’s husband becomes popular again and he starts to develop a romance with Sun Baihe, who is scholarly and fits his ideals of a woman.

The Epic of a Woman shows one-sided marriage relationship between Sufei and Ouyang Yu can be examined the backdrop of Zhi Dan's article, "Love, Equality and Agreement", which love can also be regarded as the unilateral satisfaction of one's desires, with the other party reduced to a tool of desire and satisfaction. In this case, both parties are driven by loneliness and sexual desire and can easily fall in love, but this kind of love in the end comes and goes, and people are always swinging between emptiness and boredom. (1996) Over time, love makes Sufei has lose her self-concept to the point that she believes she is her husband's inferior in every respect. She views Ouyang Yu as her idealized reflection, blindly staying in love with him and sacrificing for him, which shows her loss of boundaries, identity, liberty, and equality.

The outcome of novel differs from that of Yan's mother's real-life love story. Although Yan's mother did not want the divorce, her marriage ultimately failed, and the divorce happened right after the Cultural Revolution ended when Yan was still a teenager. (Zhuang, 2006) Yan's mother never recovered from the pain of this divorce. There is clear evidence that Ouyang always wished to divorce Sufei, which echoes Yan Geling's own parent's story. One alternative interpretation of *The Epic of a Woman* is that it arguably emphasizes the greatness of love in ultimately breaking down barriers between partners from different social classes. This implies that Sufei is finally able to win Ouyang's love and appreciation after a lifetime of sacrifice. However, the end of the novel leaves everything open and ambiguous. There is much to explore beneath the contradiction of Sufei's seemingly lifelong tragic experiences and the theme of women's pursuit of freedom and independence. Her lifelong love and marriage struggle is symptomatic of women's liberation in the context of the Chinese communist revolution.

These small variations in the character between the book and movie have led to speculation that the female protagonist in this novel is a reflection of Yan Geling's mother's personal experiences. Yan's mother was a popular dancer in an art troupe in the revolutionary army when she was young.

This contrasts with Yan Geling's comment about Tian Sufei's choice: "Women do not care about the history, they only care about their emotional world. No matter how many times Sufei's love encounter fails, she still looks for her romantic partner. Thus, Sufei's pursuit of love is her epic story, and she is eager to be loved. Therefore, in her eyes, everything in her surroundings is a blur; she does not know what has happened in history." (Jin, 2009)

Chinese scholar Wu Xueli 吴雪丽 describes this outcome as depicting "gender utopia" (2012), where women could perceive the revolution as a way to receive love and to soften the gender conflict. Their relationships could be amended after a series of events, and the novel *The Epic of A Woman* closes with: "Ouyang Yu holds her hand in his arm more tightly (Yan, 2010)" Ouyang Yu's behavior evokes in Sufei, as well as the reader, the hope and expectation of a new paper of their life after sending their daughter to study abroad. This hope criticizes the cruel reality of love and marriage towards women.

This section revealed the struggle and confusion of Chinese women in their pursuit of love and marriage during the Chinese revolutions, where raises the awareness of women's independence and liberation. Most women's love and marriage were unequal and oppressive in modern society.

3. Love and Marriage: A Chinese Woman's Impasse

This section discusses the hopeless situation about Chinese women's love and marriage. The female heroine is the misinterpretations of women's liberation depicted by Yan Geling, laying bare the internal and external reasons which perpetuate traditional gender roles in Yan's books and render her heroines incapable of being liberated. This pressure to assume traditional Chinese gender roles was assumed by Sufei because of the pressure of culture, her immature personality, and her lack of education leads to a self-fragmented image.

3.1 A Traditional Role Model of Women

The female protagonist's submissive status in her marriage is strictly informed by her mother as a role model. The novel narrates that although her mother repudiated Ouyang Yu before her marriage, Sufei's mother fully accepts and acts out her role as an elderly mother regulating Sufei's affairs, such that she ensures that Sufei dutifully serves Ouyang as his wife (see Figure 3). This role of mother and wife follows centuries of Chinese customs and norms. As his mother-in-law, Sufei's mother takes her son-in-law into a privileged status, and teaches her daughter to prioritize Ouyang Yu above all else in the name of marital harmony. The novel narrates that earlier within their marriage, Sufei fights with Ouyang Yu in her effort to obtain reciprocal love and attention. When he is disloyal to her, she takes revenge by having an affair with Chen Yiqun, an actor from the Drama Troupe. At that time, Sufei's mother harshly scolds Sufei and tells her to be a good mother and wife: "If you destroy the family, I will never forgive you."

The female protagonist's mother does not scold her son-in-law for infidelity but rather harshly yells at her daughter to compromise for her family. In her youth Sufei reflects a strong commitment to the advancement of

women's freedom and is imbued with a consciousness of women's rights when her husband is disloyal to her. Sufei confronts Ouyang over his infidelity. However, Sufei's mother represents traditional Chinese culture and norms which she unyieldingly passes on to Sufei. These traditions obligate Chinese women to honor her parents-in-law, serve her husband, raise her children, and perform housework, and claim no other rights as a human being.

Moreover, Sufei's mother set a typical sacrificial model during the period of famine: she saves meat, vegetables, and oil for Sufei's family while she suffers from the pain of malnutrition, leading to her eventual death by starvation. Sufei's mother acts as a role model of sacrifice, never complaining about her own deprivation. Despite the fact that Sufei's generation was supposedly representing a new sense of freedom and liberation for women, Sufei's way of life is virtually indistinguishable from that of her mother's.

Sufei's mother scolds the heroine even as she teaches her to eat less and to save food for her husband and daughter. In Sufei's mother's view, Sufei does not adequately sacrifice as a wife and mother and instructs her to prioritize the family above all else, even to the extent of bearing her own starvation.

Sufei's mother also aids and abets Ouyang Yu's carefree and irresponsible lifestyle, no matter the cost to the family. Sufei's mother does not only sacrifice for the wellbeing of their family, but also in affirmatively upholding Ouyang Yu's impractical lifestyle and social image. Sufei's mother cannot discard the antiquated dogma that places higher value on the lives of men more than of women. To this end, she constantly urges the heroine Sufei to be a submissive wife and play a traditional role both practically.

3.2 The Heroine as a Chinese "Nora"

The section discusses how Ouyang Yu encouraging Sufei to be an independent woman by coining the term "Nora" to describe Sufei. The novel describes that Sufei believes that Sufei's rejection of her suitor Du Han and her intention of proving herself as independent for Ouyang. Nora embodies strong feminist independence despite living in an oppressive male-dominated social environment. Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* 玩偶之家 (1963) features a female protagonist called Nora 娜拉, who is referenced in *The Epic of a Woman*. After realizing her husband is not the one who she thought she knew, Nora divorces her husband. After *A Doll's House* became well-known, the protagonist Nora has become one of the most significant characters for feminist discussions during this era.

As Dong Na, a Chinese scholar, points out, Sufei is a rare character who seems to show great courage in pursuit of free love (2016). However, it does not demonstrate the female protagonist is a liberated woman by rejecting Du Han's proposal:

"You (Ouyang) said I have no bravery to become a Nora, I will let you realize my fearlessness to resist with a brigade commander. You said that all Chinese of four hundred million are to have matters decided from them. Today I will let you know I will become the exception as the four hundred million and first" (Yan Geling, 2010)

Despite Sufei's hard work to achieve financial independence without her husband, she is unliberated because of her cognitive and cultural limitations. The female protagonist understands her husband's betrayal and ill-treatment of her, yet she is willing to still compromise and play the role of the devoted and obedient wife.

As Chinese critic Peng Jixiang points out, "*The Epic of a Woman* is a rare work in that it represents a woman's love without any correlation to politics." (Peng, 2009) He argues that Sufei does not have gender equality because gender equality is the result of political awareness. Hong and Tao state that in *The Epic of a Woman*, women created by Yan Geling are not inferior, and they are independent. (Hong & Tao, 2015) However, it is these authors' view that the female protagonist's love reflects generally upon Chinese women's confusion in pursuing love. Love illusions manipulate women within marriage; Sufei is trapped in the illusion of her love, which restricts her into a traditional, patriarchal family role, rather than as an independent and free-thinking woman. Even when Sufei achieves a level of wisdom at around 50 years old, she still chooses to love Ouyang against all odds. That appears to be her free choice, and in the end, her story seems to some to be heroic. However, whether it arises from ignorance or from a conscious freedom of choice, it is tragic. My early discussion shows Sufei is still not inspired by the character of Nora's image because of her tolerance of gender violence caused by her one-sided love and marriage. There is a cognitive block to Sufei's belief that her pursuit of Ouyang's love is equivalent to her pursuit of equality and liberty. Love and marriage significantly represent a culture-wide hurdle to gender equality among all Chinese women because of overlapped pressures as discussed in early sections. Sufei's love is summarized by Liu Huiying 刘惠英, a Chinese critic, regarding Chinese women generally, "women's love in patriarchal society only leads to losing themselves." (2007) Overall, Sufei

becomes subordinate and loses her self-worth in marriage.

Moreover, any version of Nora living in China is bound for tragedy. Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) held a pessimistic view of Nora in the context of Chinese women's liberation. In 1924, Lu Xun wrote a story titled "What happens after Nora leaves home?" 娜拉走后怎样? This tale suggests that any woman as a Chinese version of Nora will eventually lead to misery and despair unless there is a structural and systemic reform in how women are perceived in Chinese society. (Chien Ying-Ying, 1995)

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the configuration of the protagonist's work and romantic love by analyzing her choice over whether to be loved or to love, and the life experiences through which she ultimately becomes a submissive wife in a Chinese modern context. It shows that a woman's love and marriage, partly caused by her cognitive limitation but stemming in large part from the unfairness and despair of her social environment. By employing the RRCK model, the paper represents the female protagonist's marital fate as that of a slave to her husband, fueled by a one-sided love. In the end, she is forced into an unsatisfying marriage governed by years of tradition and an uncaring husband.

The image of a sacrificing traditional wife represents an unliberated woman in the 20th century. This one-sided love relationship under the RRCK model shows a fragmented relationship between wife and husband. She is enslaved in the illusion of her love, which restricts her within the confines of a traditional, patriarchal family. This enslaved woman wants to be a traditional wife, being influenced by her mother and her husband within the context of the Cultural Revolution. Her mindless pursuit of love without consideration of her own needs causes her a lifetime of fragmentation and a loss of self-concept.

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6: 1-8, 38)

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Notes

¹ Chinese Land Reform Movement 土地改革, is a profound social revolution by the Chinese people under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to completely eradicate the feudal system of exploitation. During the democratic revolution, the Chinese Communist Party put forward a thorough agrarian revolution program and led the land reform in the liberated areas. It abolished the land system of feudal and semi-feudal exploitation and implement the land reform for farmers; confiscated land from landlords and distributed them to farmers to ensure all farmers have their land. For a detailed account of the "Land Reform Movement", see Wong, J. (1973). *Land Reform in the People's Republic of China: Institutional Transformation in Agriculture*.

² The Anti-Rightist Movement 反右运动 is the first large-scale mass counterattack rightist attack launched by the Communist Party of China (CPC) after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1957 and affected all walks of life. The anti-rightist movement was initiated by the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) who believed that the rightists were attacking wildly. Mao initially set 5000, people but it was later severely expanded. The main result was that an unprecedented large number of intellectuals and democratic parties who responded to the party's call and spoke out righteously were identified as "rightists" and were discriminated against and persecuted. For a detailed account of the "Anti-Rightist Movement", see Vidal, C. (2016). *The 1957-1958 Anti-Rightist Campaign in China: History and Memory* (1978-2014).

³ The "Great Leap Forward" movement 大跃进, refers to the extreme "Left" movement carried out by the Communist Party of China across the country from 1958 to 1960. In the "Second Five-Year Plan" of 1958, it was proposed to catch up with and surpass the United Kingdom in the output of major industrial products in 15 years or less. The steel output in 1958 should be based on the 5.35 million tons in 1957. Doubled to 10.7 million tons.

The nationwide movement of steelmaking and communalization of rural people began. In the Great Leap Forward, the high targets, blind command, and ostentatiousness have disrupted the order of the national economy, wasted a lot of manpower and material resources, caused a serious imbalance in the proportion of the national economy, and caused major losses to China's socialist construction. For a brief account of the "Great Leap Forward", see Hsu, I. C. Y. (1983). *Rise of Modern China*. Oxford University Press. p. 655.

⁴ The Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement, (referred to as "Down to the Countryside Movement", commonly known as "decentralization" and "jumping the queue") 上山下乡运动, is a political movement in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The government organizes tens of millions of urban educated youths (simplified as "Educated Youth") to settle and work in the countryside and "to receive re-educate from the poor, lower and middle peasants". For a brief account of "The Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement", see Bernstein, T. P. (1977). *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages. The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China*.

⁵ The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution 文化大革命, commonly known as the Cultural Revolution 文革, is a political movement in the history of the People's Republic of China. It took place in mainland China from May 16, 1966 to October 6, 1976. The Cultural Revolution was an all-round class struggle initiated by Mao Zedong, then chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (PRC), who mobilized thousands of Red Guards from top to bottom in mainland China. Because it lasted as long as ten years, it was also called "decade of turmoil" or "decade of catastrophe" by later generations, causing huge losses to Chinese politics, economy, and culture. For a brief account of the "Cultural Revolution", see Hsu, I. C. Y. (1983). *Rise of Modern China*. Oxford University Press. p. 689-706.

⁶ The "Great Leap Forward" movement 大跃进, refers to the extreme "Left" movement carried out by the Communist Party of China across the country from 1958 to 1960. In the "Second Five-Year Plan" of 1958, it was proposed to catch up with and surpass the United Kingdom in the output of major industrial products in 15 years or less. The steel output in 1958 should be based on the 5.35 million tons in 1957 and doubled to 10.7 million tons. The nationwide movement of steelmaking and communalization of rural people began. In the Great Leap Forward, the high targets, blind command, and ostentatiousness have disrupted the order of the national economy, wasted a lot of manpower and material resources, caused a serious imbalance in the proportion of the national economy, and caused major losses to China's socialist construction. For a brief account of the "Great Leap Forward", one may read Hsu, I. C. Y. (1983). *Rise of modern China*. Oxford University Press. p. 655.

⁷ Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House.

⁸ The Eighth Route Army 八路军, short for the Eighth Route Army of the National Revolutionary Army, was later renamed the Eighteenth Group Army of the National Revolutionary Army. It was an anti-Japanese armed force directly led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) during the Sino-Japanese War and one of the predecessors of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). For a brief account of the "Eighth Route Army", see Snow, E. (1994). *Red Star Over China: The Classic Account of the Birth of Chinese Communism*. Atlantic Books. pp. 411-413, 414, 417.

⁹ Refer to the description of the policy of socialist patriotism of the Communist Party of China pointed out by Zhao Suisheng (2004.) in *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford, California, USA: Stanford University Press, 28.

¹⁰ Original text: 您将成为正式领导人的妻子。您的社会地位过高是我无法企及的。

¹¹ Ibid. Original text: “一个聪明的女人总是在年轻的时候就为自己找到一个好男人。你真幸运！好男人找到了你。”

¹² Zhi Dan 之丹 (1996). 爱情·平等·契约, 社会·Love·Equality·Contract, Society (8), 36-37.

¹³ Fromm, E. (2000). *The Art of Loving: The Centennial Edition*. A&C Black.

¹⁴ Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “我看了很多年的歌剧。我从未见过像你这样充满活力的人。你的表现对我来说很轻松。”

¹⁵ Ibid. Original text: “女主角都汉的另一个吸引人的品质是，她始终忠于自己。”

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²¹ During the Cultural Revolution the "Nine Black Categories" were: Landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionaries, bad influences, right-wingers, traitors, spies, capitalist-roaders and (ninth) intellectuals

²² Ni Yan 倪妍 (2009). 为爱谱写的史诗—解读电视剧《一个女人的史诗》. 电影评介. An epic written for love—Interpretation of the TV series "A Woman's Epic", *Film Review*. 23, 74.

²² Ibid. Original text: “我想跟你结婚。”

²² Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “田苏菲是一位著名的表演者, 几乎扮演了所有角色, 因此在舞台上的表演次数排名第一”。

²² Ibid. Original text: “您在舞台上反应过度, 可以尝试保持更多的保留”。

²² Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “所以你也爱她和其他女人, 不是吗? 看到您与他们有太多谈论的话题, 我认为您不是一个试图用鼓掌来取悦公众的人。一旦任何女人恭维你, 你永远是第一个取悦他们的人”。

²² Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “有多少人饿死? 昨天刚刚向我打招呼的那个老人昨晚去世了……田苏菲, 这个国家怎么了? 有这么多的干部吹嘘地方经济的繁荣。他们无视群众的死亡。在淮北, 一个接一个的村庄空了。村民要么逃避饥荒要么饿死了……。”

²² Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “您的父亲受到惩罚并被迫在农村工作。现在, 他的社会地位低下, 除了我, 没有女人会爱上他。到那时, 我们可以搬到一个安静的村庄过上生活。”

²² Jin Liwei 金力维. “Yan Geling's *The Epic of a Woman*”, Jan. 2009. Accessed date: 2 Oct. 2020. <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2009-01-06/17392330824.shtml> Original text: 严歌苓在访谈中所言: “女人不在乎历史, 只在乎心里的情感世界。她的情感世界多少次被颠覆, 多少次寻找情感的疆土和版图。女人的情感史就是她的史诗。特别是苏菲这样重感情的人, 这么希望得到爱的女人, 其他的东西, 在她眼睛里模糊一片, 她不清楚外部的历史长河发生了什么。”

²² Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “田苏菲觉得这是欧阳与她之间婚姻生活的开始。黑暗加深, 树木和人物在黑夜中融化。欧阳瑜更紧紧地握住他的手臂。”

²² Ibid. Original text: “您整天在外面疯了, 我非常清楚……三个月来, 您无视女儿的课程。我的孙女就是我的生活。如果您破坏了家庭, 我将永远不会原谅你。”

²² Yan Geling 严歌苓 (2010). 一个女人的史诗. 作家出版社. *The Epic of a Woman*. The Writer Publishing House. Original text: “你们(欧阳)说我没有勇气成为娜拉, 我会让您意识到我的无畏无惧与旅长的抗衡。您说过, 四亿中国人都要由他们决定事情。今天, 我会让你知道, 我将成为四亿和第一。”

²² Liu Huiying 刘惠英 (2007). “妇女主义”: 五四时代的产物-五四时期章锡琛主持的《妇女杂志》, 南开学报(哲学社会科学版). “Feminism” as the Offspring of May Fourth Time: Focusing on Funu Zazhi. Edited by Zhang Xichen. 6: 1-8, 38.

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