Textual Analysis of the New Female Image in Su Qing's Works

Zhou Qing[1,2], Lim Chsing Chsing[3], Ngoi Guat Peng[1*]

[1]Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak, Malaysia

[2]Jining Experimental Primary School, Shandong Province, China

[3]Department of Chinese Studies, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

[*] Corresponding Author

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000497

Received: 24 July 2025; Accepted: 30 July 2025; Published: 25 August 2025

ABSTRACT

This study, based on feminist narratology, takes Su Qing's autobiographical novel Ten Years of Marriage and its sequel as core texts to explore the textual characteristics of the "new female image" constructed within them. Through a two-dimensional analysis, it is found that: the surface-level text focuses on daily life under the shadow of war, shaping the image of a citizen woman in the context of the occupied areas who clings to daily necessities and is estranged from the narrative of nation and home, standing in sharp contrast to the anti-Japanese war literature of the same period from the Liberated Are-as/Nationalist-controlled Areas; the deep-level text reveals the complex core of such an image, which not only presents practi-cal utilitarianism (such as economic dependence and moral compromise) born from survival dilemmas, but also exposes pro-found contradictions between tradition and modernity. This image construction is rooted in Su Qing's personal experience of the occupied areas and her identity as a citizen, reflecting the difficult trajectory of women's pursuit of subjectivity in a special his-torical period through techniques such as bodily narrative and economic rationality. The study thus defines the unique connota-tion of Su Qing's "new female" as a form of female writing that subverts the revolutionary discourse paradigm and is rooted in the logic of daily survival, providing an important perspective for examining gender politics against the backdrop of war.

Keywords: new female images; feminist narrative; collaborationist literature; ambivalence

INTRODUCTION

Based on the theory of feminist narratology, this paper focuses on Su Qing's autobiographical novel "Ten Years of Marriage" and its sequel "Ten Years of Marriage". Based on the unique context of Su Qing's generation as a female narrator, this study uses text analysis to systematically analyze the female image presented in the surface text of the two works and the core of female consciousness contained in the deep text. Through the dual analysis of the living conditions and spiritual world of the female characters in Su Qing's works, this study aims to clarify and define the unique connotation of her "new female image", and lay a solid analytical foundation for in-depth exploration of gender politics, the construction of female subjectivity and the writing characteristics of literature in the occupied areas under the background of war.

The "new female images" in Su Qing's feminist literary works refer to the unique portrayal of new female figures in the oc-cupied areas during that period. From a feminist narrative perspective, this portrayal not only

focuses on the overall charac-teristics of new female images in society but also explores them from both collective and individual angles. This results in new female images that are distinct from those depicted in anti-Japanese war literary works of the same era, such as those in the liberated areas and Kuomintang-controlled areas. According to feminist narrative theory, textual creation is influenced by both external and internal environments. Building on the analysis of female narrative self-expression under environmental influences (discussed in Chapter Four from the per-spective of internal and external environments), this study examines the surface-level texts—i.e., direct textual descrip-tions—of Su Qing's key works, Ten Years of Marriage and its sequel, to analyze the new female images they present.

In works such as Su Qing's Ten Years of Marriage, female characters lead ordinary urban lives, standing out as exceptions amid the surging revolutionary tide. Ten Years of Marriage and its sequel The Sequel to Ten Years of Marriage recount, through a first-person narrative, the daily trivialities of the protagonist's life over two decades—from marriage to divorce. The story unfolds in rural natal homes, extended in-law families, or small Shanghai households. Its plot centers on everyday events: marriage, childbirth, spousal quarrels, and conflicts between sisters-in-law. In The Sequel to Ten Years of Marriage, the protagonist experiences divorce, leaving home, entering the workforce, and starting a business. Yet non-daily-life events remain sparse; the focus shifts to the author's social interactions and the loneliness and boredom of single life. Compared to Ten Years of Marriage, the sequel reduces plot-driven content and emphasizes female inner desires. Regardless of prior events, the reflections converge on the loneliness, boredom, and self-doubt of a divorced woman in daily life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Depicting Life-oriented Female Images Amid the Trend of War

After Japan's invasion of China in 1931, literary organizations such as the League of Left-Wing Writers issued statements emphasizing literature as a weapon in the resistance. In 1938, the All-China Association of Writers and Artists Against Japanese Aggression was established, calling on writers to actively participate in the war effort. During this period, revolutionary war themes dominated literary works, with heroic narratives becoming mainstream and depictions of everyday life pushed to the margins.

Anti-Japanese war literature of the time presented diverse perspectives. Works like Zhou Erfu's The Great Wall and Li Erzong's New War and Peace portrayed Kuomintang military and political figures as heroic participants in the resistance. Mo Yan's Red Sorghum, Tan Ge's Wild Ridge, and You Fengwei's May Township Battle focused on grassroots resistance, including peasants, bandits, and local gentry. Deng Xian's The Soul of a Great Nation employed a documentary style to depict the realities of war.Women emerged as "female citizens" in these narratives, actively contributing to the resistance and becoming central figures in wartime literature. In Bai Lang's A Strange Kiss, the young revolutionary Li Hua sacrifices her life by jumping off a train; in Cao Ming's Aunt Ayan, a fisherwoman hangs herself so her son can fight without concern; in Shu Qun's A Secret Story, Qingzi endures the loss of her loved ones for the sake of the cause. These women broke away from the traditional roles of "virtuous wife and devoted mother," taking on the responsibility of defending the nation, embodying loyalty and faith in national liberation.

Ten Years of Marriage abounds in such intimate details of women's lives. The novel opens with extensive descriptions of uniquely female life experiences: "Four sedan bearers then closed the sedan door, secured the top, and the interior was nearly pitch-black—oppressively stifling… I sat alone, suffocated, with only a so-called 'sedan deity' for company… The sedan was hot, stuffy, and dark, with that eerie sedan deity lingering in the gloom" (Su, 1994). Another passage: "This pushing continued, time blurred. I felt dazed, stripped of fear or sorrow—only a numbness, as if my body no longer belonged to me. It was not pain, nor was it the urge to

defecate, but a colossal blockage stuck behind, refusing to budge. The white sheet had been removed; my lower body lay bare, neither cold nor shameful" (Su, 1994). The novel also dedi-cates chapters to the hardships of women managing households after marriage and navigating in-law relationships. Chapter 22, "Reuniting with Kin," for instance, chronicles the protagonist's troubles mediating between servants, her husband, chil-dren, and in-laws.

In depictions of war, most works focus on its impact on personal life. In Ten Years of Marriage, Chapter 17, "Chaos in the Maternity Ward," describes the protagonist Huaiqing giving birth to a baby girl amid war. The premature infant is forced to flee with her, but due to wartime conditions, Huaiqing cannot care for her, and the child dies at 21 months. Prior to this, Huaiqing's daily life had been relatively stable: conflicts with her sister-in-law, marital tensions, and a third-party interlude were all being resolved. Her sister-in-law had married, she and her husband had left the extended family to form a small household, and the third party had quietly departed. Yet the onset of war upended her life. After Chapter 20, marital suspi-cion reemerged, a new third party appeared, her husband's career shifted, and life became turbulent—ultimately leading to divorce. The family and marriage Huaiqing had nurtured for a decade collapsed. In The Sequel to Ten Years of Marriage, the war and occupation context crumbles Huaiqing's career; publishing articles under the occupation subjects her to identity scrutiny and potential imprisonment. These are all authentic portrayals of micro-individual lives under war.

Female writers contemporary with Su Qing, such as Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), Ding Ling, and Xiao Hong, each constructed female images within the context of war and social upheaval through their distinctive styles. In Love in a Fallen City, Zhang Ailing portrays Bai Liusu, a woman seeking survival and security in turbulent times, forming a contrast with Su Qing's Huaiqing, who struggles with household finances—highlighting different strategies women used to cope with reality. Ding Ling's When I Was in Xia Village depicts the awakening of women's political identity and collective participation, while Su Qing focuses more on the individual woman's everyday survival and emerging economic awareness.By comparison, the women in Su Qing's works may lack overt revolutionary fervor or grand patriotic sentiments, yet they are not absent from the wartime discourse of female representation. Su Qing's writing, grounded in the minutiae of daily life, vividly captures the lived realities of ordinary women during wartime, revealing both their struggle for survival and their longing for freedom. As Zhang Ailing once described her, Su Qing was "a flourishing beauty in troubled times"—and her documentary-style narratives outline a unique version of the new woman, rooted in lived experience and quiet resilience.

Depicting the New Female Image in Urban Civic Cultural Life

Su Qing's experience of urban life endows her female characters with the traits of new urban women. "She is a figure an-chored on the streets of Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, bustling about to buy fabric, purchase shoes, visit the dentist, and frequent beauty salons—busily engaged, vibrantly alive." (Wang Anyi, 1995, p. 56) Unlike rural folk who depend on land, urban life offers no such safety net: "I harbor no prejudice, but in this unreliable modern world, money and children are the only tangi-ble certainties." (Zhang, 1994). This firsthand experience leads her to characterize society as "unreliable," as Edward Gunn observes: "Beyond mothers and their children, she feels no empathy for others." (Gunn, 2006).

The urban backdrop of Su Qing's novels is Shanghai itself. Her female characters make no attempt to conceal their emphasis on material wealth and practical gains. Fu Xiaomei, for instance, marries into the Huang family due to financial hardship—a transaction fraught with humiliation that deepens her awareness of material necessity. Later, though she deems working as a tutor for the Dou family akin to becoming a high-society courtesan, she accepts the position because it secures her survival, eschewing the "starve rather than lose integrity" moral posturing. In Ten Years of Marriage (Sequel), Huaiqing, driven by emotional emptiness or

financial straits, has physical relationships with men like Tan Weiming, Zhao Ruiguo, and Colonel Xie. Yet, the implied author refrains from moral judgment on her "survival and love-seeking through men." Su Qing's hero-ines sharply reveal that "wealth defines the urban bourgeoisie and confers status" and that "the fundamental impetus of urban development is economic." (Li, 1999), Huaiqing's nearly involuntary "compliance" with material interests reflects a shrewd lifestyle—one that maximizes convenience and comfort, prioritizing a "comfortable and reasonable" existence. "In a place like Shanghai, money is absolutely indispensable." (Wang, 1995). The urgency of economic needs shapes the ethical choices of urban citizens.

In Dialogues Between Su Qing and Zhang Ailing, the ideal husband is no longer the traditional "scholarly talent" or the ro-mantic hero like Zhang Sheng or Jia Baoyu. Instead, he is a modern man "with knowledge and wealth not inferior to women (preferably superior), strong physique, masculine presence, and a face neither off-putting nor effeminate"—a reflection of the emerging urban bourgeoisie's demands. (Zhang, 1994). Huaiqing's experiences of pregnancy and abortion form a site of bodily resistance. Her declaration "I refuse to bear a son" subverts the literary tradition of "sacred mother-hood," redefining the body not as a reproductive tool but as a battlefield of power dynamics. Su Qing's choice to abort is not merely an exercise of bodily autonomy but a deconstruction of the patriarchal "family lineage" narrative. This transgressive perspective overturns Laura Mulvey's "gaze theory," liberating women from objectification and placing them in control of narrative power.

Beneath the urban ethos of moderation and pragmatism lies a tangible reality. Su Qing's novels focus on mundane life, with trivial daily affairs meticulously ordered. In the chapter "The Curse of the Small Household" from Ten Years of Marriage, she depicts the transition from a large Ningbo family to a small Shanghai household. Against the backdrop of rural culture, life is tranquil yet empty. The cramped quarters, tedious routines, and interpersonal strife of the Shanghai household erode the protagonist's enthusiasm, rendering her inner world vulgar. Su Qing's works emphasize the significance of ordinary hu-man needs—eating, drinking, and daily chores. Her male and female characters alike lead difficult lives: in 1940s Shanghai, "most men are not happy either; they struggle to even secure basic subsistence. I don't know what women envy in them." (Su, 1994). Under the pressures of life, ideals, ambition, and lofty aspirations seem distant. Buying groceries, stok-ing the stove, and scrubbing floors are necessities, yet occasional restaurant outings and movie nights offer respite. A woman might thrill at earning five yuan in royalties, fleetingly feeling "great."

Su Qing's novels brim with the vitality of life. The urban citizens within them immerse themselves directly in life, savoring its intensity and liveliness. Though their existence appears ordinary and trivial, it is tangible and vivid—so grounded that it leaves little room for cynicism. Within this world, limited freedom quietly takes root, and individual consciousness begins to trans-late into action, as individuals are no longer overshadowed by the collective. In this cultural context, Huaiqing submits writ-ings, creates, and runs her own publication, freely expressing her thoughts through words. In rural Ningbo, life feels oppres-sive. Huaiqing's return to her natal home portrays the transparency of rural life, where personal matters are entirely exposed to public scrutiny. Seeking to confide in her mother, she instead feels bored and annoyed. Her mother, prioritizing social decorum, sacrifices her own quality of life. (Su, 1994) Such life is inauthentic, superficial. After the August 13 Incident, Huaiqing flees to the countryside in search of romance but encounters rural astonishment at urban behavior. Wit-nessing her family's suffering in the dim, cold days, she resolves to escape: "I hurried away from my home. I could no longer endure it. I want to live, to laugh loudly or cry out. I can't be suffocated by this atmosphere any longer. I must escape!" (Su, 1994). Huaiqing's flight signals the countryside's loss in competition with the city, affirming the vitality and creativity of urban life. In the contrast between urban and rural cultures, women attuned to urban civilization incline toward tangible urban life. Su Qing's female characters achieve self-balance—they possess talent, yet when survival requires no exertion of it, they do not seek to disrupt the status quo.

Mapping Su Qing's Realistic Experiences of Personal Survival and Development Su Qing was a mischievous child, growing up freely under the doting care of her grandmother and other elders. She excelled academically and was praised by her paternal grandmother. Her grandfather, a successful candidate in the imperial examinations of the Qing Dynasty, held high prestige in the local community. In high school, she was hailed as the "gifted literary goddess," and in college, she was crowned the "Queen of Ningbo." She brought vitality to the lives of those around her. Dur-ing her college years, she saw herself as a dazzling peony, with others merely serving as green leaves in contrast—a reflec-tion of her genuine psyche. (Su, 1994)

At 14, Su Qing became engaged to Li Qinhou and married him at 21. Pressured by an unplanned pregnancy and social expectations, she left university—a silent suffering that marked the beginning of her literary path. Submitting to Analects magazine was her desperate hope for balance. Her breakthrough essay, "Giving Birth to Sons and Raising Daughters," restored her sense of purpose. Despite her husband's opposition, Her literary long march began with essays such as Experiences of Being a Daughter-in-Law, My Own Room and Women in the Office.

In 1944, Su Qing divorced at age 31. That same year, Ten Years of Marriage was published to great success, reprinted five times within months and thirty-six times overall—a rare achievement in Republican-era literary history. As a single mother in Shanghai, Su Qing toiled day and night to support her family. Despite her literary achievements, she still yearned for a lifelong companion. After her divorce, she courageously confronted life's hardships, and her rich life ex-periences deepened her focus on family and marriage in her writing. Her works, including Collection of Wanjin, A Decade of Marriage, and Food and Love, earned her titles such as "the Most Acclaimed Female Writer in Shanghai's Literary Circles" and, alongside Zhang Ailing, the shared honor of "the Twin Pillars of the Literary World."

By 1949, Su Qing vanished from the literary scene, as did the straightforward, passionate woman who "must voice her dis-content." Her long literary path seemed to reach an end. Her once-sharp prose and most authentic emotions faded, leaving readers to trace the experiences that had forged such a writer. Su Qing's 69-year life mirrored the marital lesson of Xiong Xiling and Mao Yanwen: Everyone's choices and life paths, though seemingly predestined by hidden forces or shaped by chance, follow an underlying trajectory of fate. What appears bizarre on the surface is, in fact, governed by reason and logic. … Life holds countless possibilities and uncertainties, yet one can only walk the path that is uniquely their own. (Liu, 2009). Su Qing's works were a mirror of her own expe-riences; her life journey can be glimpsed through a decade of marriage and its sequels.

In 1927, 14-year-old Su Qing was betrothed to 14-year-old Li Qinhou. On June 16, 1935, she published her debut es-say, Giving Birth to Sons and Raising Daughters, under the pseudonym Feng Heyi—meaning "the harmonious song of man-darin ducks and phoenixes, and the arrival of a phoenix." Yet her life fell short of this ideal: "Except for characters in novels, few people live up to their names; often, the opposite is true. A name represents a need, a lack. Nine out of ten poor people are named 'Golden Treasure,' 'Fortune,' or 'Prosperity.'" (Jin Hongda & Yu Qing, 1992, p.48). Marriage and childbirth marked a turning point in Su Qing's life. The struggles and sufferings that followed spurred her writing. In 1943, during winter break, she married Li Qinhou and began incorporating marital life into her works. By early 1944, Su Qing and Li divorced, ending their decade-long marriage in vain, with all affection and ties severed. That July, A Decade of Marriage was released, its vivid depictions of marital life a direct reflection of Su Qing's real experiences

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Su Qing's autobiographical novel Ten Years of Marriage consists of 24 chapters, primarily recounting the

heroine's life ex-periences over a decade without a clear plotline. The first three chapters depict the marriage and post-marital life, including the wedding, the wedding night, and the heroine's discovery of her husband's infidelity. Starting from Chapter 4, the narrative shifts to the heroine returning to school and engaging in a romance with another man, which ends after she becomes pregnant. Chapter 6 describes the childbirth process, while Chapters 7-8 narrate the tediousness of rural life. The entire work adopts a diary-style structure, characterized by a casual, aimless flow of events. Psychological depictions and generalized statements connect the fragmented episodes. The sequel Ten Years of Marriage: The Sequel follows the same narrative approach but reduces real-life observation segments, focusing more on character psychology and dialogue. During the Anti-Japanese War, the unique social context endowed the "new female image" with more distinct characteristics of the era. When comparing the new female images in literary works of this period with those in Su Qing's Ten Years of Marriage and Ten Years of Marriage: The Sequel, the following differences in their constituent elements are primarily evident.

Portraying Women Struggling to Survive in the Environment of Occupied Areas

Su Qing entered a period of creative upsurge in the 1940s, when Shanghai was an occupied area—a "time of oppressive at-mosphere, a place where the 'soil and water' were particularly inhospitable" (Fu, 2003). "Over one-third of writers left Shanghai, while those remaining in the 'isolated island' [of Shanghai] were forced into seclusion amid the increasingly perilous political environment. Many writers were arrested by the enemy puppet regime: for example, three days after Japa-nese forces occupied the foreign concessions, Xu Guangping was arrested, followed by progressive writers such as Lu Bao, Xia Mianzun, Ke Ling, Li Jianwu, and Kong Lingjing" (Fu, 2003). Under Japanese rule, with literary and ideological expression strictly constrained, most writers in the occupied areas left Shanghai. Those who stayed had to distance themselves from politics and focus instead on daily life. "Their primary concern was survival, which meant that the boundaries between collaboration and resistance became blurred as people weighed com-pliance with or rejection of the occupiers' control" (Andrew, 1994). History and politics no longer dominated public concern or literary representation; instead, the "individual" life emerged prominently in this interstice of history (Ei-leen, 1994).

Amid social upheaval, Su Qing and other writers personally experienced the sorrow and fear of losing their homes, with no foreseeable future. The order of life could be shattered at any moment, so they prioritized immediate, short-term, and direct interests. In Ten Years of Marriage, Huaiqing endures "childbirth in a delivery room," "fleeing from war," and "taking refuge in the countryside" during the "August 13 Incident" in Shanghai. Through her experiences, we glimpse a more authentic facet of history: the position of the individual in history, the fluidity of personal honor and loss, and the coexistence of kindness and weakness, baseness and greatness in human nature during war. "These chapters could have been more brilliant, but under current circumstances, many scruples prevent me from speaking freely" (Su, 1994). In times of war, human panic, selfishness, and powerlessness—yet desperate instinct to survive—are laid bare more thoroughly than in normal cir-cumstances.

As one caught in the fate of a "marginalized ant," the writing of suffering transcends mere recollection of pain-ful history; it carries a deeper psychological analysis. When Xian accidentally boards the train while seeing Zhou Minghua off, and Huaiqing anxiously awaits his return, "Nanny Lin rolls her eyes and says to me: 'Could it be that Master took the chance to board the train himself? When disaster strikes, who cares about husband and wife?'" (Su, 1994). Un-just war is inherently irrational; using normal human logic to judge actions in abnormal states is often inapplicable. In the crowding on the ship, Huaiqing witnesses how the instinct for survival overrides fear, kinship, and social hierarchy, exposing the most primitive layer of human nature. Virtue diminishes drastically amid chaos. Though humans are higher beings than animals, we remain rooted in our animalistic nature. At the critical juncture of life and death, everyone prioritizes self-interest over ethical responsibilities. During the escape, "people wail shrilly—no love, no compassion. Even for one's dearest

spouse or kin, in moments of crisis, only resentment remains". The will to survive trumps all; no one uses their body to embody moral teachings, leaving only animalistic survival of the fittest. The raw reality of daily life reveals the cruel side of human nature, with no grand acts of heroism—ordinary people's "heroism" is built on sacrifices far exceeding the act itself. Men crowd onto the ship alongside women and children, each fending for themselves. "Equality" manifests here in a bitterly ironic form, rarely seen in daily life. For refugees, lives are equal—no distinctions of rank or status. When one struggles desperately for survival, there is no time to concern oneself with the purity of the soul.

Su Qing does not harshly satirize or criticize the selfish, anti-moral acts during the escape. She adopts an attitude of under-standing toward all actions in chaos, recognizing that small people, unable to control their own fates, inevitably engage in undignified behavior. These trivial matters evoke sorrow, for everyone is inevitably part of this reality. Human nature, a blend of bestiality and divinity, has both sublime and primitive aspects. She forgives the selfishness and forgetfulness of people in war, believing that all human actions should start from the individual—only after satisfying personal needs can one consider altruism. Human life begins with the satisfaction of material needs; in war, people cannot secure their due rights or material benefits, so their only recourse is to preserve their right to survival, even though self-anesthesia. Huaiqing's per-sonal experience of fleeing war profoundly influences her later life: her calm acceptance of changes in her marital life and her active pursuit of self-sufficiency are partly rooted in the behaviors she witnessed during the escape.

The urgency of survival in harsh environments: After Huaiqing and Xiaomei divorce, they endure a period of hardship. The pressing need to survive forces them to adopt a "make-do" mentality, lowering their standards for personal virtue. As Eileen Chang wrote in "On Su Qing": "Living on and living well in the present is as difficult as 'hacking open a path between life and death with bare hands'" (Eileen, 1994). In such trying circumstances, the female characters in the novel indeed exhibit a "reckless" determination to survive, demonstrating immense vitality and survival wisdom.

A Profound Reflection on the Characteristics of Modern "Small Women" in the Workplace

In wartime literature, female characters were often depicted as serving the war effort. While many women directly participated in the war, some were portrayed through more specialized roles. Works such as Xu Shu’s The Wind Blows, Qiu Zhang’s Encounter with the China Spy Network, Jing Youlin’s The Spy’s Wife, Dong Meikan’s The New Shop Owner, Mao Dun’s Corrosion, Zhang Ailing’s Lust, Caution, and Ding Ling’s When I Was in Xia Village all feature female spy figures during the War of Resistance. Whether directly involved in combat or serving as spies, these female characters were ultimately portrayed with a clear purpose: to serve the war.

In Su Qing's works, there are also depictions of women's careers and workplace experiences. Compared to narratives of serv-ing the war or seeking self-worth, the women in Su Qing's works are "small women" in the workplace. In Ten Years of Mar-riage, Su Huaiqing enters society as a "deserted wife." Initially after her divorce, she resolves to support herself through struggle: "I can still fight on my own; I could even do hard labor to earn money to raise my children. He can't deprive me of my right to be a mother!" (Su, 1994). However, after experiencing the hardships of a single woman's sur-vival, she retreats and accepts the first sum of money from a man (Premier Jin). When deliberating over accepting this mon-ey, her reflection on her "deserted wife" predicament and self-pity play a decisive role—though she consoles herself that she will repay Premier Jin in the future. In reality, once her basic survival needs are met, deeper desires for a more comfortable life emerge: "Though I am a woman, my palms are rougher than theirs. I felt ashamed—this was my first time feeling ashamed of labor. I was awed by the vanity of the city and gradually descended into decadence" (Su, 1994).

When Huaiqing first seeks employment after her divorce and faces cold rejection, her thoughts turn to: "What is the point of a woman sitting in a strange room if a man entering doesn't glance at her, startle, then rush over with eager, ill-intentioned flattery? It is an absolute insult" (Su, 1994). This reflection has nothing to do with the job at hand, but instead reveals a woman's insecurity and wounded vanity in daily life. In the workplace, Su Huaiqing actively leverages—and even constructs—her "weak woman" status to secure "conveniences" for survival. She often feigns a feminine demeanor to seek help from men. By labeling herself a "deserted wife" and "fragile woman," she portrays herself as a vulnerable figure struggling for survival, masking her desires as mere "humble yearning for existence" (Su, 1994). This becomes her starting point to persuade others—and herself—while completely overlooking the loss of self-respect and personal dignity in her actions.

In Su Qing's works, modern workplace women still embody traditional feminine traits of fragility and helplessness. Her pur-suit of "bearing sons" persists in the female characters of her works. After marriage, Su Qing intended to be a virtuous wife and good mother, but because her first child was a daughter, she faced disdain and discrimination from her husband's family. In Giving Birth to Sons and Raising Daughters, Su Qing writes: "One or two daughters may be tolerable, but three or four become a nuisance; if the number exceeds four, the mother suffers!" (Su Qing, 1994, p. 227). Having four daughters led to her husband's anger and in-laws' coldness, until her fifth child, a son, was born. The fate of her four daughters left Su Qing submissive, shattering the "myth of motherhood." In Ten Years of Marriage, to "give birth to a son earlier next year," the protagonist Huaiqing is instructed "not to breastfeed herself," depriving her of her maternal responsibilities. Even after giv-ing birth to a son, her marital relationship had already broken. In Su Qing's mind, a "mother" was not the mother of "chil-dren," but only of "sons"; a woman who bore only daughters was nearly unworthy of being called a mother, labeled instead a "clay kiln."

In the latter half of Ten Years of Marriage, Chongxian pursues new romances, straining the marital relationship. Huaiqing, for the sake of her children, is willing to compromise. Though she knows her husband's heart has strayed, her children re-main her priority: "From then on, I knew Xian was unreliable. To protect my children's happiness, I must endure—there is no mother who abandons her children midway…!" Here, children become sufficient reason to abandon hope. Huaiqing even writes to her in-laws, pleading emotionally: "Your daughter-in-law is so unlucky; life is not worth clinging to, death not feared—but what of the infant still in swaddling clothes?" Yet she ultimately refuses to compromise her marriage. However, even in the face of intense maternal love, when leaving the marriage, she chooses sepa-ration from her children, believing this to be "for the children." In the decision to divorce, her "painful sacrifice" of parting with her children relegates her once-deep maternal love to "storage," making motherhood a water without a source and tree without roots. This focus on "son-preference" in female images clearly conflicts with the new women's pursuit of gender equality and fails to reflect the "great love" consciousness amid revolution.

In Su Qing's depictions, Su Huaiqing and the young mistresses—women who appear outwardly free and independent—harbor profound inner sorrow. In her works, the "strong, independent women" of modern workplaces are absent, replaced instead by omnipresent helplessness and exhaustion. A passage in Ten Years of Marriage states: "Speaking of the pleasure between men and women, it lasts but a moment—ten minutes at most—yet it brings ten months of pregnancy and ten years of toil in rais-ing a child. She even deems childbirth the great-est disadvantage for women: "Raising children is arduous, time-consuming, and unending. Without help, it is truly over-whelming". This sentiment is not merely a reflection of female experience but also a tearing down of the "myth of the ideal mother"—the myth of a mother who endures all hardships and sacrifices all interests. The myth of motherhood collapses in Su Qing's works; the "selfless motherhood" becomes an illusion, while the lesser-acknowledged weakness within motherhood is brought to the fore.

Enriching the Contradictory Female Images under the Trend of Independent Women

The image of the "new woman" is characterized by the pursuit of gender equality and an independent, female-centered identity. In works such as Yu Ru's Distant Love and Xiao Jun's August in the Countryside, women awaken to self-awareness and grow into heroines. In Kong Jue's The Story of a Woman's Liberation and Liu Baiyu's Sun Caihua, female characters transform their tragic destinies through opportunities brought about by social change.For example, in The Story of a Woman's Liberation, the protagonist Zhe Juying was originally a child bride, burdened with heavy labor, mistreated by her husband, and oppressed by her father-in-law. After joining the Red Army and becoming a women's cadre, she escapes this life of hardship. She receives land and is exempted from taxes, and her father-in-law's attitude shifts dramatically ,he not only supports her revolutionary work but also joins her in opposing her husband's abuse. This type of female figure breaks free from traditional family constraints, embraces revolution in the search for selfhood, and stands as a model for female characters in wartime literature.

In works such as Su Qing's Ten Years of Marriage, the new female images lack a consciousness of war and exhibit contra-dictions in their pursuit of gender equality and self-independence. The women in Su Qing's works detest the traditional divi-sion of labor ("women manage the household, men earn a living"), yet they yearn to return to family life after facing adver-sities. In Ten Years of Marriage, Huaiqing, after giving birth and resting at home, grows weary of her monotonous life, Thus, she attempts to escape this life by seeking work or returning to her natal home, but all such escapes fail, and she remains trapped in daily routines. In Chapter 16, "Pettiness," Huaiqing, confined to trivial domesticity, becomes increasingly petty: she suspects her husband's infidelity, the maid's theft, and even doubts her-self, rendering life utterly joyless. A telling passage describes her husband "Xian" tenderly stroking her head and praising her, yet she "remains as wooden as a block, only thinking of something dull and irrelevant: 'I notice the kitchen rag is torn. It's better to take the nicer rag from the bedroom down, use your foot-washing towel as the bedroom rag, and give me your hand towel for foot-washing. I myself…' Before she finishes, he yawns and turns away, dampening all enthusiasm". Here, the author uses mundane, rambling dialogue to highlight the dullness of daily life, which is also met with lucid self-awareness: "But I feel life is gradually losing its luster; sometimes, in stillness, my heart is filled with an inde-scribable melancholy". Similar reflections appear in Su Qing's other works.

In traditional female imagery, women are rooted in the daily domestic sphere, while men dominate the non-domestic world. This divergence shapes gendered traits, temperaments, fates, and social statuses. Many "flaws" attributed to wom-en—mediocrity, laziness, frivolity, and servility—simply reflect their confined perspectives, whereas men, engaged in crea-tive work beyond the domestic realm, are perceived as transcendent, innovative, and brave. Over time, this division was normalized into norms like "men work outside, women manage the household." One path for women to escape this entrap-ment is to break free from the "iron house" of domesticity. Su Qing demonstrates a nascent understanding of how daily life con-strains women's vitality, creativity, and destiny. However, unlike new women who explicitly pursue independent personhood and gender equality, Su Qing more inadvertently records her personal experiences, rendering her insights authentic but not necessarily profound. When her domestic life is violently disrupted by external forces (war, divorce), the sudden exposure to the world and loss of domestic shelter trigger a sense of insecurity, leading her works to reveal an acceptance of women returning to the family and rooting in domesticity. In The Continuation of Ten Years of Marriage, after Huaiqing divorces and enters society, she longs to remarry and rebuild a family: "Women are meant to care for their children and husbands. Who would want to 'strive! strive! struggle! struggle!' as Uncle Gu said? I'd rather men and women never achieve equality; I'd rather women remain family slaves forever". The entire Continuation is steeped in the melancholy of a divorced woman's unfulfilled desire to remarry, with little focus on her pursuit of knowledge or career; instead, it details her interactions with various men and her unrequited longing for a good partner. Liu Siqian's critique of Huaiqing in Ten Years

of Marriage and The Continua-tion (autobiographical works of Su Qing) captures this contradiction: "Huaiqing's misfortune, in a sense, stems from her 'transitional era'—new trends awakened her hopes but failed to provide the conditions to realize them, turning hope and pursuit into luxuries mocked by reality" (Liu, 1993). Thus, Su Qing's works unconsciously depict a weariness of traditional domestic life, yet a lack of courage to escape it, with remarrying and returning to the family becoming her personal pursuit. This duality endows Huaiqing with both traditional traits of female dependence on men and the unconscious longing of a new woman to break free from the domestic sphere.

The body—especially the female body—assumes greater significance in the apparatus of consumption, with its symbolic connotations often constructed by men. In the novel, when Huaiqing is invited to dinner with Prime Minister Jin, she delib-erately chooses a plain black cheongsam, resisting the male gaze that commodifies female bodies. As Liao Shuwu notes, "In the tide of consumption, the body is fully adorned, completing its 'stylish valuation'… When the body's objectification reaches its peak, it transforms into the 'most marketable consumer good'" (Liao, 2011). Huaiqing scorns the "trendification" of the body, as excessive modernity risks objectification, weakening women's resistance. In 1930s Shanghai, a metropolis dominated by consumer culture, the visualization and commodification of the female body were products of male voyeuristic desire, which Su Qing deeply despised. The novel's Miss Qiu, vain and enjoying male attention, gradually falls into the trap of male "visual hunting": "In a world structured by sexual imbalance, the pleasure of looking is split into active/male and passive/female. The decisive male gaze projects his fantasies onto the stylized female form" (Li & Yang, 1995). Miss Qiu, disfigured by a failed nose job, is abandoned by her cohabiting partner for failing to satisfy male physical fantasies. As Baudrillard observes, "Women are 'consumed' through sexual liberation, and sexual lib-eration is 'consumed' through women" (Ge & Song, 2005). Sex, as a veiled form of bodily autonomy, risks being controlled by men and subsumed into consumption during women's bodily liberation—a critical dimension of Su Qing's examination of female independence, which is deeply reflected in Huaiqing's romantic entanglements.

Huaiqing, a divorced woman with a decade of marriage, longs for true love that unites body and soul, yet repeatedly faces disillusionment. For instance, Tan Weiming, a learned Soviet student, seduces her with eloquence and flattery, only to reveal himself as a hypocrite who mocks her health after satisfying his desires, prioritizing his own physical safety and pleasure over her dignity. Subsequent men she meets also pretend to love her while treating her as a mistress: Director Zhao Ruiguo, a man with sexual dysfunction due to chronic masturbation, pursues an extramarital affair for thrill, then abandons her and pays for their "romantic experience." Even Colonel Xie, a literary figure, lures her with a house and the title "wife," only to rape her: "Soldiers are unworthy of love. They don't know how to please others, only demand their own satisfaction. Perhaps they're accustomed to prostitutes—taking her abruptly, then discarding her". Most men in Su Qing's works are vulgar, obese, short, and despicable, subverting the phallocentric ideal of strong, powerful men. As Ge Hongbing and Song Geng note, "In the realm of consumption, the identities of consumer and consumed are fluid, interchangeable, and dynam-ic—both roles coexist. Only in extreme cases like prostitution, where the body is consumed, do these identities split: money differentiates the consumer from the consumed, granting one body control over another—reducing one to a tool of the other".

Su Qing led a turbulent life, marked by a broken marriage and solitary efforts to build a career in her later years. Her works, known for their bold portrayal of female private life and desires, were once dismissed as "pornographic literature." Furthermore, due to her association with the Wang Puppet Regime during the Anti-Japanese War—including holding a position in the collaborationist government—she was labeled a "traitorous writer" after the war and remained marginalized in literary history until renewed academic interest emerged in the late 1980s.

Her representative work Ten Years of Marriage and its sequel depict women's struggles and dilemmas between

traditional values and emerging ideas of independence. At the heart of her writing lies a distinctive narrative of economic awakening: through meticulous depictions of household budgeting (such as bargain shopping or reusing candy boxes), Su Qing parodies the “virtuous wife and devoted mother” ideal and exposes the unpaid "ghost labor" and invisible exploitation of women in domestic spaces. Her writing career itself reflects a constant negotiation between economic capital and gendered power structures. The recurring scenes of "buying rice" evolve from the humble act of counting grains to a confident act of measuring, symbolizing a shift from economic dependence to the awakening of female agency.Everyday spaces like the kitchen become arenas of survival strategy and creative resistance, while writing in cafés transforms private experiences into public narratives. In doing so, Su Qing reconstructs gendered space, breaks through the closed domestic economy, and reclaims female subjectivity.

In the novel, whether educated, powerful, or both, men adopt the stance of consumers. Tan Weiming (“free riding”), Zhao Ruiguo (“buying sex with money”), and Colonel Xie (“luring with a house and money”) all use money to objectify women; extramarital relationships are sustained or dissolved at men’s discretion. Huaiqing, trapped in these “consumption traps,” eventually sees through men’s hypocrisy. By tearing up checks and terminating pregnancies, she severs the consum-er-consumed dynamic, asserting her uncompromising female stance. However, her “poor judgment in relationships” also reveals the identity anxiety of divorced women adrift outside the family. In textual interpretations of Ten Years of Marriage, early tabloids focused on Su Qing’s bodily narratives, sparking negative perceptions. Yet, as influential critiques emerged, societal analysis deepened, establishing her professional identity and lit-erary status, attracting elite literati, professional writers, and ordinary citizens. Her identity as a female writer and the nov-el’s female self-voicing stance drew diverse female readers during the occupation: young professionals, modern urban women, educated housewives, and even teenage students. Su Qing also hosted women’s columns and a “reader mailbox” in Guanghua Daily, engaging readers on women’s issues, society, and life. The tabloid readership and broad female audience highlight the “pop-ular” and “mass” dimensions of her works. Thus, the female image in Ten Years of Marriage, though controversial due to its departure from mainstream contexts, gained literary recognition and contemporary female acceptance. Re-examining Huaiqing’s image through the lens of feminist narratology reveals her breakthroughs lie not only in plot but also in narrative mechanisms. This fusion of economic rationality, bodily politics, and linguistic experimentation presages the multiple possibilities of contemporary female writing.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of new female images in Su Qing's works, against the backdrop of the transformation of social structure in the late Qing Dynasty, the emergence of ideas advocating freedom and equality, and the formation of new female images that began to replace traditional female images and frequently appeared in literary works, aligns with the overall development trend of new female images based on her observations of collective life in occupied areas, her immersion in Shanghai's urban life, and her personal experiential expression. In the surface-level texts of Ten Years of Marriage and its sequels, they reflect the image of modern career women who adapt to daily life under the trend of war, which is connected to her own life experi-ences. However, an analysis of the deeper texts reveals that the depiction of daily life under the trend of war reflects the sur-vival struggles of women in occupied areas; the new female images shaped by Shanghai's civilian cultural life still retain the traditional "small woman" characteristics of weakness; and the reflection of Su Qing's personal experiences in her works mirrors the contradictory mindset of independent women amid their evolving trends.

REFERENCES

1. Andrew Rigby (1994). Justice and Reconciliation After Violence, trans. Liu Cheng, Yilin Press.
2. Entwistle, J. (2005). The Fashionable Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory (Trans. by Gao, Y.). Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press.
3. Fu Lei. (2003). Zhang Ailing's Novels in Zhang Ailing and Su Qing, Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.
4. Ge, H., & Song, G. (2005). The Politics of the Body. Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore.
5. Gunn, E. J. (2006). The Neglected Muse (Trans. by Zhang, Q.). New Star Press.
6. Jin Hongda & Yu Qing (1992). Collected Works of Zhang Ailing (Vol. 4), Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.
7. Liu Yiqing (2009). Red Dust Past: Legends of Literati Marriages in the Republican Period, Orient Press.
8. Li, J. (1999). Consciousness of daily life and urban citizen philosophy: On the spiritual characteristics of Shanghai school fiction. Literary Review (6), 45.
9. Li, H., & Yang, Y. (1995). Selected Essays on Foreign Film Theory. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.
10. Liao, S. (2011). The Aesthetics of the Body and the Consumer Context. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore.
11. Liu, S. (1993). Nora's Discourse: The Mental Journey of Modern Chinese Women Writers. Shanghai Culture Publishing House.
12. Su, Q. (1994). Ten Years of Marriage Continued. In Collected Works of Su Qing (Vol. 1). Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House.
13. Su Qing (1994). Edited by Yu Qing, Xiao Lan, and Yi Xin, Collected Works of Su Qing (Upper Volume), Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House.
14. Zhang, A. (1994). On Su Qing. In Zhang Ailing and Su Qing. Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.
15. Zhang, A. (1994). On Su Qing. In Collected Works of Su Qing (Vol. 2) (Eds. by Yu, Q., et al.). Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House.
16. Zhang, A., & Su, Q. (1994). A Conversation Between Su Qing and Zhang Ailing. In Zhang Ailing and Su Qing. Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House.