Coda: Women’s Journals through the Prism of Late Qing Fiction

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My recent book, Fiction’s Family: Zhan Xi, Zhan Kai, and the Business of Women in Late Qing China, examines three novels in which women’s journals play a crucial role: Nü yuhua (Female jail flower), published in 1904 by Wang Miaoru, Nüwa shi (The stone of goddess Nüwa), by Haitian Duxiaozi, published in the same year, and Nüzi quan (Women’s power) by Siqi Zhai (pseudonym of Zhan Kai, 1861–1911?), published in 1907.1 These novels are part of a much larger group written specifically for women readers between 1904 and 19072 and they significantly reflect the changing relationship between women and fiction at this time. Whereas traditional fiction was often risqué and hence mostly off limits for proper women, reformers of the late Qing obviously hoped to upgrade the form and use it as a vehicle of social change.3 In this fiction, the female figure engaging with women’s journals at the time would become an object of public discussion and public scrutiny.

Wang Miaoru’s Female Jail Flower is generally accepted as the work of a woman. After a few dramatic adventures, one of the novel’s heroines, Sha Xue-mei, comes across a group of women dedicated to the idea of improving the world from a women’s point of view. One among the group is an editor of a women’s paper (nübao), whose title is unspecified. The magazine’s rhetoric is uncompromising in its call for improving conditions for women, including by violent means. It is also quite anti-male. When a part-time contributor to the magazine falls ill, Xuemei steps in. Eventually she writes a whole novel, Choushu (The book of revenge), for the newspaper. As events in the novel unfold, Xuemei and her group of radical agitators take their own lives after an abortive attempt to improve conditions for women.

Female Jail Flower casts women’s journals in a rather ambiguous light. It is partly thanks to them that Xuemei acquires the ideology to cope with her desperate situation. Although she is presented as a positive character, the novel is

1 Widmer, Fiction’s Family. Women’s Power is the second of two reformist novels by this author, both published in the same year: the title of his earlier novel is Zhongguo xin nühao (China’s new heroines).
2 For a fuller list of such titles see Aying, Wanqing, 120–33.
3 See David Wang, Fin-de-siècle Siecle, 23–30.
clearly of the view that she can never fit comfortably in the real world surrounding her. Her methods are too violent, her point of view too uncompromising, and her attitudes toward men too negative. The novel sees more of a future for another female character, Pingquan, who is depicted as more gracious and ladylike and who is able to contemplate marriage, even though she does not finalize plans to marry before the novel ends. The text suggests that education and medicine are safer careers for women than journalism. Journalism, the novel seems to say, can raise important ideas, but it cannot always control the way women readers will respond, and it can lead them into dangers that could threaten their lives.

The plot of the second novel, *Goddess Nüwa’s Stone*, is quite different, but the attribution to women of explosive reactions to women’s periodicals is similar. The point is made already in the first chapter. There, a seemingly peaceful woman, Qian Yifang, is provoked by her reading of European history to write a poem and article and submit them to a journal entitled *Nü xuebao* (Journal of women’s learning). The story of Cleopatra, in particular, rouses her to action. She is outraged to think that China’s current plight is related to men’s predominance in positions of power. Were women to have the right to hold office, they could do a much better job of ruling the country and bringing it out of its current state of humiliation, she believes. Qian’s two pieces are quoted in the text, the poem in full, the essay in part. Their radical tone is typical of articles in the actual women’s journal of this name (the *Journal of Women’s Learning* discussed in Chapter 10), but the writings are invented. Soon Qian Yifang disappears from the unfinished novel and a crew of amazons appears. With this move, *Goddess Nüwa’s Stone* transfers the action to a more fantastic plane.

Although *Female Jail Flower* never provides a title for the magazine that energizes Sha Xuemei, the fictional magazine she reads and writes for must have been more or less like the *Journal of Women’s Learning* in *Goddess Nüwa’s Stone* in its uncompromisingly radical stance and its unwillingness to work with men. Both novels pose a contrast between more and less radical strategies, and they assign the fictional women’s periodicals and the space they provide to the more radical side. Without these periodicals as outlets for women’s frustrations, it seems, neither crew of amazons would have been as fully activated.

In the third novel, *Women’s Power*, there is again a contrast between radical and peaceful strategies, and again this is one in which women’s journals play a big role. Unlike Zhan Kai’s earlier novel of the same year, entitled *Zhongguo xin nühao* (China’s new heroines), this one has no violent women among its main characters, and the plot has been softened in at least one other way: Yuan Zhenniang (this novel’s heroine) is pursued by her male friend (she does not

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4 I am indebted to Nanxiu Qian for help with this point.
actively pursue him). I believe this moderation was intended to reassure readers and censors that the novel’s agenda conformed to “proper” boundaries for women.

A key turning point in the novel is when Zhenniang meets a woman who has connections in the newspaper world. She asks Zhenniang whether she would like to try her hand at writing an editorial on women’s rights. Zhenniang’s first draft is cogently argued, and the woman sees to its immediate publication. Without asking permission, she affixes Zhenniang’s name to the document, and Zhenniang becomes famous all over China. She happens to be on her way to a school in Beijing at the time of publication. Once she arrives, her fellow students convince her to found a women’s newspaper. It will be called the Nüzi guomin bao (Women citizens’ news). She and the students who will work with her on this project decide upon a set of rules for incorporation. These provide important insights into how women’s periodicals at the time may have been run. (Zhan Kai was a journalist and knew the profession well.) The rules pertain to the name of the paper; the amount of money stockholders must raise; the timing of publication (daily); the language to be used (half vernacular and half classical); the election of chief officers by stockholders; the content of the newspaper (editorials, fiction, and news); the establishment of distribution centers in every province; the exemption of articles and letters from publication fees if they help women; the printing only of advertisements that pertain to women; the exclusive employment of women; and the distribution of profits to stockholders, with any extra being used to set up branch offices. After sufficient funds are raised through Zhenniang’s schoolmates, who represent every Chinese province and can appeal to women’s schools in their home areas, permits are obtained from the necessary government ministries, the newspaper is incorporated, and a headquarters is found.

The paper attracts a good deal of attention. Yet trouble arises when women readers extend the space of the journal to real space and attempt to set up clubs and societies in response to this publication. The phenomenon of clubs of female newspaper readers is an interesting offshoot of the newspaper culture described by Zhan Kai. In Hunan interest spreads like wildfire. When the journal advocates freedom from male control, a provision with which Zhenniang disagrees, corrections are made to the charter of Women’s Citizens’ News: it becomes less anti-masculine and the radical groups in Hunan also simmer down. A worse problem erupts in Xinjiang. There, women’s groups lose control altogether and attack legal authorities, killing several people in the process. Significantly, the violent women are not friends of the heroine but emerge from fringe groups lying well outside her acquaintance.

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5 See p. 34 of the first edition in the Shanghai Library. Amy Dooling calls this part of the novel a “how to” manual for setting up a newspaper. See her “Revolution.”
With this development, reprisals against Zhenniang’s newspaper begin. The authorities disband affiliated clubs all over China. As the person in charge, Zhenniang is in danger of being arrested. However, by this time her father has taken a position of political authority in Beijing. Out of courtesy to his rank, the authorities decide not to arrest Zhenniang, but instead put her under house arrest at the newspaper office. The associate editor is then asked to stand in and take the blame. However, she is of frail constitution and dies in prison. Zhenniang is understandably depressed by this sad outcome. When her father asks her to give up newspaper work she accedes. The newspaper will go on, but without Zhenniang at the helm. We later learn that the newspaper continues to attract interest and subscribers, but under another woman’s control.

As in *Female Jail Flower* and *Goddess Niüwa’s Stone*, the fictional newspaper in *Women’s Power* plays an ambiguous role. It makes many credible points, and there is no doubt that its editor, Zhenniang, is reliable (in the author’s opinion), in the sense that she is a moderate progressive and believes women reformers should work with and not against men. But whether because its readers are not sophisticated enough, or because of the incendiary nature of the subject matter, women’s journals cannot always keep issues from spinning out of control. Even with as reliable a leader as Zhenniang at the helm, *Women’s Citizens’ News* still has the potential to cause violence in outlying areas such as Hunan and Xinjiang. Zhenniang is on much more solid footing, in the author’s mind, when she pursues other methods of achieving reform. One possibility is the *Zhongguo furen hui* (Chinese Women’s Organization) that is brought to readers’ attention in an appendix to the novel.

The question can be asked at this point of whether the *Women’s Citizens’ News* was based on any existing periodical, and if so, which. Other than *Journal of Women’s Learning*, there were several newspapers or magazines at the time with progressive enough agendas to have served as models. Among these are Qiu Jin’s (1875–1907) *Zhongguo nübao* (Chinese women’s news). As a person whose journalism made her well known, Qiu Jin’s experiences are quite likely to have informed Zhan’s novels, and it is conceivable that the toned-down quality of *Women’s Power* (in contrast to Zhan’s earlier novel) was a response to her arrest and execution.6 However, it does not seem that she or any other woman editors were unique influences. For example, the charter guiding Qiu’s *Chinese Women’s News* contains points that are similar but not identical to those

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6 Qiu died on July 15, 1907, by the Western calendar. This is the sixth day of the sixth month by the lunar calendar (the sixth month runs from July 10 to August 8 on the Western calendar). Both of Zhan’s novels were published in the sixth month of Guangxu 33. *China’s New Heroines* was printed at the beginning of the sixth month; *Women’s Power* was printed in the sixth month, not necessarily at the beginning. Adding this evidence together, we come up with the possibility that *China’s New Heroines* came out before Qiu’s death and *Women’s Power* came out afterwards.
for Women Citizens’ News, and Qiu’s struggles to raise funds for her publication contrast with the perfect ease with which funds for Women Citizens’ News are raised. Additionally, Women’s Power is more interested in employment for disadvantaged women, whereas Qiu Jin focuses on the basic indignities faced by all classes of women.

Setting aside the question of which real women’s journals may have been models, we find that Zhan’s own rhetoric follows that in Goddess Nüwa’s Stone quite closely. Thus, his novel suggests that a women’s journal can create excessive disruption as well as raising useful questions. A far less incendiary route for women is to work in professions like education or medicine, or join clubs like the Chinese Women’s Organization. Unlike Female Jail Flower and Goddess Nüwa’s Stone, Zhan does not present amazon-like heroines in his second novel, but his more toned-down female leaders imply a belief that women make their best contributions through professions that do not aim to arouse readers.

We know from the prefaces to his novels that Zhan Kai was quite progressive for his time. He believed that women’s rights, including voting and employment rights, were necessary if China was ever to become whole. But he also thought that a strong push in this direction would have to wait until constitutional government was firmly in place, and that women should always work in concert with men. Furthermore, the events his novels describe are set roughly forty years in the future. He does not imagine such reforms occurring any time soon. In these provisos, he is far less radical than Wang Miaoru, not to mention Qiu Jin and He Zhen.

The way readership is portrayed in these novels is also of interest. It is telling that in Female Jail Flower only the more radical Xuemei is shown to be deeply immersed in reading a woman’s journal. This selectivity allows the journals to be seen as appealing particularly to radicals. Likewise, when Qian Yifang is outraged by her reading of European history, it is to a woman’s journal that she turns. Had her feelings been less inflamed, would Cleopatra’s story have led her to submit writings to such an outlet? Similarly, Zhenniang never sought to enter the newspaper business, and she eventually left it behind. Can we deduce from this evidence that calm women, women with sophisticated reading skills such as Zhenniang, would prefer to stay away from women’s journals? Or was it rather that the novelists wanted to oversimplify, portraying these journals as intent on rupturing the status quo and thus coding them as more incendiary than they really were? This second alternative accords with the iconography by which women’s journals were linked to amazons and violence in Female Jail Flower and Goddess Nüwa’s Stone. If Zhan Kai deliberately removed amazons from his second novel, whether or not in response to Qiu Jin’s fate, he may have done so advisedly, with a sense that some woman readers preferred

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7 On Qiu’s draft charter see “Chuangban,” 10–11.
quieter modes of self-expression or that censors would find less to object to in what he had to say. The overriding point is that in our novelists’ view women’s periodicals provided the space to foster incendiary reactions. Circumspect, progressive women might prefer face-to-face encounters as a less risky means of contributing to progressive change.

These possibilities suggest that women’s journals had an impact not only on women readers, who may or may not have known how to handle them, but also on male literati, who worried about their impact – the space these journals opened up to women had not been calibrated sufficiently. It is in the case of a woman author, Wang Miaoru, that they play the most positive role, even though they largely disappear once Pingquan appears on stage. Both male writers, Haitian Duxianzi and Zhan Kai, are clearly more worried about the power of women’s journals to lead women astray. Yet none of our authors cast such concerns in terms of their own anxieties. Instead we are shown the “objective truth” that women’s journals would provoke disaster if proper precautions were not exercised. Considering that our novelists wrote on the eve of, or even after, Qiu Jin’s arrest and execution, we might agree that they had a point about disaster. But this consideration does not fully explain their tendency to write their own fears and cautions into their novels. If we sought the full truth of what it meant to have radical women’s journals on the scene in the late Qing, we would want to go beyond the novels considered here.

Our three novels tell us something about what happened when new journals for women emerged during the late Qing. Even if we look only at the fears they generated, we can conclude that their impact was profound. In addition, *Women’s Power* is of value for its detailed information about the steps one had to take to launch such a journal, although it sometimes makes the process sound easier than it was. As long as one remembers that they are fiction, these three novels lend useful insights into how early women’s journals were received by contemporary readers. They draw a map of the unsettling thoughts that these journals’ pioneering opening of new space for women’s articulations and women’s concerns had engendered.