



DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2019-24-1-84-92

UDC 821.581

## Women's issue in Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines"

A.A. Lobova

Lomonosov Moscow State University  
1 Leninskie Gory, Moscow, 119234, Russian Federation

The paper examines Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines" as historical resource to study the position of women in the first quarter of the 20th century in China. Literature is accurate in assessing changes in mentality of society. The process of the women's role transformation is the most complex and insufficiently studied issue still.

The first part of the 20 century Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing dynasty and China had a great impact of Western culture. This is the era which the women's movement also belongs. Even the novel "Wives and Concubines" author shows harsh reality of women from province, where the traditions, sexual politics, gender hierarchies, class are repressed them a lot. Within the narrative of novel women are abused by authority male culture. The Chinese revolution in 1911 didn't change the main rules that govern society. There was still strong perception of power-related norms in people's ideology about marriage, traditional role of women is linked to family, limiting the career development and ambitions. Women shall be defined as obedient and dependent in support their husbands even if they sacrifice their own careers.

**Keywords:** Chinese modern literature, Su Tong, marriage, Xinhai Revolution, concubinage, women's issue

### Introduction

Use fiction as a historical source is interesting for modern science because novel includes information about social moods and thoughts of country in different periods. As Prof. Ranald Mitchie pointed out: "Novels provide a glimpse of the opinions of contemporaries which cannot be captured from facts and figures" [7].

Recently in the historiography a new direction of research has been formed: the interaction study of the male and female aspect of society in the historical space. The study of the problem through the author's of vision has its advantages. Literature is accurate in assessing changes in the mentality of society.

In traditional China, political, economic, social and cultural values have been connected with the Confucian structure existing for millennia, including the rigid family system. Medieval China gradually developed by norms and stereotypes of each person behavior depending on the place in society that have been canonized. According to the Confucian structure of society, women at every level were occupied a position lower than men.

The period of the beginning 20th century became a turning point for China. This is the era to which women's movement also belongs. It evolved under the influence of

Confucian and Western ideas about humanity, freedom and the public initiative stems from the individual, equality of men and women, and new family relations. The intellectual elites claimed women did not acquire wisdom due to their weakness, but because they were never guided to that path.

For instance, Chen Duxiu, an active participant in this movement, wrote an article entitled “The Way of Confucius and Modern Life” [3. Pp. 355–356] (“孔子之道与现代生活”) in *New Youth Magazine* (新青年), in which he criticizes Confucianism and explains how Confucian ideals doesn’t fit in with modern world. There was no personal independence and if any deviation made from the teachings, shame brought not only the individual but to the family as well. Chen women can choose to remain single if they are widowed because “they have nothing to do with what is called the chastity of widowhood” [3. P. 121]. Under this doctrine, a woman in China is looked down upon because it is seen as “shameful and unchaste for a woman to serve two husbands” [3. P. 121]. This is significant because to avoid bringing the rest of the family shame, in-laws have forced their daughters-in-law to remain a widow [3. P. 122]. So Confucianism sacrificed individuals rights of families and society. The universal education for man and woman has recognized as essential to create independent personality and self-assertion. The author conducted a detailed comparison provisions on social order in traditional Chinese culture and Western society while showing the applicability of many Western approaches in the struggle for the liberation of women in China.

The literary world has long been a place for women to tell their stories. During a long time, China male writers mainly raised the demands for women’s liberation. At the beginning of the 20th centuries it was Lu Xun, Mao Dun and etc. Among the writers of a “New Wave” writing in China Su Tong also could be mentioned.

Su Tong (1963) is a bestselling novelist in China who became well known as one of the writers of the so called Chinese avant-garde. At the age of 46 Su Tong won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2009 for “The Boat of Redemption” (河岸). And in 2015, he won the 9th Mao Dun Literature Prize, one of China’s top literature awards, for his novel “Yellowbird Story” (黄雀记). His novels are full of symbolism and witty dialogs.

In his narratives of Chinese women lives, Su Tong portrays a broad range of character types, such as wives and concubines in “Wives and Concubines” (妻妾成群), spinsters in “Embroidery” (苏绣), and prostitutes in “Blush” (紅粉), simple girls from rural area in “Umbrella” (伞). In novels author shows harsh reality of women from province, where the traditions, sexual politics, gender hierarchies, class repressed them a lot.

Su Tong established internationally mostly through the success of the Oscar nominated film “Raise the Red Lantern” by Zhang Yimou, adapted from the “A Bevy of Wives and Concubines”. The story is set in pre-Mao China and presents the main character Lotus as a victim of patriarchal order of the Chen household.

The gender issue is very urgent today. It is defined by the fact that studying the history of gender relations offers a scientific explanation to modern political processes and their consequences. The matter is that in the conditions of the current globalization, there are transformations of family as a social institute. Nowadays, women’s issue represents sexual difference as a politically salient topic by classifying women as a special class of citizen. The women’s issues — which is equated with emancipation — is a concept which is complex and broad. It includes three main problems: ethical-psychological, economic

equality issue, and political-civil. All these parties are closely interconnected, therefore it is possible to tell that women's issues is connected with all spheres of public life. Studying literature experience of China, we can scoop the important ideas for the embodiment them in the modern world.

### **Women's role within the family**

The defeat of China in Opium war in 1840 was the beginning of Chinese integration into the global community and the influences of globalization on China were the causes of the changes in a socio-political thought. Changes have also affected ideas of women's role in society.

However, the imperial system brought in their wake, the custom of concubinage remained surprisingly resilient. Concubinage is a semi-legitimate form of marriage was common through early 20th century. Republican society continued to view concubinage in much same way as late imperial society had viewed it.

In Imperial times, concubines were symbols of status and wealth to the men that possessed by them. A concubine occupied an intermediary position between main wife, her children and domestic maid. Their own status was less than that of a wife and their children legally belonged to their master's wife not themselves [9. P. 124].

Literatures that paint life in Republican households with multiple wives suggest that the custom of concubinage largely unchanged from late Imperial times. The Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines" narrates the experience of the Chen family, which consists of the Old Master, four wives (3 concubines), their children and servant.

A university student in 1920s China, Lotus has been forced to leave school as a result of her father's recent death and her family's subsequent financial difficulties. Su Tong describes her as a practical person. With precious few options available to her, she has decided to get married, and as far as she has concerned, she may marry for money. So she became a forth and less influenced mistress of Old Master Chen Zuoqain. During the whole story Su Tong proves the Lotus position as a lower one.

Entered the house Lotus was introduced to Joy, old-fashioned aged first wife and Cloud, Second Mistress. Joy favored previously, are now out, now her main function in family is to abide family customs.

While, spending time with Cloud, Lotus recognizes Cloud's potential power under the Chen, so names her "Elder Sister". She is friendly with new wife, but shortly reader will discover her sinister intentions. One of the characters, Coral, the Third Mistress, says she has "Buddha's face, scorpion's heart", as Cloud tried to poison her.

However, with Coral Lotus meets later. Coral refused to host new concubine. To assert her influence over Lotus, she sends for Chen at their first night together.

Lotus and Coral have something in common. Coral was famous opera singer. Thus they are both young and progress women, who were independent in the past.

To understand the hierarchy at Chen's family it is also important to learn about children and their status in the household. Coral has only one son. In addition, Cloud has two daughters. Toward to this case Lotus mentioned son is better than daughter, perhaps because having boys would improve her status. Soon after reader will know of Chen's impotence Lotus won't be able to give birth, what will increase her rank within the family.

For the reason that Old Master is weak, his own health and stamina are waning, and indeed nobody truly loves him. Without love human is sinking fast.

Other two characters are First Mistress (daughter) and Feipu (son) are Joy's children. They use a greater privileges comparing with main heroine. It is showed through the scene of welcome home banquet, which was organized for Feipu and was dished up better than Lotus's one. Moreover, Feipu calls her not "Mistress", but her own name. In contrast Joy called children of other women "Whore's brats", maybe to highlight her legitimate status relating to concubines.

Competing for The Old Master's attention and status mistresses could insult each other. It is on full display in the incident with Cloud's daughters. Allegedly Coral has paid to a boy for beating two girls. Throw all of mistresses' energy into winning the Master's favor, bringing out the worst in them in the process: lying, scheming.

After a time, Lotus miss interest in competing. Others understand it as a defeat, while she doesn't see the point any more. At the first part of the novel she has advantages of others, nevertheless she lost it completely, and nobody even congratulate her at birthday.

Drawing this complex tangle of relationships between the characters, Su Tong doesn't judge or accuse them. He describes a psychological state of characters forced follow Chen family's customs. The story of their lives involving the imposition of gross and severe injustice through years of suffering, disappointment and unbearable conditions. The best description for carrion atmosphere at the house could be Coral's comment that "There is only a breath's difference between people and ghost?"

The high point of the novel is a Coral's death. Due to her adulterous relationship with the doctor she was forced to jump into well. Chen explains to Lotus what must be done to Coral will do, he doesn't see any others variant of punishment. There is no choice and woman subject on customs. The households also take it for granted. After this incident Lotus become mad.

The winter weather atmosphere of the novel's end is reflecting Lotus' condition of cold and loneliness.

It is also interesting that author put in end of the story one more concubine — the Fifths Mistress Bamboo as a symbol of continuing the story. How it was in the Lu Xun's "Madman's Diary" and Lao She's "Teahouse" the characters assume a role at the top of the society.

From the first page to the last one reader can feel psychological tension. It is quite clear from the Lotus point of view. She is the fourth wife of a wealthy gentleman, who forced to live in the enclosed space with his three older wife's. Susanna Schantz called this psychological situation "claustrophobic". She linked Su Tong's novella with Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*". The order at the Chen family is constructed disciplinary structure through custom, obedience, and punishment. This house is a prison for wives. On one hand they could fell themselves very lonely, on the other hand Lotus complains on the lack of privacy, because her servant always looks after her.

And as it usually in prison the relationships among members are based on power. According to Hobbes, power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance [2. P. 122]. Therefore, the relations within the Chinese family could be named power-based.

The traditional concubinage system of Chen's family illustrate intersectionality, the intertwining of gender with other social positions complicate power relations and inequalities between men and women, as well as among women. Due to men's resource advantage and socio-cultural influence, a traditionally accepted marriage norm is for the husband's independency and the decision-making role, while the wife remains submissive and dependent.

At these circumstances The Old Master due to the customs has a power under his wives and concubines. He also highlights with the phrase: "Women can never be more important than men". As though responses to this Lotus comments: "A woman is just that sort of creature". She says that all women play games. But do they act according their will or they have to play games to survive and achieve an illusion of power?

### **The fate of educated women**

According to Confucian ideals owing to the natural reality, women are little adapted for the correct perception of antiquity, and the habit to reflect too much can suggest her only the wrong idea which isn't fitting in established in society. They could not participate in public life or applied to civil service exams, which restricted to men only and serve to recruit new people for bureaucracy. This approach could be well illustrated by a widespread idiom: "a woman's virtue is to have no talent" («女子無才便是德»). The aim of traditional women's education was limited to the teaching of social ethics and family traditions with an emphasis on how to become a virtuous wife and good mother. These skills were acquired through their parents or nannies if the girls had come from a wealthy background, and not as a result of formal schooling. Women would be unable to take up painting or writing and, most of all, they would be barred from politics [6. P. 346]. Therefore, women did not get classical education very often.

During the late Qing dynasty and early republican period, there were widespread discussions about the roles of modern women versus traditional women. In numerous articles on magazines authors expressed the opinion on a status of women, their education and on the nature of women, etc., supported her economic independence and a possibility of participation in public work.

In 1907, the women's private educational sector was given the official seal of approval when the Qing government announced regulations covering the administration of private colleges and primary schools. At the late 1920s that girls were officially enrolled in Beijing University [6. P. 353].

The Chinese revolution of 1911 had overthrown the last Chinese emperor — the symbol of the Chinese feudal system and indicated that China had entered the era of the republic. However, the revolution actually only changed a top leader of China, but it did not touch the grassroots of Chinese society. After the revolution, the foundations of Chinese society remained the same. The status of Chinese women had not been changed at all.

And Su Tong's novel illustrates it well.

Lotus was a student before marriage. But once join the household, it doesn't matter that Lotus has attended a university or that Coral is a talented opera singer, except insofar as those qualities can please the Master. Their lives are no longer their own, not as they used to be.

At these circumstances the conflict between traditional women (Joy and Cloud) and modern women (Coral and Lotus) could be observed. Coral pretended to follow the custom, even so her adulterous could be a kind of protest. She doesn't afraid to be murder at the well as past wives.

In contrast to other three mistresses Lotus wasn't familiar with the customs due to her university background. And it becomes one of the reasons of her fall.

For example, she gives a simple birthday present to Chen differ from those of the other wives. And the fact that she even didn't put a formal red strip on it makes households confused. Trying to improve the situation Lotus decides to give a special kiss to the Master, but she makes worth. The others seem to consider the kiss an inappropriate act that only serves to highlight Lotus' misguided. The result of her nonconformity is her madness.

Yet still Lotus understands this world is very different. In her conversation with Feipu she notes the useless of book at Chen's house. Her past life as a student is over and maybe the knowledge of science she got at school doesn't fit her reality anymore. What is interesting to mention, Joy's daughter is also away from school. Nevertheless, she has the same fate with all women of her generation — one day she will married a rich man.

Examples of Coral' and Lotus' behavior show how higher education and career success, respectively, transformed women's self-identities, and how these qualities in turn influence their attitudes and choices in regard to marriage and family.

In some way Chen family has the influence of modernity and education. It represents by Cloud's desire to cut her hair. However, the life has its own hierarchy and it couldn't be changed in one moment. The transformation in socio-political thoughts ignored the specific roles of women in society. As one of the servants, Mama Song puts: "As soon as people are born, they're fated to become masters or servants; if you don't believe it, you still have to believe it".

## Conclusion

The analysis of fiction as a historical source allowed to identify the changes that occurred in the life of a Chinese woman at the first quarter of the 20th century.

In short, the Su Tong novel demonstrates that social identities are shaped and transformed in response to shifting environments, even so the traditional social roles haven't changed yet. Educated women (Lotus) still don't have any opportunities for self-realization outside the family. There is still strong perception of power-related norms in public ideology about marriage, the traditional role of women linked to family, limiting the career development and ambitions. Women shall be defined as obedient and dependent in supporting their husbands even if they sacrifice their own careers (Coral).

Clearly there is more information in the story. Even so there is enough evidence to claim that within the narrative women are abused to authority male culture. Su Tong follows the tradition of social critique by Lu Xun and Lao She.

Feminist anthropology counters that gender, class or national are essential categories should be investigated in particular cultural and historical contexts. They represent shape realities of people serve to powerful political purposes and could influence on social and structural inequality [5. P. 153].

In China women movement formation and development were in historical framework and inseparably linked with the process of profound transformations in state system including social, economic, and cultural spheres of society.

Meanwhile with all the changes that fall of the Qing dynasty and the end of the imperial system brought in their wake, the custom of concubinage remained surprisingly resilient. Not only the customs are impact into the twentieth century, but Republican society continued to view concubinage in much the same way late imperial society had viewed it. Thus progress doesn't always mean charging ahead.

Speaking about the impact of the intellectuals' work of the early 20th century, for most women achievements were inconspicuous. With the exception of obtaining the right to primary education and the abolition of foot binding, the issue of gaining political, economic, legal rights of women are little differ from previous decades.

© Lobova A.A., 2019



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

## Reference

- [1] Duxiu Ch. *The Way of Confucius and Modern Life. Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 through the Twentieth Century*. Vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 656 p.
- [2] Foucault M. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. 333 p.
- [3] Lamphere L., Stockett M.K., Geller P.L. *Feminist Anthropology: Past, Present, and Future* / edited by Pamela L. Geller and Miranda K. Stockett. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 248 p.
- [4] Lee W. Yin. Women's education in traditional and modern China // *Women's History Review*. 1995. 4:3. Pp. 345–367.
- [5] Mankevich Alexander I. Literature as a source of cultural information. [http://www.ifapcom.ru/files/Monitoring/mankevich\\_lit\\_hud\\_nasledie.pdf](http://www.ifapcom.ru/files/Monitoring/mankevich_lit_hud_nasledie.pdf) (accessed: 1 November 2018).
- [6] Mitchie R. *The City of London in Literature. Place People and Pursuits*. <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-city-of-london-in-literature-place-people-and-pursuits> (accessed: 1 November 2018).
- [7] Tong Su. *Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas* / trans. by Michael S. Duke. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. 336 p.
- [8] Tran L. The Concubine in Republican China: Social Perception and Legal Construction // *Etudes Chinoises*. 2009. 28. Pp. 119–149.

### Article history:

Received: 03 November 2018

Accepted: 19 November 2018

### For citation:

Lobova A.A. (2019). Women's issue in Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines". *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 24(1), 84–92. DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2019-24-1-84-92

### Bio note:

*Lobova Alisa Andreevna*, the postgraduate student of Faculty of Political Science, Lomonosov Moscow State University. *Contacts*: e-mail: [alice.l.maps@gmail.com](mailto:alice.l.maps@gmail.com)

## Женский вопрос в романе Су Туна «Жены и наложницы»

А.А. Лобова

Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова  
Российская Федерация, 119234, Москва, ул. Ленинские Горы, 1

В статье рассматривается роман Су Туна «Жены и наложницы» как исторический источник для изучения положения женщин в первой четверти XX века в Китае. Данный исторический период был полон поворотных событий для государства: Синьхайская революция 1911 года свергла династию Цин, большое влияние обрела западная культура. Именно к этому времени относится начало женского движения в Китае. Процесс трансформации роли женщины в китайском обществе является наиболее сложным и недостаточно изученным вопросом. Через анализ психологизма сюжетов, ситуаций, характеров персонажей, описаний природы и взаимоотношений героев в произведении Су Туна показаны социальные и политические особенности положения женщин в начале XX века. Автор демонстрирует, что, несмотря на прогресс в менталитете, китайская революция 1911 года не изменила основных правил, регулирующих общество, и стереотипы касающиеся положения женщин в нем остались прежними. Сохранялось влияние норм власти в представлении людей о браке, традиционная роль женщин была связана с семьей, ограничивая развитие ее карьеры.

**Ключевые слова:** китайская современная литература, Су Тун, брак, Синьхайская революция, институт наложничества, женский вопрос

### Список литературы

- [1] Манкевич И.А. Литературно-художественное наследие как источник культурологической информации. URL: [http://www.ifapcom.ru/files/Monitoring/mankevich\\_lit\\_hud\\_nasledie.pdf](http://www.ifapcom.ru/files/Monitoring/mankevich_lit_hud_nasledie.pdf) (дата обращения: 01.11.2017).
- [2] Duxiu Ch. The Way of Confucius and Modern Life. Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 through the Twentieth Century. Vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 656 p.
- [3] Foucault M. Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. 333 p.
- [4] Lamphere L., Stockett M.K., Geller P.L. Feminist Anthropology: Past, Present, and Future / edited by Pamela L. Geller and Miranda K. Stockett. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 248 p.
- [5] Lee W. Yin. Women's education in traditional and modern China // Women's History Review. 1995. 4:3. Pp. 345–367.
- [6] Michie R. The City of London in Literature. Place People and Pursuits. URL: <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-city-of-london-in-literature-place-people-and-pursuits> (дата обращения: 01.11.2018).
- [7] Tong Su. Raise the Red Lantern: Three Novellas / trans. by Michael S. Duke. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. 336 p.
- [8] Tran L. The Concubine in Republican China: Social Perception and Legal Construction // Etudes Chinoises. 2009. 28. Pp. 119–149.

### История статьи:

Дата поступления в редакцию: 03 ноября 2018

Дата принятия к печати: 15 ноября 2018



**Для цитирования:**

*Lobova A.A.* Women's issue in Su Tong's novel "Wives and Concubines" (Женский вопрос в романе Су Туна «Жены и наложницы») // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2019. Т. 24. № 1. С. 84–92. DOI 10.22363/2312-9220-2019-24-1-84-92

**Сведения об авторе:**

*Лобова Алиса Андреевна*, аспирантка кафедры истории социально-политических учений факультета политологии Московского государственного университета имени М.В. Ломоносова. *Контактная информация:* e-mail: [alice.l.maps@gmail.com](mailto:alice.l.maps@gmail.com)