

# *Women's Expression, Dilemma, Awakening and Metaphor of the Times in Old Events in the South of the City*

Huiyun Zhao

*China Women's University, Beijing, China*  
*cang450229@qq.com*

**Abstract.** "Old Events in the Southern City" unfolds from the innocent and adorable perspective of Yingzi, depicting the folk life and female images of the early 20th century, recording the joys and sorrows of women during this era. This era coincided with the critical juncture of old-new transition in Chinese society. Although the 1911 Revolution had overthrown the imperial system, the remnants of feudal rites still lingered, and the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures gave birth to new ideological sprouts. The book portrays female representatives such as Xiuzhen, Lan Yiniang, and Song Ma. This article focuses on female characters as the main analytical subjects, delving into issues such as the survival predicaments of women under the dual oppression of patriarchy and traditional rites in the 1920s and 1930s, the budding of subjective consciousness, and the latent resistance. It reveals the deep connection between women's fate and the changes of the times. By depicting the fragmented fates of women, this article expresses the living conditions and spiritual demands of women in the current historical stage, providing an important textual reference for understanding the modern women's liberation and offering practical insights for advocating gender equality.

**Keywords:** Old Events in the South of the City, Female Expression, Survival Dilemma, Awakening of Subject Consciousness, Metaphor of the Times

## 1. Introduction

"Old Events in the Southern City," as a classic work created by Lin Haiyin based on her own childhood memories, holds a unique position in the literary history of 20th-century China with its narrative tone of "mild sorrow and profound longing" and the metaphorical technique of "seeing the big picture through small details." [1-4] Through the daily narratives in the southern alleys of Beijing, the work portrays a series of typical female characters of the era: Xiuzhen, Lan Yiniang, and Song Ma. Xiuzhen is a "madwoman" exiled by feudal rites, Lan Yiniang embodies a "new woman" striving to break free from male control, and Song Ma is a lower-class laborer caught in the urban-rural dual structure [5]. Their fates intertwine and fragment through the innocent perspective of Xiaoyingzi, collectively sketching the survival landscape of women in the 1920s and 1930s under the triple oppression of patriarchal families, traditional rites, and rigid social hierarchies [2]. This study, using feminist literary criticism as a theoretical framework, analyzes and deconstructs "Old Events in the Southern City" from three dimensions: "the concrete writing of survival dilemmas"

"the implicit awakening of subjective consciousness" and "the symbolic expression of era metaphors" [3]. It aims to reveal how the work reflects the collapse of China's old social structure and the pains of transformation through the ups and downs of individual female fates, while uncovering its subtle yet profound feminist ideological core [6].

## 2. The survival dilemma of women in patriarchal context

### 2.1. Dependent existence in the family field

In the social landscape of 1920s and 1930s in Beiping as depicted in *Old Tales of Southern City*, the family is the concrete field of patriarchal order, and the women are disciplined as "dependent beings", whose self-identity construction, survival resources acquisition and even the path of emotional expression are all shackled in the male-centered family power structure [2].

Xiuzhen—the "madwoman" mentioned earlier—epitomizes the patriarchal system's ostracism of "deviant women". She secretly married Si-kang, a college student, and became pregnant before marriage [1]. Her family stripped her of her home, accusing her of 'disgracing the family', while her child was abandoned by her parents, leading to her mental collapse and the neighbors' perception of her as a "madwoman" [1]. The "golden bracelet" she hid in a dilapidated hut remains the last trace of love, and the "tiger-head hat" embroidered for her daughter Guihua symbolizes the final remnant of maternal love. Yet even her beloved and child remain trapped in memory as faint phantoms [1]. The family's silence and society's rejection reduced her emotional pleas to an unheeded "soliloquy" [5].

Song Ma, the nanny who often stayed by Yingzi's side, epitomizes traditional woman of her era. As both the Lin family's wet nurse and servant, she earned her living with a monthly wage of two silver dollars. Yet her economic autonomy was stripped away by her husband Huang Ban'er—he squandered her earnings on gambling, remarried, and even 'gave away' her children [1]. Left to weep in the oil lamp's dim light at night, Song Ma found even the courage to protest eroded by the dogma that "women must obey men" [2]. This cycle of economic dependence, personal subjugation, emotional bondage was pervasive, reducing women to 'silent outsiders' in the household [3]. Their suffering was concealed by the taboo of family shame not to be disclosed publicly, and their resistance was branded as a violation of feminine virtue [4].

### 2.2. Gender role constraints under social discipline

In an era shackled by the invisible chains of social discipline, constraints from family ethics, societal judgment, and gendered aesthetic norms act as daily forces of control [2]. They rigidly bind women to the stereotypical role of "virtuous wives and devoted mothers" [3]. Their attire, speech, behavior, emotional expression, and even the expansion of their living space are all dictated by the logic of "male superiority and female inferiority" [4]. In *'Old Events in the South of the City'*, women were required to internalize the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" as behavioral guidelines: "Obedience to the father before marriage" meant following the family's arrangement of "parental command and matchmaker's advice"; "Obedience to the husband after marriage" meant adhering to the husband's will as the supreme principle; and "Obedience to the son after the husband's death" meant entrusting their later years to their son's support [1].

Lan Yiniang's "rebellion" is a fragile breakthrough beneath the social net [1]. Her choice of a moon-white short-sleeved cheongsam, then-rare wavy hair, ability to speak a few phrases of Shanghainese English, and boldness to cross her legs in front of male elders are details deemed unconventional in traditional terms [1]. They serve as her signals to break free from male control

[5]. Yet the backlash from social discipline was swift and fierce [2]. Neighbors whispered she was "a concubine who escaped from some noble household"; Uncle Hu, her father's friend, hinted she "lacked feminine virtues", and even Xiao Yingzi's mother sighed behind her back that "Such women are ultimately unreliable". In this society of deep turmoil, her attempt to seek spiritual resonance through interactions with Uncle Dexian still left her labeled as a "beauty who brings disaster" [5]. The "glass ball necklace" she left behind when leaving the Lin family was both a yearning for freedom and a reluctant compromise against unbreakable discipline. This social evaluation system that "sins through beauty" and "shames through independence" reduced women's self-expression to "crossing boundaries", turning self-actualization into "a luxury": women either remained silent under discipline or are exiled through rebellion, ultimately falling into the spiritual dilemma of "being misunderstood and unable to escape" [6].

### 2.3. Stratification of women's fates

In 'Old Tales of Southern City', an underlying narrative thread shapes the destinies of women, serving as an invisible divide that starkly separates the living conditions, resistance capabilities, and tragic fates of women across different social strata [1]. As archetypes of women from the lower rungs of society, Xiuzhen and Songma are perpetually crushed by the dual pressures of "scarce survival resources" and "social discrimination chains." [2] Xiuzhen, a marginalized figure expelled from her family, dwells in a dilapidated thatched hut near Hui'an Pavilion. Her infant, Xiaogui, is "wrapped in blue cloth and discarded at the foot of Qihua Gate" shortly after her first month, while she herself is branded a "madwoman" for her "unmarried childbirth" stigma [1]. Even when buying vinegar at the hutong entrance, vendors deliberately withhold half a tael from her [1]. On a stormy night, she carries her daughter Xiaoyingzi to the train station in search of Sikuang and Xiaogui. She and Yingzi are hit by a train and killed. Even her death becomes a subject of neighborhood gossip [5].

Song Ma's plight epitomizes the "urban-rural dual oppression" faced by working-class women. Hailing from a rural Shunyi village, she came to Beijing as a wet nurse with a "flower-patterned cloth bundle" to treat her ailing son [1]. Despite sending half of her two silver dollars monthly home, her husband Huang Ban'er would still siphon off her savings under the pretext of "building a house." She raised Yingzi and her younger brother in the Lin household, yet her own children died young due to lack of care [1]. She had no choice but to weep in the dead of night while caressing their old cotton-padded coats, and even had to borrow money from Yingzi's mother to fund her journey back to her hometown for the funeral [1].

Aunt Lan's "class advantage" provided her rebellion with a bit of "buffer space." Originally a concubine in a mansion, she fled to the Lin family with a "golden ring" and "silk clothes," where she could not only enjoy "imported coffee" but also discuss "new ideas" with the progressive youth Uncle Dexian. These material foundations gave her the confidence to reject her father's arranged "remarriage" and even dared to openly refute Uncle Hu's "male superiority and female inferiority" rhetoric. However, her class advantage did not break the shackles of patriarchy; she still relied on male protection, and her "freedom" could only exist in the gaps of male power [2]. This reality highlights the systemic nature of patriarchy: class differences determine the intensity of rebellion but cannot alter the essence of oppression [3]. Unfortunately, whether it was the "struggle for survival" of women at the bottom or the "limited resistance" of women in the middle class, they ultimately could not escape the fate of being disciplined or exiled [6]. This is precisely a true reflection of the collective predicament faced by Chinese women in the 1920s and 1930s [2].

### 3. The sprout of female subject consciousness and its hidden resistance

#### 3.1. The initial demand of emotional autonomy: an attempt to break the bond of confucianism

Despite being shackled by patriarchal constraints, the women in "Old Tales of Southern City" still express their instinctive yearning for emotional autonomy in a fragmented yet resilient way [2], this yearning is faint yet distinctly marks the budding of female subjectivity [3].

The relationship between Aunt Lan and Uncle Dexian was a quietly cracked seam in the traditional Confucian walls. She would sneak into the grape trellis in the Lin family's backyard at dusk to share "stir-fried chestnuts bought from Dong' an Market" with Uncle Dexian and listen to him talk about the "student movement in Shanghai." When Uncle Hu mocked her for "not adhering to feminine virtues", she even dared to diss, "Why should others meddle with my own thoughts?" [1] These seemingly character-driven details shattered the dogma that "female emotions must be defined by men." [4] Her "boldness" was not a deliberate rebellion but an instinctive pursuit of the warmth of being understood [5]. Behind this "disregard for public opinion" lay a simple longing for "emotional autonomy." [3]

Xiuzhen's emotional autonomy resembles a wild grass sprouting from a crevice in the rocks. When recounting Sikang's story to Little Yingzi, her eyes sparkled with "starlight," repeating "He promised to return and marry me." Even when locked in the woodshed by her mother, she secretly kept Sikang's "half-worn letter" with only "Wait for me" written on it. Her "persistent waiting" wasn't blind devotion, but the sole spiritual sanctuary she could control after patriarchy stripped her of all choices. Even as a madwoman shunned by all, and before this "initial demand for emotional autonomy" evolved into systematic resistance, she remained like seeds quietly harboring unstoppable momentum. With the delicate sensitivity unique to women, they carved the first crack in the ironclad walls of patriarchy.

#### 3.2. Resistance in silence: survival wisdom against oppression

Facing the ironclad patriarchy, women in the old era used silence as armor, carrying out tenacious covert resistance in unnoticed crevices. Lacking loud slogans, they carved out a tiny breathing space in the oppressive cracks with their unique survival wisdom [2,3].

Xiuzhen often sat on the bluestone pavement outside Hui 'an Pavilion, cradling her white-washed cotton jacket—sewn by her for little Guizi, its collar embroidered with a crooked velvet flower. When children tossed pebbles or called her "madwoman," she remained unperturbed, only tucking the jacket tighter and murmuring, "Guizi must be cold." Yingzi watched her squatting by the wall, drawing circles on the mud with a twig, each one chanting "little Guizi" as she layered them, as if trapping the child in her own world. On stormy nights, she dragged Yingzi toward the train station, raindrops blurring her vision, yet her grip on Yingzi's hand burned painfully. "The train's coming! I'll take Guizi home!" she cried [1]. She wasn't mad—she had etched "mother" into her bones [5]. Even if the world called her "madwoman," she would cling to this longing like a lamp that never dimmed [1].

Every dawn, Grandma Song rose before the first light to grind soy milk. The stone mill hummed with a rhythmic "gurgle-gurgle," while her shadow danced over the stove, steaming the Lin family's steamed buns until they were perfectly soft, even stitching Yingzi's shoes with evener seams. When Huang Ban 'er came to collect wages, she would slip a few silver coins from her apron pocket, but her fingertips would discreetly press the copper coins hidden in her sock soles—money saved for her son's tuition. Without a word, she would simply wipe the stove and say, "We still need money to

buy rice." After four years as a wet nurse, her blue cloth bundle contained only tiger-head shoes for the child and half a piece of osmanthus cake wrapped in oil paper, given by Yingzi last time. She couldn't bear to eat it, saying, "I'll save it for my child to taste the city's flavors." [1] She didn't speak of "resistance," nor did she understand "patriarchy" [2]. she simply lived with unyielding resilience. She excelled in her work, saved every penny, and cherished her child in her softest heart. This resilience made her live like a wild lily on the cliff's edge, standing firm in the stormy winds yet swaying gracefully [5]. Unshaken by the wind or rain, she quietly rooted herself in the earth, guarding her own little world.

#### **4. The characteristics and limitations of feminist expression in old events in the south of the city**

##### **4.1. Indirect expression: writing restraint in the context of the times**

As both narrator and eyewitness of this book, Lin Haiyin refrains from using inflammatory slogans to expose patriarchal hypocrisy. Instead, she employs a "microscopic" approach to capture women's daily life details, weaving their existential struggles and spiritual yearnings into the vibrant atmosphere of Beijing's hutongs [7]. These "unwritten yet profound" details still stir waves of sympathy for women's unjust fates in readers' hearts. This subtle expression not only reflects Taiwan's 1950s cultural compromise of "avoiding feminism" (when literary works were required to "avoid sensitive topics" to prevent censorship), but also epitomizes Lin Haiyin's masterful technique of "seeing the big picture through small details." She compresses women's suffering into the microcosmic symbols of their lives, allowing readers to unconsciously touch the core of patriarchy while savoring "subtle melancholy." This "subtlety" not only strengthens feminism's power but also enhances the work's artistic impact. When readers realize that Xiuzhen's "madness" is forced by patriarchy, Aunt Lan's "elopement" is a desperate survival choice, and Aunt Song's "silence" is a silent cry, women's pain and struggles overflow from the cracks between words, taking root and growing in readers' hearts.

##### **4.2. Limitations: residual traditional views on women**

While 'Old Tales of Southern City' contains feminist undertones, the narrative still bears traces of traditional feminist perspectives. Certain female characters remain shaped by conventional views of women—a legacy of the author's historical context. Take Songma as an example: despite her growing self-awareness, she ultimately returns to her husband, continuing a traditional life. This ending reflects the immense challenges women faced during that era in their struggle for liberation. Their mindset remained shackled by traditional norms, lacking both the resolve to resist and the means to act.

#### **5. Conclusion**

"Old Tales of Southern City" profoundly portrays the survival struggles of women in 1920s-1930s Taiwan under dual oppression from patriarchal systems and traditional Confucian rites through the portrayals of Xiuzhen, Auntie Lan, and Songma. The female characters are either confined to familial dependency (as Songma relies on her husband's "family status" for survival resources) or constrained by gender norms (as Auntie Lan being required to "be a docile concubine"), their fates perpetually bound by the era's shackles of "obeying husbands and children." This "childlike perspective on women's destinies" not only aligns with Taiwan's 1950s context of "avoiding

sensitive issues" but also forms a unique writing style of "hearing thunder in silence." However, the work still has limitations: Songma's ultimate choice to "return to her husband's home" fails to transcend the traditional framework of "women must eventually return to their own homes"; Auntie Lan's "elopement" still depends on the male protection of Uncle Dexian, lacking clear ideological guidance and systematic action support.

Rooted in childhood memories, the literary classic *Old Tales of Southern City* explores the resonance between individual destinies and historical tides through its portrayal of women. Rather than reducing them to "symbols of oppression" or granting them "transcendent awakening," it depicts Xiuzhen, Auntie Lan, and Songma as guardians of female dignity through their daily struggles with "basic necessities" and "the anguish of separation." Xiuzhen safeguards maternal love through "madness"; Auntie Lan tests freedom via "escape"; and Songma sustains survival through "labor". This "non-sentimentalized, non-idealized" narrative endows the work's feminist expression with timeless vitality. It reveals that women's awakening is never an "instant revolution", but a "gradual march through the mire". Their value lies not in being tools for male control, but in existing as independent individuals." When Little Yingzi sings "Farewell" at the graduation ceremony, the vanished women in Beijing's hutongs have become the gentlest yet most resilient waves in history's river, reminding us: true women's liberation begins with recognizing and respecting the existence of every "ordinary woman."

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