

Dark Comedy and the Role of the Female
Author in Modern Chinese Literature
A Translation and Contextual Analysis of Su Qing's
"Concerning Women" and "Concerning Men"

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The late 1930s and early 1940s were a tumultuous time to be a female author in Shanghai. Traditional Confucian ideals permeated society, holding women on a caged pedestal, trapped within the historical ideal of what it was to be a proper woman. Chinese society is founded on a strong sense of male dominance; women traditionally were limited in their career choices and their freedoms outside of the home. Societal roles were still harshly dictated during the middle of the 20th Century, and the traditional patriarchy had given way to a newer, yet still abrasive, modern patriarchy. Women and men were still trapped in their respective gender roles, with the primary focus of the female role as that of a mother. However, there were an increasing number of outlets for women to speak out. With the May Fourth Movement (1917-1923) and the increase of published female authors, the voice of the modern woman began to crop up in literary publications throughout major Chinese cities.¹ They wrote about their lives, their plight as Chinese women, and their place in a rapidly changing society. Shanghai and other Chinese cities were changing and growing, Western ideals were permeating Eastern tradition, and the voice of the modern woman was documenting the changing perspective.²

Times were changing not only in terms of gender identity, but in overall Chinese identity as well. The Second Sino-Japanese War was well underway by 1939, Nanjing had fallen to the Japanese in 1937 and China was no longer the unequivocal, dominant power in the East.³ The impact was widespread and long lasting, and yet despite the impact that this had on the lives of all Chinese citizens, many Chinese authors remained conspicuously silent on the matter. There were tangible disincentives to writing anti-Japanese publications, yet there are techniques that

¹ Lee, Leo O. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*. Cambridge, Mass: (Harvard University Press, 1999) 67.

² *Shanghai Modern* 44.

³ Dooling, Amy D., ed. *Writing Women in Modern China: The Revolutionary Years, 1936-1976*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2004) 178.

authors can employ to write subversively and still many did not. The notable silence played a large part in determining which authors' works gained renown in the later half of the 20th Century.

It was in this social and political environment that Su Qing (苏青), born in 1914 as Feng Yunzhuang (冯允庄), penned the two essays *Concerning Women* (*Tan nüren* 谈女, 1939) and *Concerning Men* (*Tan nanren* 谈男人, 1944).⁴ Written nearly five years apart, they are commentaries on gender discussion that are defined not only by what they say, but also by what they do not. They are not a discussion of Japanese invasion, nor should they be read to look for undertones implicating them as such. Rather they are opinion pieces, a commentary on the plight of both the modern Chinese man and woman, on sexuality and where it belongs in society. Su Qing's writing is not inherently political—but it is still charged.

Su Qing began her literary career in 1935 with the publication of *Having a Boy, Having a Girl* (*Shengnan shengnü* 生男生女) which was published in *Analects* (*Lunyu* 论语), a popular literary magazine that circulated for several years in Shanghai. In 1943 she launched her own literary magazine, *Heaven and Earth* (*Tiandi* 天地) and began to publish her own work in addition to the work of other modern Chinese authors.⁵ Although most authors at the time were male, she was nevertheless encouraged by the Shanghai literary community to continue publishing her essays and short stories.⁶ Her first novel, *Ten Years of Marriage* (*Jiehun shinian* 结婚十年, 1943), was published as a serialization in the literary magazine *Chats in wind and*

⁴ *Writing Women in Modern China* 178.

⁵ Dooling, Amy D. *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*. New York, NY: (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 156.

⁶ *Writing Women in Modern China* 178.

rain (Fengyu Tan 风雨谈), a conventional way to publish novels at the time.⁷ The novel was successful and true to her literary style, however the majority of her work still consists of short essays from popular literary magazines. By 1939 and the publication of *Concerning Women* she was no stranger to having her essays published, and had written vociferously about life, gender and the plight of the modern woman. Her readers were loyal and many, but her name and her work did not stand the test of time. Scholars who have discussed her since her death are few, and her works have found few outlets for English translation. Her two novels have never been translated into English, and only her autobiographical essay *Waves* (1945) has found a small English readership.

Daily life and gender roles were popular with many female writers of the time, including her friend and literary counterpart, Eileen Chang (张爱玲). Chang references Su Qing in her works and memoirs, and refers to the times in which they lived as turbulent. And yet despite this, both seemed to find inspiration for their work from their own lives.⁸ In comparison to Su Qing's work, Chang's has received far more attention in mainstream literary history, yet Su Qing's works remain of equal value in the quest to understand what it was truly like to be a modern Chinese woman in this transitional time period.⁹ It is with this goal in mind that one should read *Concerning Women* and *Concerning Men*.

She is considered by the Chinese literary community to be a woman who survived and thrived despite her odds in life, called a beauty in a turbulent time (*Luanshijiaren* 乱世佳人) by Chang. It was an intentional reference to "Gone With the Wind," a much beloved novel to both

⁷ *Women's Literary Feminism* 156.

⁸ Huang, Nicole. *Women, War, Domesticity. Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*. (Leiden: Brill, 2005)

⁹ *Women's Literary Feminism* 165.

Su Qing and Eileen Chang.¹⁰ She was, however, a woman who did find success during her life despite the so-called turbulent times in which she lived. Given her frequent publication and success in supporting herself as a writer, she could not truly have overwhelmingly felt the turbulence of the times in which she lived in the way that many Chinese citizens did. She lived in an upper middle class world, and her essays serve as introspection into that limited but modern place.

Writing served as both an emotional outlet and a means to the end of supporting herself. To Su Qing “writing was not a political choice but an economic necessity and a matter of personal survival.”¹¹ For although she complains throughout her work of patriarchy and the limitations that females faced in Chinese society, she herself did find success during her own life. Her motivations for writing stem from a desire to analyze and honestly critique the world she lived in. “The world has gone crazy,” she writes “Distress, agitation, depression, and a bizarre joy characterize our mental state.”¹²

Such attributes also characterize her writing style, a mix between stream of consciousness and thought out social critique. Often misunderstood by literary critics, her writing is characterized as both full of “ironic detachment” and a having a “serious but self-righteous tone,” while simultaneously her works stay true to and break free from the prevalent genre of female autobiography that had been established during the May Fourth Movement.¹³ Male critics often misinterpreted the meaning and purpose being her works, and as with many female authors she struggled to have her comedic element understood by a male reader. This problem was by no means limited to female authors, however. “Dismissive reactions and conspicuous indifference”

¹⁰ *Women, War, Domesticity* 5.

¹¹ *Women's Literary Feminism* 168.

¹² *Women, War, Domesticity*

¹³ *Writing Women in Modern China* 178, *Women's Literary Feminism* 156

were the prominent feelings of male critics towards comedic writing in general, but patriarchal attitudes exacerbated these opinions toward female comedic writing.¹⁴ Historically in China, comedy was not considered to be a high-class art form, nor a high level academic literary device. Modern literary critics had not yet adjusted to the use of irony and comedic relief as part of a greater literary canon; their attitude was that it belonged somewhere, perhaps, but not in the literature of the educated reader.

Her essays are written from the perspective of a woman who wishes to reconcile the society she lives in with the people who live in it. “I have never hurt anyone, and I do my best to keep anyone from hurting me. I want to survive my time. I want to live, and I want to live in a way that most satisfies myself,” she muses. She did survive through essays that express the soul of a woman who was obviously greatly influenced by China’s patriarchal society, yet through dark comic relief and a humorous perspective on sexuality, *Concerning Women* and *Concerning Men* tackle the difficult questions of the time. Far from a comprehensive understanding of Su Qing and her writing, these translations serve as an introductory pair; a small taste of what it is to understand the inner thoughts of this beauty in a turbulent time.

Understanding context is key to understanding why she penned *Concerning Women* and *Concerning Men* and what she wanted her readership to glean from them. The usual autobiographical nature of her work, commented on most heavily in *Ten Years of Marriage*, is not absent from these essays. Focusing heavily on sexuality and gender roles, the essays detail the struggles faced by both women and men in a patriarchal and dishonest sexual construct. Su Qing was married in 1934 and subsequently withdrew from her studies at Nanjing University to give birth to her first child.¹⁵ Her own marriage was not characterized as happy, and she

¹⁴ *Women’s Literary Feminism* 158

¹⁵ *Writing Women in Modern China* 178.

obviously felt the strain of the modern patriarchal society in her own life. Her essays draw from autobiographical details—and yet her strong opinions and sexual interpretations become the focus more than any singular detail of her own marriage, one that ended in divorce.

She writes in tandem with Chang, and yet her literary style remains fiercely her own. Her critics condemn her of “enslaving the minds of Shanghai women and numbing their consciousness of resistance, making people forget oppression and the bloodiness of reality.”¹⁶ Such attitudes were the common take on authors who chose not to discuss politics or Japan. The influence of her circumstances aside, her essays probe into something more than a surface level understanding of gender roles in China. *Concerning Women* is written in her somewhat chaotic, often stream of consciousness, style. Her writing hinges on oratory, combining sometimes-inexplicable anecdotes, details and metaphors into cautionary opinions on humanity. At times this causes confusion and seeming contradiction in her proclamations, and yet there is still an overwhelming feeling that what she is really doing is commenting on a deeper level of human nature. In places it serves a window into human nature on a level that transcends the simple paradigm of gender roles.

In *Concerning Women* it seems that Su Qing holds nearly all of humanity’s facets in disdain, and yet uniquely so. Far from broad proclamations of fault, her writing centers in on the characteristics of individual sections of society that stick out as particularly flawed. Often this centers on admissions of sexuality and lustful desires. She leaves no stone unturned, for both men and women fall under the scrutiny of her microscopic look into the flaws of the human condition. The world itself seems to place restrictions of what it is that gender can do—and she goes as far as to blame the so-called fates for the limited options women have in life. One should not assume that every word she penned is held in utmost sincerity, and yet overall the essay falls

¹⁶ *Women’s Literary Feminism* 156.

short of flat sarcasm and is instead characterized by a more ironic expression of the way she truly sees the world. She offers extremes, her tone is serious, and yet her writing is dark in its comedic take on life. When posed with the idea that women can only become mothers or prostitutes, the reader is not to assume that Su Qing truly believes these to be the only two options, and yet the stark reality of societal obligation and restraints is revealed through her heightened expression of reality. The works contain heavy detail and reads as a pontification, an almost proclamation of a better way to live within the restrictions that the world has placed on both genders, minus the discussion of how.

She relies on stories and metaphor to entrance the reader and make her points clear, and yet not every metaphor and description is useful to the modern reader. Why, for example, does she characterize blind people as particularly cruel to children? Given the oratory nature of her writing, the reader is left wishing they might stop her on the street to address such questions. However, these questions do not affect the overall tone of her essays, a tone that is unsatisfied with the state of affairs she sees in the world. And yet these questions do sometimes raise the issue of whether or not she is contradicting herself. She rants against women and men both with such blame that ultimately one is left asking the question of which gender she truly sees at fault. Perhaps gender is not the cause at all, and it is something deeper and more innately felt across all humanity that is merely seen through the roles society gives gender. Humanity is flawed, to Su Qing, on a much deeper level.

In *Concerning Women*, women are trapped in what seems to be a truly miserable and limited existence. Their only recourse for any kind of fulfillment was to have a child, and this was simply their fate. To find joy in children, especially in male children, is not an unfamiliar idea in Confucian society. To have children was seen as the societal obligation of a woman, and

this bleeds into Su Qing's writing. She herself had children at the time the essays were penned, and though little is written about her relationship with them one can assume that at the time they truly were her consolation in life.

However, she does present a seeming contradiction to her own proclamation at the end of *Concerning Women*, claiming that if it is possible for the maternal grandmother to raise her grandchildren instead of the mother that would indeed be the preferable option. The contradiction is only surface level, for while this may seem to contradict the fact that having a child is a woman's only solace in a somewhat thankless world, in reality she is describing an ideal for a world that is different. The suggestion is not that women should not have children, or that they should abandon them, rather that the task of raising the child should be passed off to the maternal grandmother to free women to pursue other things. The specification of maternal grandmother is relevant because it passes on the previously mentioned joy from generation to generation. To have a child is to have the future hope for more children as well.

The overwhelming emphasis of *Concerning Women* is the inequality of sexual freedom between men and women on all counts. She does not present the topic as purely the fault of men or society, but blames women in equal part for their societal position. From a modern Western viewpoint her discussion on topics such as rape is seen as brash and politically incorrect, and from any point of view it appears dark in both topic and tone. The reader balks against her opening statement that rape is largely just women calling foul after the fact—but one must understand that Su Qing is not discrediting true instances of rape, rather she illustrates in a bold way the role that women play in discrediting their own sexuality. This is the type of dark comedic take towards sexuality that Su Qing is known for.

Women are not willing to admit, even to themselves, that they are sexual beings, and she calls them out for it. Historically speaking women in China would not have admitted to sexuality as a part of their persona, much less boldly pursued their own sexual appetites. Su Qing draws attention to women as sexual beings, but rather than applaud them for it she criticizes their inability to admit and own their sexuality. Women cannot escape their sexual desires, neither can they express them openly, and because of this they are trapped.

Overall in both essays women are characterized in a negative light. Deceptiveness is their nature, dishonesty shrouds their inner being, and this is only further exemplified in their choice of dress. Women are masters of deception—covering their flaws with care and artfully presenting only their beauty. She credits this as intelligence on their part, criticizing those who do not spend the time or effort to hide their flaws. Women are allowed by societal pressure the option to spend their lives in only one of two categories—motherhood or prostitution. Such a harsh characterization of their options is another example of Su Qing using extremes to emphasize her points. In her stream of conscious style, marriage is thrown in merely as an afterthought, a thing she notes she should probably mention when discussing gender roles. The essay highlights how women are intricately tied in with the fate of men, for a woman is defined through her relationships to men. Be it her children, her husband, or general perception of society; there is no escape.

There is a tie that Su Qing seems to feel between being a woman and having a handicap. As though to be born a woman is to be born with a kind of preexisting handicap in itself, for there is no woman who survives without being jilted, and yet a jilted woman is seen as one who cannot be remedied. The widow from Shaoxing stands as a perfect example of what an unforgiving character a woman is. For there is no expected sympathy from the reader for the

woman, despite her tragic circumstances in life. Rather with a cruelty of language and presentation the reader holds her in disdain despite her misfortune. The widow is a caricature of the state to which Su Qing felt women were confined.

She describes women in both essays as not only deceptive, but dangerous to men as well. Her metaphor of the monk and his student is an expose of that danger, not only that the woman is described as a man eating tiger—but the most distracting and enticing part of life off of the mountain as well. The metaphor should be read as a joke, a farce of a story. It serves as yet another example of her comedic effort. Su Qing's tendency to throw extremes into her writing is not used for emphasis; rather it is used to solidify her reality through irony. By overemphasizing her examples she brings the reader into an almost familiar level where all can scoff, but the reality of what is scoffed at remains. Women are schemers across the board, but they're also unfortunate in that they cannot be clear with their intentions. Their scheming seems to be forced because of their plight in life.

Largely in *Concerning Women* Su Qing presents problems, not solutions. She does, however, come to believe that women are capable of more. The efforts they expend are not trivialized—in fact she details how if their efforts were spent on other pursuits they could achieve any number of things. This sentiment is mirrored in her discussion of men's wasted efforts in *Concerning Men*. She presents an alternative world to the one that we live in—but barely. It certainly seems she presents many more problems than solutions, and so the question becomes whether or not she truly means to offer a solution, or whether it simply follows her erratic style to throw in a half thought of a solution at the end. Given the number of problems she presents it seems unlikely that she truly means for this to be a sustainable way of life.

In the five years between the publication of *Concerning Women* and *Concerning Men* it seems Su Qing's opinions on the options women were allowed had progressed slightly. From the belief that women can only be slotted into roles as prostitutes or mothers, her writing evolves to allow that though women are still trapped it is not only to those two roles. Although titled as *Concerning Men*, the focus of the essay is still largely on the effect that women have on men. She is less critical on a base level of men than she was of women. In a way, she holds men to a mild sympathy; women and the power they hold over men trap them. Women often do not seem to know that they hold this power over men, nor men that they can escape it. It is obvious that she feels that gender roles in society keep either gender from reaching their full potential, but Su Qing does not expound on what that full potential might be.

In *Concerning Men* she continues to employ storytelling as a way to illustrate her opinions on gender and sexuality. The tale of the Prime Minister Qi is used to show the power that a woman's suggestion can have over a man. In the same way that if women put their efforts towards different things they could have success—she also believes that men could accomplish great things were they not under the spell of women. Instead they squander their abilities and efforts in hopeless attempts to please women. Perhaps the reason she thinks cohabitation would be best would be to free both genders from their respective traps.

Ultimately she believes that women, even if they are unaware of it, hold men back. Men are unable to comprehend women and from this their inability to interact with women successfully stems. They pour constant effort into their desire to woo the fairer sex, but their efforts are almost always futile. The two sexes are reliant on each other and yet by their very presence they diminish the other's positive impact on the world. Men's flaws are unique from those of women—pride rather than shame, but still men are flawed beings.

In fact, nearly every paragraph of *Concerning Men* is a statement of fact about men, followed by the ways in which that same fact holds them back or causes further waste of what could be. The problems are plentiful, and yet the reader is once again never told what would solve them; rather each problem is detailed in painfully relatable language. One empathizes with the plight of both men and women without understanding how empathy provides answers. In fact, it does not.

She writes to a reader that is familiar, a seeming younger sister figure to whom she must give advice, and she does not coddle with her advice. Her writing is direct in its intent despite the fact that it rambles. Su Qing serves not only as a voice for Chinese authorship at the time, but as a voice for the modern Chinese woman. An identity that prior to the May Fourth Era was largely underrepresented in Chinese publications is now documented through autobiographical commentary on gender identity. It is impossible to separate her identity as a Chinese woman from her identity as a woman in the world at large. Perception is entirely influenced by one's own experiences in the world—and her essays should not be approached without at least a cursory understanding of that status. Her original readers would have also been privy to such knowledge, as her publications read widely and her popularity at the time would have been on par with what we imagine a daily soap opera today.

Concerning Women (Tan nüren 谈女人)

By Su Qing

Many men look down on women; they believe a woman's intelligence to be subpar, and as a result they will play with women but nothing more. Scarcely do men realize that while they believe themselves to be playing with a woman, in reality, she has already been toying with him for a long time. There is not a single sexual affair that does not arise either from a woman's scheming or a woman relenting in the heat of the moment. There are few instances of true rape in the world, and when it occurs it is only after the fact that women regret it and exploit the law, calling it rape, in this way rape is only hot air.

The words of all women, I fear, are rarely reliable, for deceptiveness is a woman's essence. If a woman does not know to be deceptive, then she is scorned, even to the extent that she is unable to show her face. For example, everyone has sexual desires, however women simply cannot admit it. If a single woman dared to admit it, what would people even think of her?

Also, in terms of physical appearance women know how to augment their breasts artificially. They use girdles to create tiny waists, they find beautiful clothing that perfectly fits the measurements of their fake chests and waists and it conceals everything. This is where women are smart. Stupid women only know to expose their bodies' weak points. They allow the exposure of their arms that are full of lesions and let their chests remain flat. Either it looks like their heads and necks are too thick, or they allow other people to see their withered wrinkled skin. It's terrible.

Women are a mystery! Wherein is the mystery? Half is in their false decency, half in their false indecency. For instance, women all like bad men, yet on the surface they feign anger that men are insincere. When they do that, if men truly come clean, then women are greatly

disappointed, their expressions reflect their unhappiness, and as a result men can't figure out what women are thinking. They think women are unfathomable, in reality this is a man's own stupidity. For example, women who sell sex as a career, they have no choice but to use excessively lascivious behavior to arouse men, if the man thinks women of this type are really exciting this is a mistake.

Some people say: among women, those in the brothels are the best behaved. Sexual desires are easily satisfied, but overstimulation feels numb, thus what women without class really yearn for apart from money is some spiritual comfort. But what of an upper class woman, wanting material satisfaction, thinking but not getting a result. They can't get sex from going out and grabbing it, but even if it's delivered to them on a silver platter it is as if their intoxication comes not from the wine.

Probably I should also talk of marriage here. Men and women are not the same: if men are of a higher status, better educated, more wealthy, then these and the opportunity to marry have a direct correlation, yet for women this is inversely proportioned. Because in matters of sex men are more reliable to sexual attraction than women, for men only love youthful beauty in women; nothing else matters.

Beauty is innate, youth is fleeting, it cannot be achieved through one's own efforts, even so much that the more effort expended the more negative the result. The result is that women get the worst of it. Women can only resign themselves to fate, but fate does not always make women suffer, because there is a sole remedy, to give them a child. Once they have children, they have a place for their love. Though they encounter shortcomings and disappointments, they also provide the reason to keep living. Women without children should be pitied, women who have lost a

child are mournful, but to have lost a child is a little better than never having had one, for the former have happy memories and something distant to look forward to.

I do not understand why so many women, in order to get in the good graces of men, are willing to take harmful drugs or have their ability to give birth surgically destroyed. A woman usually does not love a man; rather she loves but the tiniest cell of him: sperm. Women exploit this and it brings about adorable children who forever comfort their loneliness and forever fill their emptiness, and forever give them a passion for life.

A woman cannot love a man because men are seldom faithful; women will always resent them for it. Women's love is clinging. At first this affection will make men fond, but the more time passes the more men grow bored with it and even detest it. Women always will hate men. Consequently, many women are hysterical. They spend all day at home suspecting everyone. They think every time their husband goes out it is to meet with another woman to have an affair. He comes back late at night and he is suspected of doing dishonest things. On one end she hates him, on the other end she is concerned about him, even so much as to think that every visit from a woman is to seduce her man, and that male visitors are coercing her husband to go out and engage in suspicious behavior. When the men can no longer stand being constantly subjected to these troubles and noisy complaints, they refuse to give her attention, and then she hastens to threaten divorce. This is probably the fault of vanity. Women think being left is a shameful thing. This kind of hysterical disease can only be restored to normal if the men actually flee, because in that moment women are hell bent on opposition. After all she has no man and so she does not fear having a man taken away, all she can do is go take away someone else's.

Jilted women who have lost in love develop an abnormal psychology, the same psychology of the handicapped. A blind person treats children especially terribly; this is one

example of it. And Napoleon's fierce bravery, perhaps he had ringworm from head to toe. A suffering woman finds it even easier to be jealous of other people's happiness. According to what an old woman from Shaoxing told me: her town has a middle aged widow, and every time a man comes home to the town she always puts on makeup, she dresses up like a slutty woman, and she passes by the house. During the night she lurks outside the house eavesdropping; and when she doesn't hear enough, she pokes a very small hole in the window paper to peep through. She stays outside the window for a long time, the more she hears the sadder she becomes, until she has no option but to return home. She wears a white mourning dress and white clothing draped over her hair¹⁷, inside her home she burns incense and kneels, repeating over and over again to the fates a curse of unfairness. Other women are obviously loose, but they get to keep their husbands and their conjugal bliss, and yet the crazy woman has never done evil things and is deprived of her conjugal bliss. On the one hand complaining, on the other hand beating her head against the ground as if pounding garlic, until daybreak, on her forehead there is nothing but black and blue bruises.

There is also another kind of spinster, her mental abnormalities are known to everyone, but she is not self aware of them. The reason for this unawareness is that she listens to other people's false propaganda, and mistakenly thinks that sex is obscene, and that she herself is extraordinarily pure. She would never imagine that food and sex are humanity's desires; that natural tendencies are not something human effort can withstand.

It is said there was once a young monk who followed his master down the mountain, but he could not take his eyes off her, looking back to see the woman who had passed by. His master told him it was a man-eating tiger. Afterwards when they returned to the mountain, the master asked him repeatedly what he had found to be the loveliest thing, and he answered without any

¹⁷ 白衣白穿 *Baiyibaichuan* A phrase which denotes letting her hair down in a typical mourning fashion

hesitation that it was the man-eating tiger. From this it can be seen, after a virgin passes through puberty all they do is advocate being single, a married woman who raises six children says that it is due to having no other choice—in both instances they deceive themselves with complete falsehood.

Irrational censure of servants and children treated with excessive indulgence, both are symptoms of abnormal psychology. Being extremely coy can also be classified this way. Just because a woman blushes does not mean she is an upright woman, instead her heart may have an even more pressing need and so her facial expression is inevitably embarrassed. At the same time, a very straightforward woman is not so necessarily because she has the temperament of a man, it could be she is desirous and she wants to cut down the distance between men and women, using her straightforwardness to make it easier to approach men.

Women cannot woo men in a straightforward manner; this is where women lose out the most. Because of this, women must expend even more effort scheming in order to seduce men. If this scheming were used in networking they could become government officials, if they used it on an abacus they could become rich, if they used it on detective work they could become spies, if they used it on design they could become artists as well. Unfortunately this scheming is all squandered, because smart men escape, and stupid men don't get it. Some smart women are so smart they are unnerving. They know that men are cowardly, indecent and lacking in desire, not having as much desire as the women would wish them to have. The result of this is women are unwilling to expend the effort to obtain the hearts and minds of boring men. These women are lonely. Women who understand loneliness understand art, yet art cannot fill up their void, they want to return to a normal life but they cannot return to it.

I know respectable women are pained, because men only have respect for them, but what use is the respect? If you are a prostitute then you have the freedom to choose who you sleep with, this is what is in the mind of respectable women, perhaps they think this is one kind of profession that can bring them happiness.

The existence of the profession of prostitution is a great threat to women. Because of this, men can escape, despise and ignore normal love from women. In the end it does nothing but diminish the worth of all women. It causes them to look at themselves as a commodity, although in the exchange there is a difference between the list price and black market price. Once a big customer has committed himself to a high quality woman they'll be fixed for life. Low quality women are constantly changing hands; although they are fully employed they are squandered excessively and quickly become shabby. Youth is only a fleeting second of magnificence, when one is a strange and beautiful flame and appreciated by others, but not knows not how to enjoy the glory. In an instant the moment is gone. Women then understand this, but also do not have the potential to fiercely burn again, they want to create a stir and they are unable to. Thus women who arrive at middle age often have a last astonishing burst of radiance. That is her unsparingly using three times her life force to get a moment of glory, afterwards the fire is extinguished.

People say there are two kinds of women: mothers and prostitutes. Is it good for women to study the mother model? Or what? I dare say the world does not have a single woman who does not want to go the way of prostitution forever, but it is impossible, so they end up becoming motherly. There is no way out, children are women's final comfort, and also their greatest comfort.

If I were to plan for all women, the life that is the most ideal would be, to abolish marriage, co-habit in freedom, have children be raised by their mothers and be subsidized by the

state. If the mother's mother is still alive, she should raise the child, for this would be the most suitable.

Concerning Men (Tan nanren 谈男人)

By Su Qing

Everyone says this world is a man's world, that only men are competitors, and that money is not enough, but they must also have the upper hand, and need to put themselves on a pedestal, out of touch with reality and proud.

In fact, these competing motivations are for the sake of women; men are perhaps unaware of this, however I am convinced that is absolutely true. Yanzi's coachmen at one time was content with his job, then his wife said "Yanzi, he is less than five feet tall and he is the Prime Minister Qi, you're a strapping gentleman of a 7 feet, and to drive for him, do you not feel embarrassment?"¹⁸ Afterwards he made a determined great effort, and at last he became a senior official, this is one example. Sometimes I walk past the government's doorway, to see the guards standing when the official's exit their cars and shout salutes, in my heart I truly am made sad, although my husband is not one of them.

Do all women love the men who sit in the car and are saluted? Or love the men standing at the gateway and yelling the salutes at others men?--because there is no woman who does not admire vanity, so men's vanity increases.

Many men would not hesitate to give up their own artistic hobbies, research and studies, exercise and hygiene, begging the east and asking favors to the west, getting up early and going to bed late, everyday forced to drink alcohol, compelled to say things they don't want to say, in the summer wearing white woolen¹⁹ western suits all neat and tidy, when actually underneath their waistcoat and shirt are both drenched in sweat, and everything is done in order to make money. But earn money for what? The sole honorable reason is only to provide for their family.

¹⁸ The character of Yanzi is a figure from a Chinese folklore, the Prime Minister of the State of Qi.

¹⁹ A Western fabric not suited for summer wear.

There are a few men who secretly think it's not worth it. They are unsatisfied, and still secretly go out to get added pleasure. However in the end they are also unable to escape women. To dance requires a partner, to watch a play, to play mahjong, to do opium, all require a woman, and as for visiting a prostitute, etc., that needs no explanation.

Cosmetics, perfume, high heels, silks and satins, they are all manufactured only for women's needs. The world has countless workers laboring around the clock for women. This saying, although inevitably somewhat profane, yet in this way it is fact, and they are at a loss of how to gloss over it. I believe that if there were not a woman in the world, a man would be incapable of making money, and also incapable of spending money. Even if he earns money he would still be unhappy, spending it, it is not satisfying. What kind of a world would that be?

Men all love women, however men cannot explain why or understand women, thus women's eyes are full of tears. In general women only know to whisper affectionately, to embrace after sex, the things they must understand about the affairs of men are many. To become a government employee everyday he must think of how to flatter his boss, deal with conflict with his colleagues, direct his subordinates; even more with businessmen there is no time when they are not wearing someone else's hat, taking advantage of an opportunity at someone else's expense. And who is capable of focusing all their attention on one thing, on a woman? In addition women are hard to fawn over, like Jia Baoyu all day long until night hanging around in the Grand View Garden, not attending his proper duties, moreover, worrying that he could not be considered enough to consider even Lin Daiyu's thoughts.²⁰ So I ask you with these modern men, all are hurried back home from the factory or office, extremely weary and annoyed, how can they give their wives sufficient comfort? As a result they have no alternative but to choose

²⁰ Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu are characters in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The traditional Chinese novel would have been well known to Su Qing's readership.

their desires and pursue them, after all, the motivation to earn money is also nothing but to earn the favor of women, the whispers and tenderness of women, and perhaps when necessary require women to comfort him. Women who do not understand men mistakenly believe men make money for the sake of making money, so they treat love as a remedy that restores balance, because of this women are also not satisfied in fulfilling their wifely duties. Women also must have a career, or simply rely on taking care of a man for a career, they only want money and do not want love.

After all what value does a woman's career have? I have always been doubtful about this. What you must understand is for men the beginning of love is beginning of a career, because a man believes having a career can sustain his love. When love fails more than ever he strives for a career, because he believes if he is successful in his career he does not have to worry about ever having to lose hope of love. Yet women are not so. Women who have success in love have no need for a career. After achieving success they cannot have love, so what use is this so called career? Of course I know to pursue love while pursuing a career is doable, except it would be have to be the desire of each and every woman in the world, otherwise, as I see it, women who simultaneously work and are in relationships will lose out in comparison with women who focus on romantic love, and as a result their work will get the short end of the stick.

In reality, from the perspective of true love, surely there are no cases in which women do not wish for men capable of giving them attention. A young woman, to be sure, loves Jia Biaoju, yet perhaps by the time she understands the ways of the world, then and only then would she rather marry Zhen Biaoju.²¹ Women's love for Jia Biaoju is a desire for a sweet love, but when they marry Zhen Biaoju it is in order to be a top-ranking wife. However, Adam and Eve's offspring's misfortune of not having a ready-made paradise, the fruit of life, and their

²¹ Zhen Biaoju is Jia Biaoju's brother, also a character in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

descendants must themselves have a life of work. Thereupon men choose to make money, women naturally turned to dressing up. They would not have to look down on themselves; their objective is the same, to try to please each other.

Men's pride is a mistake. For example, from ancient time until now, the sages, heroes, scientists, artists, have been almost all men, very few are women. You must know this is brought about by the customary standard from ancient times until the present, men have always relied on this to try to please women. Opinions of evaluating women's quality ought to be derived from their relative ugliness or prettiness. Has anyone ever seen a history of the world that does not have enticing beautiful women? Suppose from today on men were willing to be in love with women who are guards, I believe that then at the gates of the government office buildings there would then be crowds of men making up a group of loving voices shouting salutes, numerous modern woman raising their lily white hands in salute. If all women did not require men to make money and strive for power, it would look like all the men were like Jia Baoyu, spending all day making rouge with servant girl's, then there would be less violence and fewer wars in the world.

Unfortunately so far this idea that men and women have roles has not changed, thus very busy men are devoted to fame and fortune, nothing else. I also have my doubts the value of men's so-called careers. I remember once my younger sister said to me, she wished to marry a kind and prosperous husband. I think in today's world people who are kind often cannot make money and lead a very miserable life, whereas those who make money are cheaters and hoarders to get rich. How can we expect them to develop a good heart?

Men use wealth and influence to win the favor of women. In fact, this is a very unreasonable thing, but some men use excessive effort and mess with their brains until they become simple and muddled, they mistake means for end, for the sake of making money,

and to become a government official. As long as someone has money and power, then who cares whether or not his wife loves him? The result of this is unimaginable. Although it is the case that a person's vanity can undoubtedly stimulate them, however sexual instinct also cannot be denied, therefore if someone works too hard in their youth doing other things, often they become middle aged men who have affairs just before old age. By that time even if he does regret it it's already too late.

There is not a single person who does not lust. Some are internally full of unfulfilled desires, while some give vent to sexual desires excessively. Those with unfulfilled desires apparently are all well behaved. They have good records in school, they are reliable members of society, and for many proper women this is the standard for a good husband. Scarcely do they realize these people masturbate. In marriage it is difficult for both sexes have to achieve happiness. As far as flirtatious men, there is the danger of disease; it may be assumed that both options are awful. There are also men capable of suppressing their own desires, they only mentally vent. That is beneficial for great artists can come from this. Because Dante could not marry Beatrice, he suppressed his sexual desires. Only because he did this could he write his immortal masterpiece, "Divine Comedy". But there are also men who are capable of finding a suitable means for venting lust; often there is contact with women and no improper action, that is the most ideal thing to wish for in a husband. It is a pity there are only a small number of ideal husbands, and that's it.

Men fear their wives. Apparently they are unable to voice the reason why, though if it could be explained it would simplify matters. However I'm afraid for a lot of them it is because they are inadequate sexually. If the elderly spend money with women at hand, both are only compensating for their sexual inadequateness. They feel ashamed, apologetic and unable to

speak, they have no alternative but to concede on all respects. In this way a man becomes henpecked. Against one's better instincts, they force themselves to back down and come up with feeble excuses in an argument. They may say it is to save trouble, but whatever they say is not the truth, the real truth is clear. The psychology of sex can explain all motivations of human behavior. If people consider this vulgar, then those people are not worth talking to.

Men love young, good-looking women; this is men's innocent uncomplicatedness. It also is because men in the area of physiology are prone to excitement. Sexuality comes from stimulation in the first place, yet it cannot last, because when two people are in contact for a long time the excitement decreases. Asking for material possessions is for women all they can ask for because they know men are likely to cease to be faithful, moreover it happens quickly. It is better to immediately grab some small amount of material possessions, for this is considered to be a consolation after they are disappointed. They can say, in any case, I got some money from him. This is a dumped women's heroic language, because she can obtain a considerable price. If one says: when women get material gains out of a relationship can this not count as women exploiting men? It's nothing other than belonging to the category of Ah Q²²; the result of this is that men are allowed to continue to take advantage of women.

Because men are liable to impulse, as a result, a regular mate cannot satisfy them. Now they love dancing girls, now they love female opera singers, sometimes men might also for the sake of something new turn the idea of a "career women" in their minds. At the time they may not have malice, they only attempt to give vent to their instinctive desires. They have the stamina to incorporate diverse things (or sample platter of the various kinds of women), and the more the better. Unfortunately at some point these women are incompatible with each other. Because of this there is the tragedy of discarding your wife because of someone new. In this society, most of

²² Ah Q is a character from the renowned Chinese author Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*

all in the metropolis, I fear few men are truly maintaining monogamy. They have at least one or more mistresses. This method of dealing with this was traditionally to take concubines, but later there was a period of suddenly promoting women's rights, love among modern men and modern women was very prevalent. As a result because of loving modern, they would divorce from their old wives more and more. Unexpectedly the recent mood has also undergone change. When men see that more and more people of the previous generation discard their previously arranged wives and marry a modern women, but after a few years those marriages don't turn out so well either, then they are convinced that marriage is half old and half new. Then in a daze they agree to get engaged, for if you are really to have a free love relationship there is no better option than to informally live together. Even though they are without the status of being a wife, it is still not unfair for the women. It also doesn't offend the wife, and so contrary to what you would expect it is a win-win situation. Currently many have these sorts of aspirations, but also there are women of high prestige, whether because when all is said and done they cannot physiologically control themselves, or because they deliberately exploit the men's influence. Either way they can easily have this kind of mistress status. Although freedom is freedom, it is still more convenient for men; men have the least level of responsibility.

Men are spoiled, because their love is not singularly faithful, not everlasting. However in reality this is their physiological instinct, so at least they are real. They like young, good looking women, because young, good looking women are directly capable of arousing sexual stimulation, as a result love occurs, that is real. Women claim it is like such and such man's morality, such and such man's knowledge, while in her mind she is secretly calculating his status and wealth, as if being his lover is capable of satisfying her vanity. I think this is disgraceful. However this is probably also related to physiology, women's sexual impulses are more

moderate, and thousands of years of traditional ideological restraints are used to control them, sexual repression has been regarded as natural for women. I've always felt the cinema usher's clothing--purple and red clothes with sewed on close rows of copper buttons, below white trousers with an outer inlay of two strips of color—looks better than men's black formal wear, however generally women all look down on this, because the usher has status. Put the most stylish haircut on the head of the man who shaves people's heads, would they then all change to priceless value? Ah, false women! Their love instinctually perhaps is also incapable of permanence or single faithfulness, yet they can subdue self and observe propriety; therefore they often are faithful until death. Their desires, even though often repressed, do not often produce great art, they only produce children, to a great extent in maternal love they seek their development, their lives will then finish.

Women's vanity compels men to abandon appropriate means of finding happiness and women. Not by means of youth, strength and beauty do men stimulate the opposite sex. Instead they give reign to savage murders, illegal accumulation of wealth, and a hope to steal the limelight, this arouses the attention of women around the world. Little do women realize at this moment the nature of men has already become greedy, fierce and ruthless, no longer suitable for tenderness, a misty fleeting kind of love. Women, although vain, overall also cannot completely suppress their sexual instincts. So they decide they cannot truly love men. Men are in mental anguish, their behavior will become cruel and lose rationality, and thus the whole world is chaos.

I hope throughout the world women will be a little less vain, for this also could make men a little less evil. Men are such pitiful and hateful animals.

A note for the reader who holds further interest in Su Qing:

Though much of her work has not yet been translated into English, there are some authors who have dedicated time to considering her works as a part of the greater canon of modern Chinese literature. Nicole Huang and Amy Dooling are two of this sort, and their works contain biographical detail as well as a greater literary analysis. The translation of *Waves* also contains great autobiographical detail provided by Su Qing's own pen. Much more has been written in Chinese, though it evades the English reader.

As a whole Su Qing has often been forgotten to translators, looked over for the works of Eileen Chang, Lu Xun, and other more popular authors. This is not to discredit her work or her literary talent and importance. She wrote with honesty and character, and her works as a whole delve into humanity on a level that evades many. To truly understand the time period and circumstances in which she wrote the reader would benefit from reading more about the May Fourth Movement and the role of the modern Chinese author. The titles listed in the bibliography are to be used for further research into the subject. For the bilingual reader *Su Qing sanwenji* contains a complete account of her essays, many of which further explore her opinions on gender and sexuality.

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