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'Only Women can Change this World into Heaven' Mei Niang, Male Chauvinist Society, and the Japanese Cultural Agenda in North China, 1939–1941

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From 1939 to 1941, Mei Niang (b. 1920) penned three of her most famous novellas, *Bang* (*Clam*)(1939), *Yu* (*Fish*)(1941), and *Xie* (*Crabs*) (1941).[1] Each of these works sheds light on the struggle of Chinese feminists in Japanese-occupied north China to realize ideals that stood in stark contrast to the conservative constructs of 'good wives, wise mothers' (*xianqi liangmu*) favoured by colonial officials. The contemporary appeal of Mei Niang's work is attested to by a catch-phrase, coined in 1942, that linked her with one of the most celebrated Chinese women writers of the twentieth century, Zhang Ailing (1920–1995): 'the south has Zhang Ailing, the north has Mei Niang' (*Nan Ling, Bei Mei*).[2] Both women attained great fame in Japanese-occupied territories, only to have their achievements tempered by condemnation of the environments in which they forged their early careers. The Chinese civil war that followed the collapse

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[1] *Bang* was originally published under the title *Yi ge bang* [*One Clam*]; the original title of Xie is *Xie: Yi ge bu xie de gushi* [*Crabs: A Story of Catching Crabs*].

[2] *Nan Ling Bei Mei* was coined by Beijing's *Madezeng* and Shanghai's *Yuzhoufeng* bookstores after a contest to determine the most popular contemporary Chinese woman writer. Shangguang Yin. 'Wo suo zhidao de Mei Niang' [All That I Know About Mei Niang] in Shangguang Yin, *Shu hua* [*Talking About Books*] (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 2001, pp. 33–6), p. 33.

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of the Japanese empire propelled the two writers along divergent trajectories: Zhang Ailing moved to Hong Kong and the United States, where she achieved iconic status, while Mei Niang remained in the People's Republic of China, to be vilified. As one of the pre-eminent 'writers of the enemy occupation' (*lunxian zuojia*), Mei Niang was persecuted by a Maoist regime (1949–1976) dedicated to the refutation of the Japanese colonial order in its entirety.

In China, the condemnation of cultural production in Japanese-occupied territories was structured by the political necessity of articulating national resistance to foreign imperialism. The historical narratives that emerged had dramatic ramifications for intellectuals whose war-time production did not trumpet Chinese nationalism: they were forcibly integrated into highly politicised narratives, ignored, or silenced. For decades, their work was judged within a strict collaboration/resistance dichotomy, which dominated perceptions of life in Japanese-occupied territories. This stranglehold has begun to loosen, as scholars re-envision the world that lay between the two extremes of 'collaboration' and 'resistance.' One of the earliest interventions was delivered by Howard Goldblatt, in his pioneering study of the pre-eminent resistance woman writer from Manchuria, Xiao Hong (Hsiao Hung, 1911–1942). In *Hsiao Hung*, Goldblatt argues that those who situate her work within the category of resistance literature 'have apparently confused theme with setting.'[3] Goldblatt stresses that Xiao was driven by feminist ideals: 'the theme of feminism is highly visible in all her major works except Ma Po-lo.'[4] Similarly, in 'The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Manchuria in Xiao Hong's *Field of Life and Death*,' Lydia Liu suggests that the depiction of Xiao's work as 'national allegory' must be 'opened up, interrogated, and radically rethought.'[5] Liu reveals that Xiao does not champion nationalism, but rather censures it 'as a profoundly patriarchal ideology.'[6] Sha Jincheng has also argued that 'from start to finish [Xiao Hong] never forgot to express in her writings the themes of "sexual equality" and "women's liberation."'[7] Goldblatt, Liu, and Sha

[3] Howard Goldblatt, *Hsiao Hung* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 122.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[5] Lydia Liu, 'The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Manchuria in Xiao Hong's *Field of Life and Death*' in Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, (eds), *Body, Subject and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 157–77), pp. 158, 161.

[6] Lydia Liu, 'The Female Body,' p. 175.

[7] Sha Jincheng, 'Xiao Hong yu *Yeshao*' [Xiao Hong and the *Night Sentry*] in Liu Yunzhao, (ed.), *Wei Man Wenhua* [*Bogus Manchukuo Culture*] (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1993, pp. 94–101), p. 99.

effectively illustrate that Xiao Hong's role as a pioneering feminist in north China has been overshadowed by narratives too narrowly focused on the nation.

After Xiao Hong left the Japanese colonial state of Manchukuo (1932–1945), Mei Niang was the first major woman writer to emerge in the territory to continue the promotion of a feminist discourse. Zhang Quan has noted that Mei Niang's novellas *Bang*, *Yu*, and *Xie* are linked by aquatic titles and an 'obscure women's rights ideology' (*menglong de nüquan zhuyi*).[8] This study focuses on the latter to demonstrate how these works epitomize Mei Niang's aim to 'describe the reality' (*miaoxie zhenshi*) and 'expose the reality' (*baolü zhenshi*) of Chinese women's lives under Japanese occupation. Ironically, her writings highlight a disenfranchisement of women that fails to account for the professional success that she personally enjoyed. From a privileged vantage point, Mei Niang articulated a feminist critique of Japanese colonial ideals. For her efforts, she was lauded by her peers, both Chinese and Japanese, and by the reading public. The success that she attained illustrates that significant opportunities existed for Chinese feminists to work within Japanese colonial institutions for their own advantage, to critique the chauvinistic foundations of a colonial state that paid them little heed. The 'reality' that Mei Niang portrays in *Bang*, *Yu*, and *Xie* and the career that she established offer important reflection on the state of Chinese women's lives in Japanese-occupied north China.

Raising a Woman Writer

Mei Niang was born Sun Jiarui, on 24 December 1920, in Vladivostok and was raised in Changchun, Jilin.[9] As a child, her father, Sun Zhiyuan (1897–1936), had moved with his family from Zhaoyuan county, Shandong, to Manchuria, where he rose from a position as a messenger in a British firm to become a major regional industrialist; his success was based on mastery of English, Japanese, and Russian,

[8] Zhang Quan, 'Mei Niang: Ta de lijing he ta de zuopin' [Mei Niang: Her Place in History and Her Writings] in Zhang Quan (ed.), *Mei Niang xiaoshuo sanwen ji* [*Mei Niang's Collected Novels and Essays*](Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1997, pp. 607–29), p. 616.

[9] Mei Niang is a pen name, adopted in the late 1930s. Other pen names include Fang Zi, Lao Xia, Liu Qingniang, Lu Yin, and Sun Minzi.

and a timely marriage into the family of a prominent militarist.[10] Mei Niang's childhood was far from idyllic in the well-to-do Sun household. Her mother had been brought into the wealthy, extended family as a concubine, and was hounded to suicide by Sun's wife soon after she gave birth to Mei Niang. In spite of this inauspicious beginning, Mei Niang enjoyed a close relationship with her father, who encouraged her to be independent, 'like a man' (*xiang nanren yiyang*); as a young girl, Mei Niang shocked her neighbours by driving a horse and carriage through the city streets.[11]

From an early age, Mei Niang pursued studying and writing. When she was four years old, she began an eclectic Sino-Western education at home. For several years, she studied under a classically trained Confucian scholar, learnt English from the Russian wife of a local bank manager, and was introduced to popular contemporary literature by her father. In 1930, Mei Niang embarked upon formal studies at Jilin Provincial Junior Middle School for Girls. There, she enjoyed work by authors as diverse as Bing Xin (1902–99), George Byron (1788–1824), Lu Xun (1881–1936), and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936).[12] At home and at school, Mei Niang thrived on a wide variety of literary influences. The following year, when she was ten years old, Mei Niang transferred to Jilin Municipal Middle School for Girls, and dormitory life. The all-girl environment and stern instructors contrasted with her home life, which featured a doting father and a distant step-mother. Later, she credited her dormitory experience with awakening her 'strong affection' (*nonghou de ganqing*) for a collective womanhood.[13]

In September 1931, shortly after Mei Niang began middle school, the Japanese invaded Manchuria; the young girl was immediately returned to her family home in Changchun. In March 1932, Manchukuo was formally established. Soon afterwards, Sun Zhiyuan rejected a vice-presidency of the Manchukuo Central Bank and the family traveled in north China for a year.[14] But restrictions on the export of capital from Manchukuo made life on the road untenable, and they returned to their established lives in the Japanese colonial

[10] Mei Niang, 'Wo de qingshao nian shiqi: 1920–1938' [My Childhood, 1920–1938] in Zhang Quan (ed.), *Xunzhao Mei Niang* [*Searching For Mei Niang*] (Beijing: Mingjing chubanshe, 1998, pp. 97–128), pp. 97–9.

[11] Mei Niang, 'Wo de qingshao nian shiqi,' p. 102.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 109.

[13] Mei Niang, 'Wo mei kanjianguo niang de xiaolian' [I Never Saw Mother's Smiling Face], *Funü zazhi* [*Women's Journal*] (November 1944); Rpt. in Zhang Quan (ed.), *Mei Niang xiaoshuo sanwen ji* (pp. 511–12), p. 512.

[14] Mei Niang, 'Wo de qingshao nian shiqi,' pp. 107, 111–15.

state. Her father's decision to return to Manchukuo epitomizes the experience of Chinese who may not have approved of Japan's imperial ambitions *per se*, but had few other options. As the rest of China suffered war and economic dislocation, Manchukuo offered a relatively stable environment. In his recent study, *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China*, Rana Mitter reconstructs and contextualises the varied Chinese responses to initial Japanese pleas for the incorporation of local elites into their haphazard imperialist agenda.[15] But the increasingly militaristic nature of Japanese rule in Manchukuo belied the promises that accompanied the founding of their 'earthly paradise' (*letu*). Mei Niang's legacy underlines the characteristics of colonial life that appealed to and repulsed Chinese feminists.

In the fall of 1933, Mei Niang returned to school and to a curriculum still focused on Chinese and Western texts, although the promotion of Sun Yatsen (1866–1925) or the Republic of China was banned. Colonial officials began to dismantle liberal arts programs as they directed their attention towards the expansion of primary and vocational education.[16] In Jilin Municipal Middle School for Girls, Japanese staff promoted ideals of womanhood that stressed the cultivation of docility, obedience, and composure.[17] Uninspired by such conservatism, Mei Niang immersed herself in literature by writers such as Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun (1908–1988), whose work was banned in 1935 after they fled the colony. In 1936, when she was sixteen years old, Mei Niang's own scholastic achievements were memorialised with the publication of her first volume of short stories, *Xiaojie ji* (*A Young Lady's Collected Works*). Unfortunately, this work has been lost in the ravages of time; all that is known to exist of it are contemporary critiques.[18] In the following decade, while in her teens and early twenties, Mei Niang published three more volumes of collected works.

In 1936, the death of Mei Niang's father and graduation from middle school transformed her world. Her guardians, her stepmother and

[15] Rana Mitter, *The Manchurian Myth: Nationalism, Resistance, and Collaboration in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[16] Details of education reform can be found in *Manchoukuo Yearbook: 1941* (Hsinking: Manchoukuo Yearbook Company, 1942), pp. 671–91.

[17] Mei Niang, 'Wo de qingshao nian shiqi,' p. 118.

[18] For example, see Han Hu, '*Di'erdai* lun' [Discussion of *The Second Generation*] (Dalian: Datong bao wenyi, 1943); Rpt. in Zhang Yumao (ed.), *Dongbei xiandai wenxue daxi, 1919–49: Sanwen juan* [*Compendium of Modern Northeastern Literature, 1919–49: Volume of Essays*] (14 Vols. Vol. 9, pp. 453–8) (Shenyang: Shenyang chubanshe, 1996), p. 454.

uncle, sent her and her siblings to study in Japan, coincidentally at the same time that Xiao Hong was also in Japan.[19] For two years, Mei Niang attended Kobe's Women's College. Although Mei Niang's dream was to study medicine, she soon discovered that the only avenue available to her was that of finishing school to become a 'good wife, wise mother.' Such an ambition alienated the young woman who dreamt of 'modern' opportunities premised on the ideals of independence with which she had been raised; indeed, as will be shown below, a frequent theme in her work is the inadequacy of Japanese-style education for women.[20] Mei Niang's disquiet was compounded by access, at Kobe's Women's College and in Tokyo's Chinese language bookstore, to work by writers she later credited with further awakening her social conscience, including Guo Muoruo (1892–1978), Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), and Karl Marx (1818–1883).[21]

Mei Niang's studies in Japan were interrupted by a burgeoning love affair with a fellow Chinese overseas student, Liu Longguang (1916–1949); they met at Tokyo's Chinese language bookstore, where he worked. Her family's refusal to accept their relationship resulted in the severance of her financial support. Mei Niang was forced to return prematurely to Manchukuo. In 1938, living at home again in the colonial capital of Xinjing (the renamed Changchun), she was employed as a proof-reader for the Japanese-funded Chinese-language newspaper, *Datong bao* (*Great Unity Herald*). Mei Niang also 'discuss[ed] women's suffering' (*shuoshuo funü de kunan ba*) in the weekly *Funü* (*Woman*) page.[22] In 1939, Liu followed Mei Niang to Xinjing, whereupon she rejected a marriage that was being arranged for her. The young couple began to live together, disregarding her family's objections. In her personal life, Mei Niang strove to realize the ideals that informed her writing. Despite several years of a Japanese-style education designed to foster submissive 'good wives, wise mothers,' Mei Niang employed her education as she saw fit: she chose her own husband, pursued her professional ambitions, and

[19] Mei Niang's first stepmother succumbed to tuberculosis in 1933, and her father married again.

[20] In 1990, Mei Niang reiterated this criticism in 'Songhua jiang de buyu' [The Nurturing Songhua River] in Liang Shanding (ed.), *Xiao Jun jinian ji* [*Commemorative Collection for Xiao Jun*] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1990, pp. 230–3), pp. 231–2.

[21] Mei Niang, 'Wo de qingshao nian shiqi,' pp. 123–4; Mei Niang recounts buying Xiao Jun's virulently anti-Japanese *Village in August* [*Ba yue de xiangcun*] in Japan. Mei Niang, 'Songhua jiang de buyu,' pp. 232–3.

[22] Mei Niang, 'Wo de qingshao nian shiqi,' p. 127.

led an active social life. In the summer of 1939, Mei Niang wrote *Bang*; it was published the following year in the Japanese-sponsored, Chinese-language journal, the *Daban Huawen meiri* (*Osaka mainichi shimbun/Chinese Osaka Daily*).

Mei Niang's career began to flourish as colonial officials increased efforts to structure Chinese cultural production in Manchukuo and other occupied territories. In *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937–1945*, Edward Gunn, Jr. argues that the 'primary mission (of colonial cultural functionaries) was to revive literary activity in order to exploit it by converting it into propaganda. The activity was restored, but never seriously exploited.'[23] In Manchukuo, a resurgence of Chinese literary production was accomplished in the 1930s, but it was paralleled by an ever-expanding framework of regulations prohibiting pessimistic writing, derision of colonial institutions, and denigration of conservative ideals of womanhood. The ongoing issuance of regulations such as the 'Publication Laws' (1932), 'Discussion of Public Affairs Controls' (1937), and the 'Eight Abstentions' (1941) reflected bureaucratic attempts to stifle dissent across the Japanese empire. But colonial officials' efforts to dictate intellectual production were far more widely publicised than they were effective. In Manchukuo, as in Beiping and Shanghai, 'the failure of functionaries to inject writers with a sense of joy, confidence, and militant mission is evident not only from a perusal of the contents of the literature, but from explicit statements by Japanese critics themselves.'[24] An addendum to Manchukuo's Eight Abstentions asserts that 'there are obviously very many who agitate the people to contrary emotions, write of the dark side, and vigorously describe the red light districts.'[25] Cultural criticism emerged as the predominant literary form. Gunn argues that Chinese writers who remained in Japanese-occupied territories did so primarily because of connections to the territory, family concerns, and the fear of being unable to earn an income elsewhere, not for affinity with Japanese imperialism.[26] Their

[23] Edward Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 51.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Yu Lei, transl., 'Ziliao' [Data] in Feng Weiqun, Wang Jianzhong, Li Chunyan, Li Shuquan (eds), Dongbei lunxian shiqi wenxue guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji [Collection of Papers From the International Research Conference on Literature of the Enemy Occupied Northeast] (Shenyang: Shenyang chubanshe, 1992, pp. 171–81), p. 181.

[26] Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 3.

dismay at the nature of Japanese domination is readily apparent in their work.

Chinese writers in Manchukuo, as elsewhere in the Japanese empire, were inspired by the potential of social realism to effect political change. Leo Ching, in *Becoming Japanese: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation*, cites Japanese writer Hayama Yoshiki's (1894–1945) reflection on literature in colonial Taiwan in 1937:

> [The pessimism in social realism is] not only the cry of the Taiwanese, but also the cries of all the oppressed classes. It is in the spirit of Pushkin, Gorki, and Lu Hsün; it [has much] in common with Japanese proletarian work. It fully embodies the highest literary principles.[27]

Thus, Chinese criticism of colonial life could be legitimized by Japanese intellectuals. Even among Japanese writers in Manchukuo, 'realism seem[ed] to predominate among the main literary trends,' linking them with their Chinese counterparts.[28] Colonial officials responded to their critics by haphazardly applying intimidation in an effort to pressure writers to abandon their pessimistic stances, a phenomenon that also characterised the literary worlds of Beiping and Shanghai.[29] Writers Zhu Ti (b. 1923) and Li Keju (b. 1920) have argued further that Chinese women writers in Manchukuo were empowered by a colonial misogyny that dismissed their work as inconsequential, sparing them the intense investigation that dogged most male writers.[30] The regime of literary regulations established to warn off writers like Mei Niang is a testament to the subversive nature of their activities.

In the fall of 1939, Mei Niang and Liu Longguang's apartment became a salon for young literati in the Manchukuo capital. It was a centre for one of the most prominent factions of subversive Chinese writers who, with the support of Japanese intellectuals Kobayashi Hideo (1902–1983), Abe Tomoji (1903–1973), and Kishida Kunio

[27] Hayama Yoshiki refers to Lung Ying-tsung's (Japanese pen name Ryu Ei-so) 'dark' novel *A Town of Papaya Trees* [*Papaiya no aru machi*] (1937). Cited in Leo Ching, *Becoming Japanese: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 129.

[28] Shinichi Yamaguchi, 'Contemporary Literature in Manchuria,' *Concordia and Culture in Manchoukuo* (Xinjing: *Manchuria Daily News*, July 20. 1938, pp. 27–9), p. 27.

[29] For example, see Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 11.

[30] Zhu Ti and Li Keju, 'The Northeast's Literary World, 1942 to 1945' [1942 yu 1945 nian Dongbei wenyijie] in Feng Weiqun *et al*. (eds), *Dongbei* (pp. 405–9), p. 408.

(1890–1954), formed the Literary Collective (*Wencong*).[31] Mei Niang was a founding member of this group, which urged writers to 'describe the reality' and to 'expose the reality' of colonial life. Unfortunately, due to a lack of financial support, their self-titled journal, featuring original writing and literary criticism, was short-lived. But before its demise, the Literary Collective published several of the most important books of the occupation era, including, on 24 June 1940, Mei Niang's second volume of collected works, *Di'er dai* (*The Second Generation*). This critically acclaimed collection of eleven short stories was credited with introducing 'liberalism' (*ziyou zhuyi*) to Manchukuo's literary world.[32] In the preface to *Di'er dai*, famed Manchurian writer Liang Shanding (1914–1996) offered an authoritative assessment of her work. Liang lauded the 'progress' (*qianjin*) that Mei Niang exhibited towards 'exposing reality' rather than 'the little girl's love and hate,' which he said characterised her earlier work.[33]

At the end of 1940, Liu Longguang was hired as a reporter for the *Daban Huawen meiri*, and the couple moved to Japan.[34] The following year was spent in Kobe, Kyoto, Nara, Osaka, and Tokyo. They welcomed this work since the Literary Collective's finances had run dry and the journal was one of the most prestigious in Asia; it was published bi-weekly in Japan (until 1944, and then monthly) for distribution across the Japanese empire. The *Daban Huawen meiri* provided Liu Longguang and Mei Niang with enhanced career opportunities. In the preface to the edition marking their first anniversary, the editors stress that their publication policies are not dictated by the state or by the army, but rather the editors 'stand on a position of freedom' (*zhan zai ziyou de lichang shang*).[35] This enabled them to publish several of the most critical works on life in Manchukuo, including Dan Di's

[31] The Literary Collective was one of over eighty literary societies that emerged in Manchukuo in the late 1930s. See Qian Liqun (ed.), *Zhongguo lunxianqu wenxue daxi: Shiliao juan* [*Compendium of the Literature of China's Enemy Occupied Territories: Volume of Historical Data*]. 11 Vols. Vol. 11. (Nanling, Guangxi: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), pp. 557–67.

[32] Han Hu, '*Di'er dai* lun,' pp. 456–7.

[33] Liang's critique was published under the pen name of Shan Ding. Shan Ding, 'Cong *Xiaoji ji* dao *Di'erdai*' [From *Young Lady's Collection* to *The Second Generation*] in Mei Niang, *Di'er dai* [*The Second Generation*](Xinjing: Wencong han xinghui, 1940, pp. 1–4), p. 1.

[34] Edward Gunn, Jr. notes that Liu also edited *Wude bao* [*Martial Virtue Herald*]. See Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 279, ft. 90.

[35] Zhang Yumao (ed.), Dongbei xiandai wenxue daxi, 1919–1949: Ziliao suoyin [Compendium of Modern Northeastern Literature, 1919–49: Data Index](14 Vols. Vol. 14)(Shenyang: Shenyang chubanshe, 1996), p. 63.

(1916–1995) *Andi he Mahua* (*Andi and Mahua*)(1940); her award-winning novella explicitly condemns the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. But life in Japan was marred by several factors, especially the birth and death of their first child. Mei Niang was also disconcerted by Japanese discrimination against Koreans, which defied the 'racial harmony' officially propagated in Manchukuo.[36] Their stay was warmed, though, by contact with friends of her father and the development of new ties. Mei Niang polished her Japanese language skills by translating Japanese literature, notably that of Kume Masao (1891–1952) into Chinese. In Japan, she witnessed first-hand the war-time hardships under which the masses strained and refused to blame them for their nation's aggression against her homeland.[37] In 1941, against the backdrop of an increasingly militarised Japanese empire, Mei Niang wrote *Yu* and *Xie*.[38]

In the spring of 1942, following the United States' entry into World War II, the war climate in Japan grew untenable and the couple left for China. Liu Longguang was invited to Beiping (the Republican and occupation-era name of Beijing), which was occupied by the Japanese since 1937, to promote literary work; he was a founder of the North China Writers' Association (*Huabei zuojia xiehui*). From 1942 to 1943, Mei Niang worked as an editor and reporter at Beiping's *Funü zazhi* (*Lady's Journal*), in which she published a translation of Kume Masao's novel *Muxi jiazu* (*Matriarchal Clan*); she also wrote an advice column, '*Mou furen xinxiang*' (Madame X's Letter Box), for the *Shibao* (*Facts Herald*).[39] The tone of Mei Niang's work is illustrated in a 1943 open letter to fellow Manchukuo woman writer Wu Ying (1915–61), in which she asserted: 'women in this society experience a great deal of suffering and pain that men can't imagine . . . Only women can change this world into heaven'.[40] Mei Niang consistently linked women's 'suffering and pain' with the 'male chauvinist society' (*nanquan shehui*) that she believed was the genesis

[36] Anti-Korean prejudice in Japan is the topic of Mei Niang's short story, *Qiaomin* [*Expatriates*], *Xin Manzhou* [*New Manchukuo*] (June 1941)(Vol. 3, No. 6).

[37] Mei Niang, 'Wo yu Riben' [Me and Japan] in Zhang Quan (ed.), *Xunzhao Mei Niang*, pp. 144.

[38] Both were published in serial form: *Yu* in *Zhongguo wenyi* [*Chinese Literature and Arts*](July 1941) and *Xie* in the *Daban Huawen meiri* (August – December, 1941).

[39] Mei Niang's work also appeared in *Zhonghua zhoubao* [*China Weekly*].

[40] This letter was published in Manchukuo, in Xinjing's *Qingnian wenhua* [*Youth Culture*]. Mei Niang, 'Ji Wu Ying shu' [Mailing Wu Ying a Letter], *Qingnian wenhua* (1943, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 84), p. 84.

of social problems.[41] Her assertion that 'only women can change this world into heaven' mocked Japanese claims of an 'earthly paradise' in Manchukuo.

In Beiping, Mei Niang and Liu Longguang led active lives. In March 1943, Mei Niang gave birth to a daughter, Qing, as her husband edited *Zhongguo wenxue* (*Chinese Literature*), *Yanjing yuekan* (*Yanjing Monthly*), and *Zuojia shenghuo* (*Writer's Life*), directed the North China Writers' Association, and became involved in underground activities.[42] Together, the couple participated in the establishment of the North China-Manchukuo Writers' Association (*Huabei Manzhou xiehui*), which was designed to strengthen links between writers in Beiping and Manchukuo. Mei Niang assertively promoted women writers living in Manchukuo, such as Wu Ying and Zhu Ti, in Beiping's relatively freer literary world. Mei Niang's popularity was marked in the fall of 1942 with the catch-phrase, 'the south has Zhang Ailing, the north has Mei Niang.' Unbeknownst to her, in her early twenties, she was at the pinnacle of her career.

Mei Niang's fame solidified in conjunction with the establishment of the Japanese-sponsored, pan-Asian Greater East Asia Writer's Congress (Datongya wenxuezhe dahui/Daitōa bungakusha taikai). The impetus for the Congress came from former Japanese army employees, Chinese academics, and other writers across the Japanese empire. Since August 1940, Japanese intellectuals Kikuchi Kan (1888–1948) and Kume Masao (who in 1942 became executive director of the Japanese Literary Patriotic Association) had pushed for measures to integrate Asian literature.[43] The Congress was organised under Japanese auspices, and stressed Japanese culture, but vital contributions were also made by delegates from occupied China; the literature department of Beiping University evaluated Chinese-language works.[44] The first Congress was convened in Tokyo, from November 3–10 1942.[45] It was anticipated that this Congress would 'discuss ways and means of how literary circles . . . can offer cooperation toward the prosecution of the Greater East Asia War and the creation

[41] Mei Niang, 'Ji Wu Ying shu,' p. 84.

[42] Mei Niang, 'Yi ge chaqu' [A Sideline] in Feng Weiqun, Wang Jianzhong, Li Chunyan, Li Shuquan (eds), *Dongbei Lunxian Shiqi Wenxue* [Literature of the Northeastern Enemy-Occupation Period] (Shenyang: Shenyang chubanshe, 1992, pp. 414–16), pp. 414–416; Gunn Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 279, ft. 90.

[43] Their activities are cited in *ibid.*, p. 32.

[44] Mei Niang, personal interview, Vancouver, May 10, 2001.

[45] Details of this Congress can be found in Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, pp. 32–3.

of literature and art characteristic of East Asia.'[46] In 1943, the second Congress (August 25–28) issued awards based on literary merit, not affinity with Japanese state directives. At this Congress, the first 'Greater East Asia Literature Award' was presented to Manchukuo writer Yuan Xi (1919–1988) for his novel *Beike* (*Seashells*), while Mei Niang was awarded a secondary prize for *Yu*. Both writers were noted for their social critiques. In October 1941, Yuan Xi, fearing retribution in Manchukuo for the popularity of his 'dark' writings, had moved to Beiping, where he was subsequently imprisoned; Yuan was released through the personal guarantees of Liu Longguang and Takeuchi Yoshiro (1886–?), a sympathetic Japanese judge stationed in China.[47]

Mei Niang's growing popularity was marked by the third and final Greater East Asia Writers' Congress, held in Nanjing on 12–14 November 1944. Although the agenda had not substantially altered in the two years since the first Congress, the atmosphere certainly had. Edward Gunn, Jr. has described the 'desperate drive' that characterised official efforts to mobilise writers during the final year of the war, as well as the distinct lack of progress made by the Congresses.[48] Mei Niang, whose poignantly anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal *Xie* was acclaimed 'Novel of the Year,' attended the Congress but her husband abstained.[49] Mei Niang's recognition by the Congress cemented her reputation, but also inextricably linked her name with one of the highest profile Japanese colonial institutions. Three novellas brought Mei Niang great fame even as they sealed her fate: *Bang*, *Yu*, and *Xie*. Each features prominently in contemporary and latter-day collected volumes of her work. All are fictional accounts of the struggle of young Chinese women to overcome patriarchal subjugation; colonial society serves as a backdrop for their insecurity, fear, and oppression. Together, *Bang*, *Yu*, and *Xie* 'expose the reality' of Chinese women's lives in a Japanese colonial 'male chauvinist society.'

[46] *The Hong Kong News*, Oct. 29, 1942, p. 1. Cited in Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, pp. 32–3.

[47] Yuan Xi, the pen name of Li Keyi. Zhang (ed.), *Dongbei xiandai wenxue daxi, 1919–1949: Ziliao suoyin*, p. 87. Mei Niang recounts this incident in 'Wo yu Riben,' pp. 145–6.

[48] Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, pp. 41–3.

[49] Edward Gunn, Jr. notes that Mei Niang received her award and a cash prize of twenty thousand yen. Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, pp. 41–43, 279 (ft. 92).

Bang

Bang is the story of an ill-fated young couple in Manchukuo, Bai Meili and her lover Wang Qi. Meili and Qi are co-workers, whose love affair is destroyed by their parents' arrangements to marry them off. Meili's parents aspire to marry her into a prominent family in Tianjin, to halt their family's economic decline and escape Manchukuo's 'suffocating' atmosphere.[50] Traumatised by her parents' plans, Meili seeks consolation from Qi, and has her first sexual experience with him. The next morning, at work, Meili hears of Qi's own impending marriage, to which he is equally opposed. Learning of his engagement from co-workers, Meili feels betrayed. She retaliates by announcing that she had never considered their relationship to be monogamous, and that she has another boyfriend; Meili leaves work, never to return. When a local newspaper salaciously reports her innocent meeting with a former male colleague as 'a lapse of morality,' Qi believes Meili's pretence and accedes to his parents' arrangements just as Meili determines that their relationship is worth saving.[51] *Bang* concludes as Meili arrives at the train station, too late to stop Qi from leaving for his hometown. Meili is devastated by the loss of her relationship, her job, and her hope for the future.

Meili's education and career reflect the lives of many young Chinese women in Manchukuo. Meili achieved a high school education, despite her parents' belief that for women to 'know two characters is enough.'[52] As a tax-office clerk, Meili pursued a 'contemporary woman's vocation' (*shidai de nüzi zhiye*), which provided her with little money or dignity; she complains that women in the workplace are treated as if they are 'feeble-minded.'[53] As the cost of food and consumer goods soared, her meagre wages declined in value even further. To add insult to injury, as Meili reels from learning that Qi is engaged, she is ordered to help a fellow female co-worker serve tea to their male bosses.[54] Their refusal to serve tea like Japanese women sparks an argument with a male co-worker who suggests that they shouldn't be insulted by the request, since they often serve tea to each other. The women complain that in spite of their education they are only allowed

[50] Mei Niang, *Bang* [*Clam*] in Liang Shanding (ed.), *Changye yinghuo* [*Fireflies of the Long Night*] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1986, pp. 158–216), p. 171.
[51] Mei Niang, *Bang*, p, 205.
[52] *Ibid*., p. 179.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 168.
[54] *Ibid*., p. 169.

to perform mindless, demeaning tasks. They explicitly denounce behaviour typifying colonial ideals of womanhood.[55]

Meili's precarious economic position afforded her few options besides marriage. Her parents considered her work to be a temporary diversion with no prospects, and Meili could not survive on her own income. In Manchukuo, all women were expected to marry and were pressured to do so before the age of forty, when they were believed to have exhausted their marital options.[56] Meili is intent on marrying, but wants to choose her own partner, Qi. She envies the 'qualifications of contemporary wives' (*shidai de qizi de tiaojian*), excellence in housekeeping, cultivation of a 'pure and fresh mind,' and strong child-rearing skills, but swears that she would rather become a prostitute than enter into an arranged marriage in which she would be 'bullied' (*qifu*) from morning till night by her husband's family.[57] Thus, Meili anticipates realisation of the attributes of a 'good wife, wise mother,' but chafes at the restrictive path accorded her. Meili recognises that rejection of her arranged engagement leaves her few alternatives. Before she learns that Qi is engaged, she rhetorically asks him how they can escape her parents' machinations: 'Where [can we] go? Tianjin, Beijing, or even a little further to Shanghai or Nanjing? Where is it not the same?'[58] In 1939, when *Bang* was written, each of these cities was occupied by the Japanese, who promoted a conservative cultural agenda that stressed women's filial piety and marriage.

The central conflict in *Bang* pits Meili's desire to control her own destiny against her parents' stress on conservative Confucian ideals. Her parents' stance is illustrated by how they treat their children. Meili's elder brother, the family heir, is an unemployed opium addict, yet it is Meili who is subjected to firm discipline. All of Meili's activities outside the home, including her career ambitions, are curtailed at her parents' discretion. Their arrangement of a marriage on her behalf is the catalyst for Meili to rebel and have sex with Qi. Afterwards, despite fears of her parents' wrath and pregnancy, she avers: 'I must not blame myself. That is a natural instinct. Everyone must have it, to refuse it would be immoral. I mustn't feel sorry for losing my virginity.'[59] Meili defends her choice to engage in pre-marital

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 168.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 194.
[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 191–4.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 173.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

sex with her boyfriend; sex is a 'natural' search for affection and understanding that women should feel no shame for pursuing. In her diary, Meili mourns the plight of virgin girls, who alone suffer the consequences of sexual relationships.[60] Complaining that 'women's road is narrow, especially in this society, which uses virginity (*zhencao*) to judge women,' Meili questions why women should be expected to be virgins on their wedding nights, when their fiancés are not.[61] Meili argues that it is incumbent upon women to teach their children to challenge such double standards so that 'the future world will become rational.'[62]

Meili's desperate plight awakens her social conscience. Meili determines to 'make the women around her realize that only women can sympathise with and understand women, and that women need to unite for their own salvation.'[63] She argues that women can only achieve salvation when they become conscious of, and united against, their subjugation. Meili was victimized not only by men but also by other women (especially her mother), who needed to be awakened to their complicity in the subjugation of women. At the close of *Bang*, Meili's devastation personifies the violence that Mei Niang ascribed to the Confucian ideals that dominated women's lives in Manchukuo.

Yu

In 1943, the Greater East Asia Writers' Congress awarded *Yu* the 'Second Prize for Literature' as the ranking Japanese scholar of Chinese literature, Yoshikawa Kōjirō (1904–1980), condemned it as 'so utterly devoid of values in its portrayal of adultery and despair that it ranks among the most degenerate pieces' he had ever read.[64] Yoshikawa's revulsion was no doubt inspired by the novel's structure as well as by its content. Mei Niang empowers the pregnant protagonist, Fen, with the only voice in the novella, silencing the male characters, Lin Shengmin (her partner and the father of her son) and his cousin, Lin. A stormy night provides the backdrop for Fen to recount her childhood, her decision to 'betray' (*beipan*) her family to pursue

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 188.
[61] *Ibid.*
[62] *Ibid.*
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 189.
[64] Cited in Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 37.

romance, and her love affairs.[65] Fen describes herself as a 'thirsting for love woman,' on a quest to find true love.[66] All vestiges of Fen's happy home life with Shengmin are destroyed, however, when she discovers that he has secretly married; an affair with his cousin leaves her equally unfulfilled. Through failed relationships, negative school experiences, and a repressive home environment, Fen comes to believe that the genesis of her suffering is 'patriarchal society' (*nanxing zhongxin shehui*), which does not treat a woman as a 'human being' (*ren*), but merely as an 'accessory' (*fushupin*) of a man.[67]

Through her narrative, Fen reflects on her childhood and the Manchukuo education system. She describes being raised without her birth mother in a home dominated by a stubborn father and a wicked step-mother as 'bitterer than being in jail.'[68] Repulsed by the 'corpse-like life' (*xingshi si de shenghuo*) expected of her as a daughter in a wealthy household, she is disappointed by an education system that failed to improve her life; she argues that her Manchukuo education only made her more aware of how oppressed she actually was.[69] Fen denounces the repressive, cloistered all-girls school environment, which taught women to 'recognise a few characters' and stunted their youthful sexual urges.[70] Fen argues that the colonial education system could not produce its intended result, submissive women, but rather only emotionally starved women, like her. Far from curbing her sexual appetite, the puritan environment led to her unrequited crush on a male teacher. Her failure to consummate that relationship exasperated her even further.

The central theme in *Yu* is Fen's attempt to resolve the demands of ideal womanhood with her 'thirst' for love. Fen believes that women's search for love, which she defines as sympathy and understanding, constitutes a drive for 'spiritual liberation' (*jingshen de jiefang*) from the conservatism that rules their lives.[71] Fen is torn between her parents' insistence on her chaste obedience to them and her own individual fulfillment: 'family and love were battling in my heart.'[72]

[65] Mei Niang, *Yu* [*Fish*] in Mei Niang, *Yu* (Beijing: Xinmin yinshuguan, 1943), pp. 27–74; p. 31.
[66] Mei Niang, *Yu*, p. 73.
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[69] *Ibid.*, p. 50.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Fen chooses her partner, Shengmin, and breaks with her family to live with him. Ultimately, Shengmin proves unable to provide her with the emotional support that she seeks: '. . . What I need is love: true understanding, love that flows up from the bottom of the heart. Hugging, holding, kissing, stroking, what does all that add up to? I can easily get that from my husband . . . '[73] Fen subverts the official promotion of chastity as the foundation of women's virtue by insisting that sex can not compare to the importance of emotional fulfillment; her attempt to find love with her husband's cousin underlines her assertion. Further, Fen scorns the prevailing belief that women in free-choice marriages had seduced their husbands, a myth perpetuated, she believes, to denigrate women and to excuse men's extra-marital affairs with other 'seductresses.'[74] Fen stresses that women's needs can only be satiated through emotionally-committed relationships with men who treat them as equals, not as 'accessories,' which are only valued for their bodies.

Fen repudiates Shengmin when he attempts to impose sexual double standards on their relationship with his demand that she become his concubine; his family is intent on gaining control over her child, their only grandson. Fen refuses, on the grounds that such a position would render their relationship unequal; she swears that she would rather become a prostitute.[75] Fen characterises Shengmin's arranged marriage as an attempt to 'swindle another woman out of her independence.'[76] Shengmin responds by beating Fen and storming out of the apartment. Fen then realises that the love of her life is unable to provide her with the mutually respectful, monogamous relationship that she once thought they shared. Shengmin is incapable of divesting himself of the privileges that accrue to him as a man in a patriarchal society. Fen compares herself to a fish that needs to wriggle out of the net in which it is trapped; if the fish is too afraid to make a move, then its only fate is decapitation or suffocation.[77] Fen argues that she must free herself from the 'net' of patriarchal domination before it kills her.

Mei Niang's sympathetic portrayal of Fen is the antithesis of officially sanctioned constructs of a 'good wife, wise mother.' Fen is a pregnant mother who rejects her partner and father of her son,

[73] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[74] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[75] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[76] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

has an affair with his cousin, and then aspires to leave both to look for affection elsewhere. Fen refuses to accept that any man has 'all the rights to oppress me, and to abuse me.'[78] Each attempted restriction of Fen's independence results in an act of rebellion: her parents' insistence on an arranged marriage leads her to have sex with Shengmin, whose demand that she become his concubine results in her affair with his cousin. Fen argues that it is women who must take responsibility to challenge patriarchal subjugation by prioritising their own needs and by educating their sons to treat women equitably: 'if this society has one more reasonable person, women will eat less bitterness.'[79] Fen remains indefatigable in her 'thirst for love' and, in the eyes of social conservatives, is utterly incorrigible. When *Yu* was published in 1943, Japanese critic Iizuka Akira (b. 1907) denounced Mei Niang's 'distraught heroine [as] a feminist statement overladden with eroticism.'[80] Despite such condemnation, *Yu* proved extremely popular with readers; it was re-published eight times within half a year in Beiping.[81]

Xie

In 1944, *Xie* was recognised as 'Novel of the Year' by the Greater East Asia Writers' Congress for its dark portrait of two young women, Sun Ling and Xiao Cui, in an extended household in Changchun.[82] Ling is the melancholic daughter of the family's most successful son, the deceased Second Uncle. Cui is the optimistic daughter of rural relatives who had been brought into the city to assist Ling's father in managing the family businesses. The family thrives (through connections with local Russians) until the Japanese occupation, which drives the family into an irreversible decline. The relatively benign presence of the Russians is underlined by Ling's refusal to burn the Russian books her beloved father had given her, terrifying other family members who fear that they will be denounced as communists. As friends and neighbours flee to other parts of China, the Sun family

[78] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[80] Iizuka Akira, 'Kahoku bungaku tsūshin' (News on Literature in North China), *Shinchō* (*New Tide*) (September 1943), 40(9), 40–1; cited in Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 37.

[81] Zhang Quan, 'Mei Niang,' p. 620.

[82] Mei Niang uses the city's pre-occupation name of Changchun, rather than the colonial, Xinjing.

remains in Manchukuo, to become 'a skeleton' of its former self.[83] In the harsh colonial environment, Japanese rulers and their Chinese puppets assume menacing forms as 'mothers use a new name to hush misbehaving children.'[84] Women, in particular, are traumatised by the search for concubines for the Manchukuo monarch, the last Qing dynasty (1644–1912) emperor, Aixingioro Henry Puyi (1903–1967).

The odious nature of Manchukuo society is primarily elicited through Chinese responses to it. The Japanese, for the most part, remain at arm's length. All efforts by members of the once-prominent Sun family to ingratiate themselves with the Japanese, for financial gain, are unsuccessful. The Japanese work ethic, in particular, is shown to be destructive in a Chinese context. The Japanese are aloof, do not speak Chinese, and Third Uncle, who is employed at the tax office, has no meaningful interactions with his Japanese bosses; his self-serving efforts to cultivate personal relationships with them fail miserably. In spite of Third Uncle's prominent position, he goes to work every day (according to a schedule), works long hours, and receives no gifts. His family views these as marks of true failure, devaluing his work for the Japanese even further.[85] The Japanese occupation of Manchuria is shown to be ruinous to the Chinese, especially in comparison to the earlier Russian presence in the region.

A central theme in *Xie* is the colonial regime's inflation of the importance of money at the expense of personal relationships. Economic uncertainty forces Ling's stepmother to obsess over her stash of silver, which she begins to view as more important than life itself.[86] Government demands to convert all silver to the new, worthless paper currency incapacitates her and robs the family of her steady, able control over their faltering finances. Cui's down-to-earth father, Sun Wangfu, loses all sense of propriety after he moves to the locus of Japanese domination, Changchun. Sun comes to view women as 'a ready source of money' (*yaoqianshu*), to be bought and sold like commodities.[87] Cui fears that her father will get drunk and sell her, or marry her into a rich family, with no concern for her well-being.

[83] Mei Niang, *Xie* in Zhang Yumao (ed.), *Dongbei xiandai wenxue daxi, 1919–49: Zhongpian xiaoshuo juan* [*Compendium of Modern Northeastern Literature, 1919–49: Volume of Medium Length Fiction*](14 Vols. Vol. 5. Shenyang: Shenyang chubanshe, 1996, pp. 428–539), p. 463.

[84] Mei Niang, *Xie*, p. 457.

[85] *Ibid*., pp. 502, 509.

[86] *Ibid*., p. 462.

[87] *Ibid*., p. 440. A *yaoqianshu* is a legendary tree that sheds coins when shaken.

Cui aspires to a 'simple life' with a poor man, because she believes that when poor women like her are married into rich families, they are treated abominably because of their lack of wealth.[88] Women are impacted by the economic and moral decline that gripped Manchukuo society, but are generally hailed to be more capable, resilient, and distanced from the Japanese than men. It is men who bring the full negativity of the occupation into the home, with catastrophic results.

The precarious position of women in Manchukuo is illustrated by the fates of Ling and Cui. Ling is relegated to caring for the reclusive family matriarch and equates life in the Sun household with prison.[89] Her dreams of attending Beiping University to study engineering in order to contribute to national development are quashed by the Japanese occupation.[90] Ling complains that the colonial education system 'cheats' women by only allowing them to learn Japanese-style home economics.[91] In the face of women's disenfranchisement, Ling asserts that the most important trait to develop is 'self-reliance' (*zhizhe ziji*) and envies Cui for her noble endurance of hardship.[92] Cui models her behaviour on her self-sacrificing mother, who views urban life and men with apprehension; her mother's elusive behaviour is despite, the narrator observes, her long presence in the city and having adult children.[93] Cui and her mother demonstrate that the conservatism that Mei Niang condemned for subjugating women, by restricting their roles to within the home, could shield them from the contagions of occupation life. But those ideals also left women vulnerable. *Xie* climaxes as Cui's father sells her to Third Uncle to gain control over the family businesses. Cui's betrayal by her 'useless and emotionless' male relatives confirms the women's worst fears.[94] Cui's innocence is sacrificed, women's lives become the stuff for barter, and the full impact of colonial misogyny shatters the family.

By the close of *Xie*, the once prosperous Sun family is in tatters. *Xie* concludes with a heated argument among the women over Third Aunt's mistaken belief that Granny had encouraged Third Uncle to take a concubine to secure a male heir for the family. Ling appears

[88] *Ibid*.
[89] *Ibid*., p. 439.
[90] *Ibid*., p. 443.
[91] *Ibid*., p. 481.
[92] *Ibid*., p. 534.
[93] *Ibid*., pp. 515–16.
[94] *Ibid*., p. 514.

outside the window attempting to divert them. She is displaced from this confrontation, and that distance is her salvation. While the rest of the family is tormented and torn apart, Ling's moral compass remains intact. In *Unwelcome Muse*, Edward Gunn, Jr. terms her stance a 'lonely defiance of stagnation and corruption.'[95] Ultimately, Ling is inspired by the setting sun to escape her family and seek a new life elsewhere. Gunn argues that 'since Japanese propagandists made much of their symbol of a rising sun, Mei Niang's choice of a setting sun to symbolize hope shows at least a marked indifference or insensitivity to, if not actual rejection of, Japanese propaganda themes and symbols.'[96] Mei Niang further defied colonial ideals by sympathetically portraying a woman who was prepared to abandon her family for her own well-being, which had been destroyed by the patriarchal ideals that she identified with Japanese occupation. Gunn suggests that *Xie* was proclaimed 'Novel of the Year' because Mei Niang was Liu Longguang's wife and had translated the work of Kume Masao.[97] While the motivation for its celebration can never be known with certainty, its critical acclaim in the final year of empire testifies to the endurance of Chinese cultural criticism throughout the Japanese occupation. *Xie* is an unambiguous, negative portrait of life in Manchukuo that reflects Mei Niang's personal experiences in her own Sun family.

Exposing Realities

The themes that emerge from *Bang*, *Yu*, and *Xie* highlight Mei Niang's feminist critiques of Japanese colonial, male chauvinist society. The novellas stress the disenfranchisement of women by patriarchal ideals that restricted women's autonomy in terms of education, employment, and personal relationships. While colonial officials promoted the ideal of an obedient, chaste, 'good wife, wise mother,' Mei Niang advocated for a woman's individual right to an education, to pursue a career, and to marry a man of her own choice; in *Bang* and *Yu*, both of the protagonists argue that they would rather be prostitutes in control of their own lives than submit to arranged marriages. Mei Niang's fiction is peopled with women who are tormented by

[95] Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 42.
[96] *Ibid*.
[97] *Ibid*.

conservative Confucian ideals, which they resist with varying degrees of efficacy. Mei Niang portrays Chinese women in Manchukuo as deeply disenfranchised yet engaged in the re-definition of the terms of their subjugation. The weighty regulatory framework that was created to restrict pessimistic writing, derision of colonial institutions, and denigration of conservative ideals of womanhood was not applied to Mei Niang, leaving her free to focus readers' attention on women's subjugation in Japanese colonial society.

Mei Niang consistently challenged the conservative Confucianism that colonial officials advocated for Chinese women. Ironically, Mei Niang enjoyed greater intellectual freedom as a feminist under Japanese colonial rule than she did during the Maoist era, which vociferously defended its liberation of women. In the early 1940s, Mei Niang's writings were published in Beiping, Japan, and Manchukuo and distributed across East Asia. Mei Niang contributed to a popular malaise regarding Japan's cultural agenda and the status of women. She overtly criticised colonial life in works such as *Xie*, yet her primary focus on 'the woman question' (*funü wenti*), and not on that of the Chinese nation *per se*, blinded officials to the larger context of her work. Colonial officials adopted various stances towards feminist discourse, but they did not treat it with the severity that they levelled at other types of criticism. During the colonial period, Mei Niang was not subjected to official harassment. Mei Niang was allowed to pursue her writing ambitions since although she criticised Japanese colonial society, she did not laud life in the Republic of China. Indeed, her critiques of women's status in Manchukuo would have applied to the Republic as well. Mei Niang's focus on the subjugation of women echoes the work of Su Qing (1917–1982), a woman writer based in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, whose popular *Jiehun shi nian* (*Ten Years of Marriage*) and *Tao* (*Swelling Wave*) 'were both fuel to the fire of the women's movement.'[98] The work of Su Qing, Mei Niang, and Xiao Hong also mirrors that of Ding Ling (1904–1986), whose feminist critique of life in communist-held Yenan is articulated in 'Thoughts on March 8' (1942). Criticism of conservative Confucian ideals forged an affinity between Chinese feminists, across political borders, that Japanese occupation could not displace.

Mei Niang's feminist stance links her with other activists in China *and* in Japan. Although Manchukuo colonial rhetoric stressed the ideal of 'good wife, wise mother,' Japan was also the genesis of

[98] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

many of Mei Niang's feminist ideals. Since the late Meiji era (1867–1912), debate over, and between, 'new women' (*atarashii onna*) rippled through Japanese society, and into China. The Taishō (1912–1926) and early Showa (1926–1988) periods are particularly noted for their flourish of feminisms. In 1926, writer Takamure Itsue (1894–1964) condemned 'men, modern society, and the West [as] . . . all equally hateful.'[99] In 1932, anarchist Yagi Akiko (1895–1983) denounced the 'slave' state of Manchukuo and appealed to all socialists to oppose Japanese imperialism.[100] Similarly, Ichikawa Fusae (1893–1981) urged 'mothers of humanity' to work toward ending the destructive wars that were ravaging Asia.[101] Japanese new women challenged the patriarchal principles that they identified with the militarization of Japanese society in the 1930s and 1940s that eventually silenced them. The ideals that inspired these women also encouraged feminists in Manchukuo. Mei Niang aspired to their example, and was spurred on by the revolutionary literature to which she had access while living in Japan. Colonial officials who advocated conservative ideals for Chinese women thus found themselves caught between their own ambitions and legitimising discourse from other Japanese, perhaps most problematically from the Greater East Asia Writers' Congress. Ironically, the regulatory framework that colonial officials established best served post-occupation critics of Japanese rule who cited the onerous literary regulations as proof of the fascistic nature of Japanese imperialism. Mei Niang exemplifies those Chinese writers who worked within colonial institutions to delegitimise Japanese rule while pursuing their own ambitions. Gunn argues that 'occupation literature shows very little cultural identification with the Japanese.'[102] Mei Niang's work does level wide-ranging critiques of occupation life, but it also teems with the feminist ideals that had previously enlivened Japanese society. Thus, *Bang*, *Yu*, and *Xie* should be situated within a context of Asian feminist discourses, for their denunciation of Japanese colonial ambitions.

[99] Patricia Tsurumi, 'Visions of Women and the New Society in Conflict: Yamakawa Kikue Versus Takamure Itsue' in Sharon A. Minichiello (ed.), *Japan's Competing Modernities: Issues in Culture and Democracy, 1900–1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998, pp. 335–57), p. 342.

[100] Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour, and Activism, 1900–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 93.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

[102] Gunn, Jr., *Unwelcome Muse*, p. 50.

Mei Niang's colonial career served a dual purpose: to promote a feminist discourse and to provide her with an income. She used substantial educational and employment opportunities to build a platform from which to engage in cultural criticism. Her work brought her popular and critical acclaim. Mei Niang wrote hundreds of stories and essays, edited Beiping's *Funü zazhi*, earned a living, and in the process left a trail of achievements, which turned against her following the collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945. It is worth bearing in mind that the bulk of her considerable body of work was published by 1945—nine years worth of writing, and four volumes of collected works, completed before she was twenty-five years old. This work determined the rest of her life, which was dominated by tragedy for over three decades following the collapse of Manchukuo. In 1945, Mei Niang and her family returned from Beiping to the Sun family home in Manchuria and lived there until 1948, when they moved to Shanghai, and then to Taiwan. Following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the couple decided to return to the mainland to participate in the reconstruction of the war-torn country. Tragically, Liu died *en route*, and the heartbroken widow, pregnant with their son, returned to the mainland with their two daughters. Mei Niang began teaching middle school and in October 1949 was enrolled in Beijing's Writer's Federation.

In the 1950s, Mei Niang, along with most writers who had lived in Japanese colonial regimes, was denounced as a 'writer of the enemy occupation.' In 1952, she was criticized for 'degenerate bourgeois ideas' as feminism was attacked as a foreign import. In 1955, she was labelled a 'suspected special agent of Japan,' and in 1957 a 'rightist.' In the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), she was condemned as a 'literati traitor to China' (*Hanjian wenren*). Mei Niang's assertive character and high profile achievements during the Japanese occupation cost her dearly. For her, the Maoist era passed in a succession of imprisonment, forced labour (including bomb shelter and tunnel excavation in the capital), street cleaning, and housekeeping.[103] During this extended period of hardship, Mei Niang's family shattered further: her youngest daughter died of illness and her son of hepatitis; she was informed of both deaths by her eldest daughter, Liu Qing, during visits while

[103] Yang Yong, 'Caifang Mei Niang' [Interview with Mei Niang] in Zhang Quan (ed.), *Xunzhao Mei Niang* (pp. 68–72), p. 71.

she was imprisoned.[104] Mei Niang endured over two decades of persecution from a regime so focused on Maoist narratives that it denied expression to the other voices of dissent that had delegitimized Japan's imperial project, from within.

In 1978, after the end of the Maoist era, the condemnation of the 'writers of the enemy occupation' was repealed, *in toto*. Since then, with her political verdict reversed, she has resumed writing essays and children's books. From the late 1980s, Mei Niang has again attracted positive attention as her work has been featured in major Chinese literary anthologies and a volume of women's fiction from Manchukuo, *Changye yinghuo* (*Fireflies of the Long Night*). Over the past decade, numerous separate editions of Mei Niang's collected works have been published in Beijing and Hong Kong. In 2001, a volume of tributes from colleagues, scholars, friends, and family was published in Beijing. But despite trends towards a less politicized approach to the history of Chinese life under Japanese occupation, Zhang Quan has warned that Zhang Ailing's denunciation as a 'traitor' in the Chinese press in 1996 reveals the still contentious nature of the legacy of 'writers of the enemy occupation.'[105]

Mei Niang's literary legacy is significant in several important respects. Firstly, Mei Niang is representative of the first 'modern' Chinese writers, of either gender, to emerge in the post-May Fourth period. Their reflections on life in the first half of China's turbulent twentieth century are integral to any understanding of the societies in which they lived. Secondly, Mei Niang's work exemplifies a long-forgotten Chinese feminist legacy from the early twentieth century. That legacy was long tarred with 'bourgeois' and 'collaborationist' labels, yet Mei Niang's work gives voice to the many women and men who sought liberation from the conservative Confucian ideals advocated by officials in Japan's occupied territories, and the Republic of China. Today, Mei Niang's work may appear to promote only an 'obscure women's rights ideology,' but it constitutes a vital step in the development of twentieth century Chinese feminism that spanned China's political divisions in the 1930s and 1940s. Mei Niang's legacy

[104] Sheng Ying, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shi*, p. 529; Liu Qing, personal interview, Vancouver, June 18, 2001.

[105] Zhang Quan, 'Wei wanjie de huati: Luxianqu wenxue de zhengzhi pingjia' [Unfinished Conversation: Political Evaluation of Enemy Occupied Territory Literature] in Zhang Quan (ed.), *Xunzhao Mei Niang*, p. 493.

compels re-evaluation of received interpretations of the relationships between colonialism, feminism, and national identity.

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