

**Women and Education –
the Chinese Experience as Portrayed
in the Novel ‘Before Dawn’ (*Limingqian*) by Meng Yao**

by

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“Lack of learning is a credit to a woman’s virtue” (nuzi wu cai bian shi de)¹ is a maxim that dominated the Chinese mind for centuries, and persisted even when the notion of formal education for women had started to be accepted in modern cities in China.

What education a girl did receive was given in the home by her mother and consisted of such subjects as household management, ceremonial and the proprieties, and the duties owed to a husband, a mother-in-law, and other members of the husband’s family. Anything more was generally considered unnecessary and wasteful since it was a woman’s destiny to marry and produce children, preferably boys, in order to ensure the perpetuation of the ancestral lineage of the family into which she married. There were, of course, exceptions, as the number of women poets and painters in Chinese history prove, but these were to be found largely in families with scholarly traditions and in homes that could afford to engage a private tutor.²

Up to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, when China was defeated by Japan, China’s intellectual life was shaped by the civil service examination, the test by which admission

¹ Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement*, Stanford University Press, paperback ed., 1967, p. 257.

² Ibid.; see also Yang C.K., *Chinese Communist Society: The Family and the Village*, Cambridge, Mass., The M.I.T. Press, paperback ed., 1965, pp. 106–107; and Latourette, K.S., *The Chinese. Their History and Culture*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 3rd ed., 1946, p. 789.

was gained to the bureaucracy. But after 1895, and particularly after the Boxer Rebellion³ of 1900, when China's education system came to be seen as one of the contributing causes of her defeat, conditions changed rapidly. Schools with a curriculum combining Chinese and Western subjects were established, although they did not become popular until the civil service examination was abolished in 1905.

Upon the abolition of the two thousand year old examination system, however, modern schools were set up in increasing numbers, but for boys only. Apart from those schools for girls, founded either by missionaries or by private enterprise, the education for girls was largely neglected until after China became a republic in 1911.⁴ However, until education for girls became commonly accepted, it took courage, both on the part of the girl and her parents, to defy tradition and take advantage of the new educational opportunities offered.

What helped to change the traditional concept that a woman had one function only, and that her proper sphere of activity was in her home alone, was the May Fourth Movement. The May Fourth Movement originally denoted the movement precipitated by the decision of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 to transfer to Japan former German rights in the province of Shandong. This resulted in an explosion of anger in China, particularly among student organizations. It came, however, eventually to signify the broader political, social, intellectual, and literary movement of 1916-1921.⁵ The participants in the May Fourth Movement questioned deeply-held beliefs and assumptions. They argued for a re-evaluation of tradition in the light of science and democracy. They called for an assessment of the old family system. They demanded, among other things, rights for the individual, and the emancipation and education of women.

³ The Boxer Rebellion was a primitive uprising nurtured by anti-foreign sentiment caused by the humiliation suffered at the hands of foreign powers. It did not succeed in ousting the foreigner and his ways, and led only to further humiliation.

⁴ See Pott, Francis L.H. "Modern Education" in MacNair, H.F., *China*, Berkeley, Los Angeles University of California Press, 1946, pp. 427-433.

⁵ See Clubb, Edmund O., *20th Century China*, New York, London, Columbia University Press, 1964, pp. 81-87, and Chow, op. cit., pp. 5,257ff.

The major vehicle for the dissemination of their ideas was the journal, *New Youth* (Xin Qingnian) under the editorship of Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), one of the leading protagonists of the Movement and a future founder of the Chinese Communist Party. In January 1918, for example, *New Youth* discussed the position of women in society and introduced Western ideas on the women's movement. Subsequent articles of a similar nature, particularly one by Hu Shi⁶ on the Norwegian dramatist, Ibsen, and his views on the full development of a person's potential and individuality, helped to prepare the ground for the emancipation of women.⁷

After 1919 women began to play a greater part in social and political activities. Co-education was established and women students were admitted to the university in Beijing in 1920. Two years later there were twenty-eight colleges and universities around the country which accepted women students.⁸ But the number that could avail themselves of the opportunity of going to college or university was very small, for despite the good intentions of the young republic, universal primary and secondary education was a long way off, and what education there was, was expensive.

Initiating universal education for a country the size of China was a mammoth task and progress was very slow; first, because the political situation was unstable, as the various power groupings strove to assert themselves, until only two remained - the Communists and the Nationalists; second, because a multiplicity of educational theories largely imported from the west, were vying with each other for acceptance; and third, and probably most important of all, because there was a dearth of properly trained teachers, and a scarcity of funds for salaries, equipment and school buildings.

⁶ Hu Shih, 1891~1962, was one of the leading liberal intellectuals of the 20th century. It was his promotion of the use of 'baihua', speech-based prose, instead of the classical literary language which triggered off the literary and culture movements of the 1920s.

⁷ Chow, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-296.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

After the Nationalists had succeeded in establishing themselves in 1928, however, they sought to bring education under government control. All schools, whether private, missionary or state, were required to register with the Ministry of Education, which laid down academic standards and determined the qualifications required within the teaching profession. Only those schools which conformed to government regulations received government grants. The curricula in secondary schools and universities were gradually standardized, with the accent on science and technology, since it was held that the modernization of China lay in the application of science. During the next ten years educational institutions multiplied, and the number of students attending schools, colleges and universities grew.

But even during this period, and right through to the late forties, the proportion of women to be found in educational institutions was very small, for despite the fact that sex equality was part of the National government's political ideology, such ideas as education and equal occupational opportunities for women found little favour outside urban areas. There, women were discouraged from developing any skill or special aptitude which might be useful for a career outside the home.

During the war with Japan, the government's educational programme suffered a severe setback. In the occupied areas of China educational institutions were damaged or destroyed; and in the unoccupied interior of the country, the influx of millions of refugee students and staff put enormous pressure on existing facilities, making a normal education virtually impossible.⁹

The defeat of the Japanese ended one war, but it also re-opened another in earnest - the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists. The result of the conflict we all know. The Communists came to power in 1949, while the Nationalists retreated to the

⁹ See Pott, *op. cit.*, pp. 433–439; Latourette, *op. cit.*, pp. 474–483; Yang, *op. cit.*, pp. 112, 116–119; and Taylor, Robert, *China's Intellectual Dilemma, Politics and University Enrolment, 1949–1978*, Vancouver/London, University of British Columbia Press, 1981, pp. 2–5.

island of Taiwan, and education in China entered a new and different phase, a phase we are not concerned with here.

It was in 1919 that the author under consideration, Meng Yao, was born. By the time she had reached school age the question of whether or not she should attend school was not an issue, and she consequently received her primary education, first in Hankou, the city in which she was born, and then in Nanjing, to which city her family moved. Her secondary education was, however, completed in Hankou, to which the family had returned upon the death of her mother and the remarriage of her father.

In 1938, with the undeclared war with Japan in its second year, Meng Yao and two of her brothers joined the millions of refugee students who tried to get a tertiary education in the hinterland of China. She graduated with a degree in history from the National Central University in 1942, after which she married an aeronautical engineer, to whom she had first been attracted through their mutual love of Chinese opera. This mutual interest did not sustain their marriage, however; and in 1944, after the birth of her first son, she took a teaching position at the Jianyang Girls' Middle School where she remained until the end of the war.

The family was reunited when it moved to Shanghai, and a second son was born. Then, upon the collapse of the Nationalist government in 1949, Meng Yao and her family moved to Taiwan. She succeeded in securing a teaching position at the Taizhong Teachers' Training College, a position she held until her divorce in 1955, when she moved to Taipei to a lectureship at National Taiwan Normal University.

In 1959 Meng Yao was promoted to an associate professorship, and in 1962 she accepted an invitation from Nanyang University in Singapore to become Associate Professor of Chinese. She relinquished this post in 1966, owing to general unrest in the university and returned to Taiwan. She subsequently became Professor of Chinese Literature, and

Chairman of the Department of Chinese Literature, National Zhongxing University in Taizhong.

Meng Yao started to write in the early nineteen fifties, beginning with essays that were published in the literary supplement of the *Central Daily News* (Zhongyang ribao), then short stories and novels. Apart from her works of fiction, at least two of which won literary awards,¹⁰ she has written a four-volumed *A History of Chinese Fiction* (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi), *A History of Chinese Drama* (Zhongguo xiju shi), and a biography of Du Fu, the 8th century poet.

Although Meng Yao's major fields of interest are history and Chinese literature and drama, it is obvious from her writing that education, and particularly the education of women, interests her deeply. Many of her characters are students, teachers and academics; and it is clear that she draws on her own experience in the teaching profession. It is also evident that she is more than theoretically acquainted with the dilemma of the educated, married woman who tries to maintain the delicate balance between marriage and a career without either being made to suffer as a consequence of the other.

Meng Yao's first works of fiction deal with the modern period when women not only had won the right to be educated, but took this right for granted. In one of her later novels, 'Before Dawn' (Limingqian), published in 1963, however, Meng Yao goes back to the beginning of education for women in republican China.

Taking 1909, the final two years of the Qing dynasty, as her point of departure, she traces the fortunes of four generations of one family or clan in the city of Hankou in central China until the Communists come to power in 1949, and describes the change of attitude towards education of women in each generation.

At the outset education for women is just an ideal to be fought for. The ideal is then realized for a handful of women in the next generation. These are aware of the fact that they

are among the privileged few and, consequently, aim to work for the furtherance of education for all women. They are the initiators of educational trends and formulators of curricula content. They succeed in combining marriage and a career largely by marrying men with similar ideals, and by being sustained by an enlightened extended family.

The third generation of women is a new breed altogether. They are not only the products of the co-educational colleges and universities where they have learnt to compete with men, both academically and professionally, but they are the embodiment of the feminist rebellion against lingering traditional restrictions on women.¹¹

The following extracts, taken from Chapters 12 and 41, show the above-mentioned differences in attitudes. First of Shujun, a widow whose husband had died whilst studying in Germany, and who lives with her two children, Xiyi and Xiwei, under the care and protection of her husband's family. And second of Feng Wen, a product of the modern educational system, who married Shujun's nephew, Xiru, whose first wife had died in child-birth twenty years earlier; and lastly, of Xiyi, one of the first women educators, on whose shoulders the blame is laid for turning out academic successes, but human failures:

It was the sixth year of the Republic. 1917. The tidal wave, set in motion by the 1911 revolution, had carried with it the nationalism of the Heavenly Kingdom of Peace,¹² and had set in motion even greater waves in the days that followed. The accompanying turbulence had grown stronger as time passed until it reached into every home and affected every individual. Its impact had been felt over a large area, yet its effects were not the same everywhere.

¹⁰ 'Dangerous Precipice' (*Wei yan*) won The China Literature and Art Award Committee's literature award in 1953; and 'Before Dawn' (*Limingqian*), a novel of some 780 pages, won the Education Department's award for literature in 1962.

¹¹ See Lancashire, E. M. *The Novels of Meng Yao*, M.A. dissertation, University of Melbourne, 1969, pp. 35–138.

¹² This is a reference to the Taiping Rebellion of 1848–1865 which sought to oust the Manchus and in their place establish a new dynasty with Hong Xiu-quan as Heavenly King (Tian Wang). For further details see Hsu, Immanuel, C.Y. *The Rise of Modern China*, 2nd. edit., New York, London, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 277–318.

Xiru had gone abroad to learn about other political systems. That was five years ago, and there was still no word as to when he was going to return.

Zhongjin¹³ had been carried along by the force of that tidal wave and was now back in Beijing, a civil servant in the new government of Li Yuanhong,¹⁴ and life to him was very satisfactory.

The rest of the Zhao family was all in the old family residence in Wuchang, seemingly unperturbed. But, because they had been given a violent jolt, they felt uneasy. The most affected was the silent and composed Shujun, who lived in seclusion in the women's quarters.

Shujun was not as meek and submissive as her external appearance suggested. When her mother-in-law criticized her, she would outwardly appear to be pliant, but be inwardly unyielding, her will-power sustained by the strong views she entertained. Her ideas and her way of looking at things were very advanced; but even more so because her husband had been among the first students to study abroad,¹⁵ and had often given an account of the new knowledge and of new things he had encountered in his letters to her, and she had, through a process of unconscious assimilation, kept abreast of the times.

One idea, which shone brilliantly above all others, was the question of a fresh appraisal of women. She was quite convinced that women in the future would no longer be the slaves of men, and that the sphere in which they operated would no longer be limited to the home alone. In short, women would possess something truly their own.

This new idea gave rise to deep anguish, but it also made her determined to struggle and rebel. She had accepted the fact that her own life was dead and buried with her husband. Propriety demanded this, as did her own emotions. She gladly accepted her own fate, therefore, and hoped for nothing for herself. Instead, she devoted herself entirely to the upbringing of her son and daughter.

Current conditions, the times, and the loss of her husband, to whom she had been deeply attached, had thus, prematurely, brought to an end the joyous part of her life. But in the light of her new way of assessing matters, this deprivation had to be regarded as a great sacrifice, and she consequently did not want her

¹³ Zhao Zhongjin is the second eldest brother of Shujun's husband. He had been an official at the Court in Beijing prior to the death of the Empress Zixi.

¹⁴ Li Yuanhong, the former Qing Brigade Commander who was Military Governor of Hubei Province upon the success of the Wuchang Revolution of October, 1911. He subsequently became Vice-President of the new republic, then President from June 1916 to July 1917, and June 1922 to June 1923.

¹⁵ When China was defeated by foreign powers in the 19th century, she sought to achieve strength by reshaping the country according to western ideas. Young men, therefore, went abroad in increasing numbers to study in universities and colleges in Japan, Europe and the United States.

daughter to be trapped in a similar manner. In other words, for the sake of her daughter's happiness, she had to search for a new direction.

She felt uneasy about the fact that her daughter was not able to receive the same kind of education as her son. There were now schools for girls in many places, yet the only education Xiyi got was the usual bit of learning she herself was able to impart to her at home; and there was not much she could teach her beyond the rules of conduct for young gentlewomen. If this continued her daughter might find herself lagging behind the times and come to grief. That was something she could not endure.

She agonized over this day and night and considered sending her away to a school for girls, but she knew this was not going to be easy since there was no precedent for this in the Zhao family. If she hoped to achieve her objective, she would have to exert herself to the utmost. But, for the sake of her daughter's future, she was willing to try.

This year Zhongjin and his family had come home for the New Year celebrations. Shujun felt that this was the most opportune moment in which to broach the subject. After much thought, she decided to raise the matter with her mother-in-law first.

She played a round of cards with her mother-in-law in the evening, and as she was putting the cards back into their box she bent her head and called out nervously, "Mother, there is something important I should like to discuss with you."

The old dowager was moved by the expression on Shujun's face, and she took off her glasses and looked searchingly at her. After a long pause she said, "Speak up!"

"I've learnt that there are very many schools for girls elsewhere. I was wondering whether our Xiyi ought not to go to one of them to learn something or other."

This took the old lady completely by surprise, and not being able to make a snap decision, she carefully picked up her hookah, took a couple of puffs, looked again at Shujun, all eager and expectant, then said very slowly,

"In former days when your father-in-law helped Duke Hu Wenzhong¹⁶ put down the Hung Yang Rebellion¹⁷ he often talked to me about the Taipings

¹⁶ Hu Wenzhong is the name given posthumously to the outstanding general and statesman Hu Linyi (1812–1861), who helped to put down the Taiping Rebellion and restored law and order in the province of Hubei. See Hummel, Arthur, W., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 1644–1912*, Washington, United States Government, 1943, pp. 333–335.

¹⁷ The Hong Yang Rebellion is the Taiping Rebellion of 1848–1865. The name is derived from the first characters of its two leaders, Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing.

opening up the civil service examination to women.¹⁸ He partly agreed with this move. He was of the opinion that women ought to have an education, but not that they should sit the examinations. Women should see that their duty lay in assisting their husbands and in bringing up their children, yet they ought not to be too stupid.

“With regard to what you just said about sending Xiyi away to school, there are many points I’m uneasy about. The first is that she will be sixteen this year, and, no doubt, there will be constant calls by people proposing marriage. If she goes away now, won’t this delay the most important event in her life?”

“Girls today are not like those of an earlier generation,” said Shujun, “they get married later. In Beijing there is a Normal School for women in which, it is said, there are many women about twenty years of age, who are studying and not getting married!”

“It’s not appropriate to postpone the child’s marriage and thereby make her bear us a grudge for the rest of her life. This is far more important than being educated,” said the old dowager, unable to agree. “Moreover, the child is delicate. You can’t be easy about letting her go away on her own, surely?”

“It’s good for children to be able to endure hardships,” said Shujun, struggling hard for the realization of her dreams and the future of her child. “Xiyi, I’ve noticed, loves studying, and as a person, she’s very capable. It can’t hurt if she were able to acquire some skill or other. Besides, I can’t teach her anything here.”

The old lady put the hookah on the table before looking at Shujun, then she said with a smile,

“Xiyi is my favourite grandchild, that you know. As long as you feel it’s right; as long as you can bear to let her go, I won’t stop you. However, the responsibility for making all important decisions in this household rests with my eldest son. Discuss it first with him and then you may be able to do something about it.”

“Yes. What I had in mind was to ask if you would discuss the matter with Eldest Brother-in-law.” Feeling that there was some hope of success, Shujun said, elated, “If Eldest Brother-in-law agrees, maybe even Xiwei could accompany his sister to the Capital with Second Brother-in-law.”

“What? Does Xiwei want to go as well? Are you willing to let both children go?”

“Yes. As long as it’s for their good. Besides, Xiwei ought to leave home and get some experience of the outside world.”

¹⁸ The Taipings instituted a civil service examination of their own, and as they considered men and women to be equal they permitted women to sit the examination and take office. See Hsu, *op. cit.*, pp. 293–294.

“I fear you won’t be able to bear it when both children have gone.”

“I still have Shili¹⁹ to stop me being lonely. He’s only six.”

“All right then; if this is what you really want, I’ll certainly go and find my eldest son and talk it over with him.”

Shujun felt pleased as she went to her room. She knew that Eldest Brother-in-law was very filial and that he would not run counter to his mother; therefore, as long as the old lady was won over to her side, the rest was no problem. As expected, the matter was settled several days later.

Although it was Shujun herself who had decided upon this course of action, yet, before the children’s departure she clung to them and found it very hard to control her grief over their parting.

Xiyi became increasingly nervous and excited. As old as she now was, she had never left her mother before, yet, all of a sudden, she was going hundreds of miles away.”

Concerned to alleviate the anxiety in her daughter’s mind, Shujun says,

“I don’t see the world outside as a place to be feared, and have therefore thought of every possible means to let you go away. I’m not asking you to pass exams so that you become an absent-minded Hanlin academician.²⁰ You must put what you learn to good use! You could either become an educator and teach stupid, obstinate and ignorant women to be a little more intelligent, or you could become a doctor and save the lives of good people like your sister-in-law. As the classical saying goes, you ought not only seek what is good for yourself alone, but to aid the whole realm without making any distinction.”

“Yes, Mother,” sobbed Xiyi. “I’ll do as you say.”²¹

Xiyi goes to Beijing, where, in spite of initial difficulties in keeping up with her class, she soon forges ahead. Conscious that she is among a privileged minority of women, she feels it

¹⁹ The motherless son of Xiru, Shujun’s nephew.

²⁰ The Hanlin Academy was founded by the Tang dynasty emperor, Xuanzong (712–756). Only those who came First in the civil service examination were eligible for admission.

²¹ Meng Yao, *Limingqian*, Changcheng chubanshe, Gaoxiong, 1963, p. 82–85.

is her duty to train as a teacher and to be instrumental in liberating and educating the next generation of women.

She is fortunate to meet a young doctor, a graduate of the Peking Union Medical College, who shares her views on the education of women and of the part she feels she has to play in it. When they marry, upon Xiyi's graduation from the Women Teachers' Training College in Beijing in 1924, they support each other in their respective professions.

After teaching for two years in Hankou, Xiyi is invited to head a newly established school for girls in the same city. Despite the advent of children, Xiyi manages to combine motherhood and a career largely through the help of her mother, who comes to live with the family.

Xiru, Xiyi's cousin, whose wife had died in child-birth and has spent several years abroad studying political science, returns to China and secures a lectureship in The School of Political Science in Wuhan University.

One of his students, Feng Wen, a product of Xiyi's school for girls, attracts his attention because of her intelligence, enthusiasm and self-confidence. When he asks Xiyi for her opinion on the young woman, Xiyi's reply reveals that she is beginning to have misgivings about some of the side effects of the educational programme with which she is involved:

“...Feng Wen is one of the most competent of the new breed of women, but she certainly won't make an ideal wife.”

“Why not?”

“Because what are virtues in a career girl are vices in a wife.”

“I think,” said Xiru, with great confidence in himself, “that what a modern husband asks for in a wife is not that she should only wash up, make beds, produce and bring up children!”²²

²² Ibid., p. 319.

Xiyi's misgivings are shared by other members of the Zhao family, particularly by her mother, Shujun. She has not changed her mind about men and women being socially equal, and she has no regrets regarding the role she herself played in wresting an education for her daughter. But, she is becoming increasingly concerned about what she sees as a male-orientated curriculum, which is turning out young women who seem to be confusing equality of status with similarity of function, and that instead of men and women complementing each other, they are competing with each other.

The emancipated and educated young women, she observes, pursue their careers with such single-mindedness that the families they acquire are left to fend for themselves. If Feng Wen came from the same mould, remarked Shujun, she would not make a suitable marriage partner. But neither her comments nor those of Xiyi have any effect on Xiru, who persists in persuading Feng Wen to marry him.

To Feng Wen, who finds her male fellow-students dull, Xiru appears to have qualities not found in her contemporaries, and the twenty-year age difference is seen as an attraction rather than a disadvantage. She therefore agrees to marry Xiru upon her graduation in 1937 just as the war with Japan breaks out.

Xiru has had glimpses of Feng Wen's high notions and desire to be second to none during their engagement, but he had put these down to her youth. He now discovers that Shujun was not far off the mark in her judgement of the modern, educated urban woman of the thirties.

Feng Wen not only teaches full-time, but becomes very active in the China Middle Schools' Union's contribution to the war effort, and marriage to her is very much a secondary concern. Xiru finds that, despite his supposedly modern outlook on women, he in fact still thinks in terms of women making marriage and the home their principle interest.

.... he had once in the past had a lovely, placid and unassuming wife who had given him the mistaken notion that all wives were gentle and submissive. He really had not fathomed that twenty years had passed, nor did he realize how

great a change the times and the social climate had wrought on women. Many of them had individuality, ability and an excellent education, and the majority of them considered staying put in the home as something to be ashamed of; and Feng Wen was one who felt this most keenly.²³

After a period during which Feng Wen is so immersed in her various activities that she has little time for Xiru, their marriage reaches a crisis point. When, in the presence of other members of the Zhao family, Feng Wen is reminded of her wifely duties, she says to Xiru,

“You told me that you wouldn’t keep me all to yourself. You said too that you were just as patriotic as everyone else, and you said that you had developed, morally, to the point where you could make allowances for the individuality in me that seeks expression elsewhere. You also said that you were going to be a good husband and never hinder me from realizing my ambitions. But the reality is rather different!

“The honeymoon is over, yet you still wish me to keep you company all the time. You read, and I’m supposed to sit by your side, fanning you. You’re hungry, and I have to cook you a tasty dish. You feel like going for a walk, and I have to go with you. You come out with some brilliant idea, and I’m supposed to sing your praises. You’re cold, and I have to get you more clothes; then you’re hot, and I must remove them. Why? What do you think I studied all these years for, just so that I would be qualified to be your slave? If you hadn’t given me all those assurances before we got married, I most certainly would not have married in such haste. It’s you, it’s you who have deceived me!

...

“It was you who promised that I didn’t have to be a housewife. What’s the matter? Are you regretting it? Do you still indulge in the vain hope that I’ll submissively make your food, wash your clothes, have your children, and darn your smelly socks for you? I can’t, I tell you! Not as long as I live!”²⁴

When Xiyi, Feng Wen’s former headmistress, who is present during this outburst, tries to reason with her, Feng Wen continues,

²³ Ibid., p. 348.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 351–353.

“One of the reasons why I entered into this stupid marriage was because he tricked me with his honeyed words; and secondly, because of my own stupidity; and I must find out where the responsibility for my stupidity lies.

“I have never had any information from school, home, society, books, teachers or friends ... on the subjects of social intercourse and marriage. These kinds of subjects, which are of such great importance to life, are so neglected by everyone that naive young people like me blindly follow our hopes and aspirations and dream dreams that bear no relation to reality. No one is willing to point out how wrong this is before the event; then, when we wake up to our mistake, after the event, and get furious over the fact that it has been made through our own stupidity, no one wants to forgive us”²⁵

Too proud to let the family see her tears of disappointment and anger, Feng Wen leaves abruptly. Only Shujun breaks the silence that follows with these words,

“So this is the type of girl your new-styled education turns out! It’s right that girls should get an education. However, the more a girl excels in her studies, the less willing she is to stay contentedly at home. How can this be right? Homes are broken, children have no one to look after them, society is crammed full of women who are competing with men for a livelihood. What are we coming to?

“The Almighty created man and woman because each had his and her own function to perform. In the past the man would plough the fields and the woman would weave. The man worked outside the home, and the woman in the home. Each had his and her own place, and that was good. But now we talk about reform, about the equality of men and women. Women want to be like men and compete with them in every field. So much is this the case that they even dress like men. From now on there will be only two kinds of people, the real men and the pseudo men. Isn’t it...isn’t it a huge joke?”

“You’re prejudiced against Feng Wen, Mother, but she isn’t really such a bad girl,” said Xiyi, looking distressed at her mother.

“I’m not saying Feng Wen is a bad girl; but I’m not alone in being prejudiced against her,” said Shujun in reply. “I just can’t agree with any of the methods and views of you modernists. No doubt you are laughing up your sleeve at an old fuddy-duddy like me; but I too have read a lot and there isn’t much from

²⁵ Ibid., p. 353.

either the Classics or newspapers and magazines that I haven't taken note of. I just can't go along with your present-day education for women. The relationship between husband and wife is one of the cardinal relationships.²⁶ Can such a relationship be regarded as mere child's-play?"

"Don't be too hasty in your judgement, Mother. Isn't the reason why you are against current education for women because women aren't as obedient as they once were?"

"It's not that simple; of course not," said Shujun. "Those of you who are in the advance guard among women have kicked out The Three Obediences and Four Virtues²⁷ adhered to in the past; but have you been able to put any new morality in their place? Is there so little difference between man and beast that he has no moral concepts at all?"

Xiyi was stumped for an answer, and only after a long pause did she say, "But we're only in the initial stages. Who knows what the end product will be. I don't believe we won't do as well as in the past."

"If my old eyes don't deceive me, I can tell you right now that you will fail," said Shujun, "unless you change course and correct these girls' hostile attitude towards the home. Unless you can produce a more acceptable type, I'm afraid the majority of women will prefer training in family life, and will have nothing to do with the kind of education provided by you educationalists. The road you have been following has been wrong from the start."

"Where is it wrong?"

"It is wrong in that education for women aims at the same goals as education for men!" said Shujun. "Just look at Feng Wen. You say she is a good girl, and this I believe; but if she hadn't had your wrong kind of education is it likely that she would look upon marriage and the home as torment? Is it likely that such an ambitious child would break down into a flood of tears in front of us?"

"Do you want us to retreat, retreat to the home and never be allowed out?"

"My ideas are not that old-fashioned," said Shujun. "If I were of the opinion that women ought to stay at home all their lives, I would under no circumstances have endured all conceivable hardships in order to send you to Beijing to get an education."

"That being so, aren't you contradicting yourself?" asked Xiyi with a smile. "You feel that girls shouldn't spend all their lives in the home, yet you also feel

²⁶ The five cardinal relationships (*wu lun*): between sovereign and subject; father and son; husband and wife; between brothers and between friends.

²⁷ A woman was required to obey her father before marriage, her husband during married life, and her son if she were widowed. The Four Virtues were: fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needlework.

that girls ought not to be unwilling to stay contentedly at home and be good wives!”

“Yes, and for that reason it is still a problem, a problem for which you educationalists must find a fair course between two extremes. Girls must have a skill, but they must under no circumstances forget their bounden duty to be wives and mothers. If they forget, there will be anarchy.”²⁸

Xiyi has to admit that her mother has a point, but she cannot immediately formulate in her own mind a curriculum for schools that will give a girl a well-rounded and balanced education: an education which, while aiming for high academic achievement, will not neglect those subjects that will equip her for marriage and motherhood. Nor can she devise a course which will help to lay the foundation for greater understanding between the sexes.

Though the problem exercises her imagination for some considerable time, the war with Japan begins to dominate the scene. As the Ministry of Education adapts the curriculum for emergency conditions, there is no question of Xiyi tackling what she now sees to be not only an educational problem, but a social one.

A chance to experiment with a social relations course finally arises when the whole family is evacuated to the hinterland of China to a small and backward market-town in a province largely untouched by the twentieth century. Here Xiyi is invited by the District Magistrate and the local gentry to start a school for girls. With the help of other refugee teachers she begins to put into practice ideas which she hopes will lead to a more balanced type of young woman than Feng Wen.

At the end of the war Xiyi and her family return to Hankou intent on playing their part in the reconstruction of their country, but disillusionment soon sets in as the Nationalist and the Communists become locked in a life or death struggle.

²⁸ Meng Yao, *Limingqian*, pp. 353–355.

Meng Yao brings down the curtain on the Zhao family as the Communists take over the administration of the city of Hankou. As she herself did not remain on the mainland, she could not observe at first hand the next phase in the education of women in China.

In other novels, set either on the mainland or in Taiwan, many female characters are highly trained, but few have solved the problem of combining career and marriage without either the one or the other suffering.

As her own marriage ended in divorce Meng Yao may well be reflecting something of herself in Feng Wen and identifying herself with the complaint that nothing in the educational system prepared her for the dual role of career woman and wife. The Western reader will no doubt feel some sympathy for Meng Yao since the issues she raises have not been resolved in western society either.