

## Research Article

# "Blank" and Love: Love in the Miniature Novels of Indonesian--Chinese Writer Yuan Ni

Wang Jiatong

Xihua University, China

**Abstract.**

Among Indonesian-Chinese authors, Yuan Ni is very well known. This paper analyzes her miniature novels by using Wolfgang Iser's *blank* theory to explore her writing on love and the values behind it. Firstly, Yuan Ni's view of love shows a call for genuine feelings, and the artistic *blank* in some of her novels leads readers to think critically. Secondly, her novels also show the notion that perfect love should be sublimated in the family, which is the result of Indonesian-Chinese women's conscious identification with traditional Chinese ethics. The concept of family is an important point in this traditional ethical view. However, in some of her works, the novel presents *blank* the meaning of the text, which reflects the fact that the family, a symbol of patriarchal power, often hinders love, and this feature of the text reveals the author's inner entanglement.

**Keywords:** Yuan Ni, novel, Indonesian Chinese fiction writing

Corresponding Author: Wang  
Jiatong; email:  
2926244143@qq.com

**Published** 8 November 2022

Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

© Wang Jiatong. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the SIRES Conference Committee.

## 1. Introduction

In the history of Indonesian Chinese fiction writing, female literature is unique. Most of the creators were born in the 1930s to 1950s, and their lineup is almost equal to that of male writers (Wang Lieyao&Yan Ming,2007). Almost all of these women writers had complex and difficult life experiences and unique emotional worlds, which made them very sensitive to the world situation and often made different observations from the female perspective. Yuan Ni is one of the representative figures. Yuan Ni, birth name Ye Li Zhen, was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, and her ancestral home is from Songkou, Meixian, Guangdong. Her writing career began in 1972, and she has written a wide range of works, including short stories, miniature novels, poems, and essays. In this paper, we will mainly examine her miniature novels. As Qin Hong said (Yuan Ni,2013) , the greatest feeling of Yuan Ni's miniature novels is that they present a wide range of worldly conditions with rich expressions and writing strategies, which is the charm of her writing. On the one hand, influenced by the writer's writing style and the qualities of the genre, her writing must be simple. On the other hand, her writing must be rich

**OPEN ACCESS**

in meaning if she wants to reflect the broad state of affairs and human feelings in a short space. In order to achieve this effect, the author creates many "blank" in her work. Shortness and incisiveness are the most important aesthetic features of miniature novels. In characterization, they focus on a certain point or aspect, and in the storyline, they often do artistic treatment such as omission (Liu Haitao,1994). These omissions and abbreviations have created massive artistic blank in the text, "blank" proposed by the aesthetic theorist Wolfgang Iser, "the unqualified and meaningful blanks in this text are the bridge between creative and receptive consciousness... The function is to prompt the reader to give definite meaning to the undefined parts of the text in the process of reading, to fill the blank in the text. (Wolfgang Iser,1991)"blank" refers to the undefined parts of the text that need to be filled by readers according to their own imagination, and it is the "blank" that stimulate readers to imagine and construct the meaning of the text, so that the meaning of the text can be constructed through the two-way participation of readers and authors. Yuan Ni's miniature novels are written about many aspects of life, many of which are based on the theme of love.This paper will examine Yuan Ni's unique view of love through the theory of "blank" and observe the hidden worries and entanglements therein.

## 2. Calling for Genuine Feelings

The core term of Yuan Ni's concept of love is "genuine feelings", which is an emotion based on personal will, unadulterated by desires, interests and compromises. This is achieved through the criticism of the opposite of genuine feelings, false emotions. In some of the novels, this critique reaches a deeper level, touching on aspects such as women's compressed living space and the alienation of people and love in modern society.

*A String of Necklaces* has an O'Henry-style ending, in which "I", work as a servant in the Lin family, and "I" especially envies the happy and harmonious life of the Lin family, in which the husband is caring, the wife is gentle, and the children are surrounded by their knees, so "I" work more diligently, hoping that one day I can also have a warm and happy small family.

However, one day "I" found a necklace and gave it to the mistress, but accidentally broke the secret of Mr. Lin's cheating, at the end of the story, When the mistress was cooking, tears suddenly fell, lamenting that if "I" had not given her the necklace, nothing would have happened... This novel starts from "my" internal focus narrative perspective. In "my" eyes, perhaps the Lin family is the most exemplary family, but

in reality, is the servant's observation really comprehensive and reliable? This inward-focused perspective causes a certain interruption in the plot, and it allows the reader to think deeply about the hypocritical side of married life. In addition, this article ends with Mrs. Lin's confession, which also creates a certain blank in the plot. Will she choose to divorce or continue to put up with her current life? Perhaps the words at the end of the article have already pointed us to the latter option. When marriage becomes a cage, when women have no other choice, life will lead them to choose a kind of false happiness, pretending nothing ever happened. It is this blank in the plot that gives rise to a broader imagination and allows the reader to empathize with Mrs. Lin's experience, or the situation of women in general.

Yuan Ni is also concerned with the alienation of personal existence and emotional life in contemporary society. In *The Love of Li Youheng*, Li Youheng, a young man working in Jakarta, meets two beautiful young girls, but does not understand their secret language about fruits. When he foolishly meets them with the grapes as gifts, he learns that the "Apple or Melon" they were talking about is just a reference to drugs. Zhu Liyuan believes that literary language also has a structure of invocation (Zhu Liyuan, 1988), and in this novel, the signifier and signified of "Apple or Melon" are separated and deflected in the specific use, resulting in a temporary blank that is not revealed until the end of the text. In fact, the deflection of this language sign is very critical, as the signifier of "Apple or Melon" loses its original meaning when it refers to drugs, and the meaning is deflected. However, when Li Youheng understands it as a fruit and brings the grapes as a gift, this behavior made the signifier back to its traditional meaning. This language sign reflects the characters' heart and behavior. The girls' differences in hearts and words (like fruit and drugs) represent their indiscriminate love and indulgence, while Li Youheng, whose heart and words are consistent, maintains his pursuit of love and genuine feelings. In addition, the energy of "Apple or Melon" gives people a very fashionable feeling, which precisely illustrates the state of sin and degradation wrapped by beautiful language, referring to the alienation and degradation of human beings.

*The SMS*, The story of a husband caught cheating on his wife is outlined in the form of ten short SMS messages, which also gives the reader a sense of originality. In the SMS, the words of both the wife and the husband are sweet, but various lies are behind these words. The whole novel is composed of SMS, which is a very clever writing strategy. On the one hand, the special form leaves a blank in the plot, which leaves a lot of room for the reader to imagine. On the other hand, SMS, which do not require the physical presence of a person and can be deleted and tampered with at any time, symbolize the

absence of the possibility of sincere human communication and express an alienated state of human relationships and emotions.

The criticism of these phenomena is a reflection of Yuan Ni's call for genuine feelings. In her novels *Obsession* and *10:10*, both celebrate the true love between a man and a woman, and how beautiful this genuinely is in an age of materialism.

### 3. Love Sublimates in the Family

Although there are works such as *A String of Necklaces* and *The Love of Li Youheng* that keenly explore women's stuck marital status or criticize the alienation of emotional life, most of Yuan Ni's love-related miniature novels still accuse husbands/lovers of betrayal and lament women's fate, so her overall view of love is still on the traditional and conservative side, The image of women is a bit simplistic and women often exist in an image of waiting for love, thus the call for true love and genuine feeling is sometimes like a false bubble. although the heroine are praying for genuine love , but in fact they lack the ability to change their own situation. Yuan Ni's traditional view of love is also reflected in her writing about family, for her, perfect love should be sublimated in a family.

One of the typical works is "The Enemy of Love," in this story, Xuan Hua's wife and her singing friends prepare a lively party for him on his birthday in a luxurious townhouse, but Xuan Hua goes to the home of another woman, Cai Qingyun. The wife angrily confronts Qingyun , only to be coldly reprimanded. "Man likes a warm nest and a caring wife." Xuan Hua was once in love with Cai Qingyun, but he cheated her and married his current wife, and now it is the current wife's turn to be worry. Which is more important to a man, lust or a warm family? Yuan Ni's answer is family, and the ultimate form of love can only be family, and the best love is the warmth of a woman watching over a man in a family. Yuan Ni's view of love is closely related to the existential reality of Indonesian women writers. On the one hand, the traditional concept of Indonesian society and the spirit of Confucianism are immersed in the collective unconscious of women writers (Wang Lieyao&Yan Ming,2007), and on the other hand, the Chinese community, surrounded by a heterogeneous culture, instinctively preserves traditional culture. Therefore, women writers have a special identification with the "family" which have strong connection with the traditional ethical concept (Wang Lieyao&Yan Ming,2007).As a result, Yuan Ni's works are not immune to this cultural constraint, and the image of women in her writing still appears passive and supple; they aspire to love and believe that the best love is related to family.

## 4. The Irreconcilability of Family and Love

Among Yuan Ni's miniature novels, there are two special pieces, namely *Grandmother* and *Grandfather in Grandmother's Eyes*, which are somewhat autobiographical in nature. In *Grandfather in Grandmother's Eyes*, The story telling of grandmother is from the perspective of "us". Grandmother was grew up in a town in Guangdong, When she was young ,she was chosen by "our" grandfather as his bride, and then went to Indonesia, never return hometown again. What "we" cannot understand is why our grandmother always cries when she talks about leaving home, and being punished by mother-in-law, and why she always scolds her husband who have already died very early. In *Grandmother*, the grandmother's life is full of hardships and great challenges, but as she grows old, all her memories and these marvelous experiences has been sealed and annihilated, and "we" cannot understand her, nor can she understand our world.

Both novels ask the reader a question :how to evaluate the grandmother's life, which is also a huge blank in the meaning of text. In the text, although the author says that "we suddenly understood our grandmother when we grew up," but as a reader, I can see the author's powerlessness and entanglement in facing this question. She tries to summarize her grandmother's life, arguing that she was in love with her grandfather and has a happy life ("decades after his death, she was still proud and happy when she thought of him"), but this solution is powerless. The grandmother was loved by her husband and had many children and grandchildren, but her life was a trapped one, with the pain of not being able to return to her hometown, the scolding and beating of her mother-in-law, the early death of her husband,and the powerlessness of not being able to change her own life. Perhaps "family" is not always the most wonderful form of love, and "family" can also be a cage that makes women trapped. In this difficult question and the huge blank in the meaning layer of text, I can see Yuan Ni's entanglement and sincerity.

This kind of entanglement is not a single case, *18 Years* tells a tragedy caused by racism, the powerful father hinders the happiness of the young Chinese daughter, the young daughter has to run away with her lover, an Indonesian young man. at the end of the story, the young daughter returned home, she still insisted that her marriage is fulfilling and happy. However, the daughter has long been suffering from cancer and has became old and tired. On the one hand, Yuan Ni emphasizes the primacy of true love, but on the other hand, she has to admit that without the support of her family (even if it is a representative of patriarchy and power),a woman's chances of achieving

happiness are very small. At this point, an irreconcilable conflict arises between family and love.

Although works like *The Enemy of Love* show the identification with the "family" under traditional ethics. But works like "Eighteen Years" and *Grandfather in Grandmother's Eyes* reflect some thing different. We can see Yuan Ni's inner entanglement, or a little doubt about the value of "family". This fact shows that Yuan Ni's view of love is complex and unconsciously influenced by many factors.

The journey of Indonesian women writers is undoubtedly a difficult one, Yuan Ni writes about women's stories with a sympathetic eye, so that the secret history of Indonesian Chinese women's hearts and the reality of their existence can be presented and explored artistically.

## References

- [1] Liu H. *Xiandai ren de xiaoshuoshijie: weixinxiaoshuo xiezuoyishulun* [The Modern World of Fiction: A Treatise on the Art of Writing Microfiction]. Shanghai Literature press; 1994.
- [2] Wang L, Ming Y. *Kunzhezhiwu yindunixiya huawenwenxue sishinian* [Dance of the Imprisoned Forty Years of Indonesian Chinese Literature]. China Social Sciences Press; 2007.
- [3] Iser W. *Aesthetic response theory of reading activities*. China Social Sciences Press; 1991.
- [4] Yuan. *Yajiada de shengdanye* [Christmas Eve in Jakarta]. Literature and Art Press; 2013
- [5] Zhu L. *Luelun wenxuezuoping de zhaohuanjiegou* [A brief discussion on the response-inviting structure of literary works]. *Academic Monthly*. 1988;(8):43–49.