

# Seeing and Writing: From Zhang Li's Feminist Perspective Theory to the Literary Practice of Qiu Yuan

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**Abstract.** Taking the "female perspective" narrative proposed by Zhang Li in *I See Countless Her* as the framework and background, this study delves into the practice and value of female perspective narratives represented by *Qiu Yuan*, exploring the perfect closed loop from literary theory to writing practice. Through close reading and theoretical interpretation, the research demonstrates that *Qiu Yuan* portrays a map of women's survival with its simple yet profound non-fiction narrative and the plain writing of daily life, awakening the consciousness of the female community and vividly practicing Zhang Li's theoretical proposition of "granting dignity to the weak and giving voice to the mute" —a reclaiming of narrative power by women. At the same time, her literary success, in turn, confirms the significance of the "female perspective" criticism. The research conclusion indicates that this creative combination of theory and practice not only provides a new paradigm for interpreting women's life experiences but also opens up a practical and feasible path for how contemporary Chinese literature writes the history of ordinary people.

**Keywords:** Female perspective; female subjectivity; *Qiu Yuan*; *I See Countless Her*.

## 1. Introduction

With the progression of the times, an increasing number of female figures have emerged in contemporary literature, and the characteristics of female subjectivity have become ever more pronounced. This study is centered around the phenomenon of the increasingly prominent female subjectivity in contemporary literature. Taking the narrative theory of the "female perspective" put forward by critic Zhang Li in *I See Countless Her* as the research context, and incorporating her literary tenet of "endowing the weak with dignity and enabling the voiceless to speak out", this research conducts an in - depth exploration of how Yang Benfen's *Qiu Yuan* vividly presents this theory. This research holds significant theoretical and practical significance for promoting the renewal of the research paradigm in women's literature and exploring how literature can effectively care for individual destinies. This study mainly elaborates on three aspects: the intrinsic connection between the "female perspective" narrative theory and the female writing in *Qiu Yuan*, the reconstruction of narrative rights from "seeing" to "writing", and the presentation of the female community with a shared future in the work. In terms of research methods, this paper employs the literature analysis method to search for and read relevant materials and documents. Through a detailed interpretation of the text of *Qiu Yuan*, combined with Zhang Li's "female perspective" narrative theory, it analyzes how the work presents the life journey of ordinary women in the historical torrent through the depiction of mundane daily life, emotionally rich brushstrokes and the choice of non-fiction genres. The advantage of this method lies in its ability to deeply explore the convergence points between text details and theoretical connotations, and reveal the interactive relationship between literary creation and theoretical construction. The ultimate research objective of this study is to clarify the specific manifestation of the "female perspective" narrative theory in contemporary literary practice, explore the new literary paradigm initiated by this theory, and promote the reconstruction of narrative rights from "being written" to "self-writing". To achieve this goal, this article will systematically analyze the narrative features, emotional expression and thematic presentation of *Qiu Yuan*, and demonstrate how it embodies the core proposition of the "female perspective" narrative theory, thereby providing a new path for Chinese and even world literature on how to effectively create and care for individuals.

## 2. Literature Review

Currently, academic research on *Qiu Yuan* primarily focuses on its "narrative of suffering," "mother figure," or "non-fiction characteristics." Zhang Yaoyu's *on the Depiction of Female Survival Dilemmas in Yang Benfen's Novels* and Meng Yu's *on the Survival Conditions of Traditional Women in Qiu Yuan* both analyze the multiple predicaments of 20th-century women under patriarchy from a feminist perspective, showcasing women's resilient resistance through the stories of characters like Qiu Yuan [1,2]. These works contribute to highlighting the overlooked spiritual aspects of women, but they do not introduce theoretical frameworks. Cao Ze's *Seeing Countless 'Hers' and the 'Countless' Aspects of Her* further enriches Zhang Li's critical theory from a female perspective. Together, they construct a broad framework for understanding female images, assisting this research in analyzing the female - perspective theory put forward [3]. However, this assistance is confined to the critical theory itself. Moreover, in academic circles, there has been very little discussion about *I See Countless Her*. Placing these two works side by side to explore the profound intertextual relationship between "theoretical appeals" and "creative practices" remains a critical research gap. This paper will use Zhang Li's "feminist perspective" criticism theory as a framework to deeply interpret how *Qiu Yuan* practices "seeing" and "writing" in narrative perspective, thematic presentation, and narrative power. It aims to conduct a profound study of the perfect intertextuality between theoretical propositions and literary practice, filling existing research gaps and collectively advancing Chinese women's literature toward deeper and broader horizons.

## 3. Critical Theory of "Female Perspective" in *I See Countless Her*

### 3.1. Zhang Li Explains the Core Concept of "Female Perspective"

In the preface of *I See Countless Her*, Zhang Li proposed four principles to help readers better and faster interpret literary and film works from a female perspective. They are sympathetic understanding, breaking away from the victim mentality, confirming the subjectivity as a reader, and rediscovering the vastness of the female world.

To understand these four perspectives, first of all, it is necessary to understand that women are not only a gender but also a situation. The book mentions that "We cannot demand gender awareness in all artistic works, but we can understand and perceive them through a female perspective or gender consciousness" [4]. To truly grasp this condition, we must not only analyze her actions but also comprehend her vulnerability, struggles, helplessness, and sense of being compelled [4]. As readers, we need neither an omniscient God's-eye view nor complete identification with the protagonist. For instance, Zhang Li observes that most readers of *Jane Eyre* view the story through Jane Eyre's eyes. However, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, critics perceive the madwoman through a transformed lens. This shift in perspective allows readers to glimpse the potential for female growth even in films with non-female protagonists. The fourth principle helps readers understand that such a "world" is vast. In female literary works, it is impossible to have only birth, aging, illness, death and kitchen stoves; there will also be rivers, lakes, seas and the tenderness of time.

Zhang Li posits that the female perspective serves as both a standpoint and a methodology of values. Like all forms of reading and thinking, it aims to cultivate readers' independence, enrich their inner world, prevent blind conformity, and resist easy submission. "The ultimate purpose of interpreting through a female lens is to nurture compassionate, understanding individuals—more crucially, independent thinkers with critical inquiry capabilities" [4]. Female literature and female writing have always pursued equality and understanding rather than opposition and exclusion. It is important to recognize that many things are not singular or absolute. Similarly, women's writing is rich and fertile. Zhang Li once likened it to an interconnected network of nerves— "bridging women with men, women with women, and connecting people with reality and nature" [5].

### 3.2. Call for Female Perspective Writing

Zhang Li's interpretation of the female perspective is also a profound and revolutionary appeal: she advocates establishing a conscious "female perspective" in the writing and reading of Chinese literature. The core of this appeal is not to stir up gender confrontation, but to reconstruct a way of viewing and narrating. She hopes that readers and authors can try to break free from the long-dominant, unconscious male gaze filter, and instead adopt an empathetic, anti-shaping approach to "see" and understand women in the literary world and real life. The theoretical foundation lies in the widely circulated summary — "Let the weak gain dignity, let the voiceless speak."

She called on writers, especially female ones, to courageously write about their own experiences, about the daily lives, delicate emotions and individual destinies that have been overlooked by grand historical narratives. " This is the return of women's literature in the 'wrong path', while also representing women's self-guided journey to explore life's multifaceted possibilities" [6]. This redefinition of narrative authority equally grants every ordinary 'she' the dignity to be seen and told.

## 4. Literary Presentation of Female Narratives in Qiu Yuan

### 4.1. Writing about Women's Plight

The predicament of Qiu Yuan is first reflected in the material and survival aspects. Her life was like a duckweed, swept up by the torrent of war and the turmoil of politics. She fled from Luoyang and moved around Hunan and Hubei, constantly on the move. This kind of wandering and instability was the common fate that countless Chinese women were forced to endure for survival at that time. As a mother, she felt the threat of "hunger" even more deeply. The scarcity of food became the core anxiety that enveloped the entire family. Her body was not only a tool for labor but also the carrier for reproduction and nurturing.

*Qiu Yuan* portrays the spiritual and emotional struggles of women. In *Emerging from the Historical Surface*, Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue observe: " In the power cycle of father and son that has lasted for more than two thousand years, women have been alive but have no history. There were wives, wives, maidservants and concubines, but no women " [7]. Qiu Yuan's predicament stems from societal constraints and ethical norms. Despite her education and desire for independence, traditional expectations and social pressures severely limited her personal growth. Take Qiu Yuan's two marriages as examples. Her first marriage to Ren Shou was an arranged one, and they had never met before the wedding. Her second marriage to Wang Cheng'en was due to a policy change that prohibited outsiders from moving in. Neither of these two marriages was Qiu Yuan's own choice; they were both survival strategies, necessities she had no choice but to accept. Her value was often reflected through the sacrifices and dedication she has made for her family. This experience of struggling to survive within the family ethics network was a common life issue for almost all women at that time.

### 4.2. The Embodiment of the Community of Shared Future for Women

Qiu Yuan is not only a concrete and vivid individual but also a representative of countless women in the same situation. Her image has transcended the realm of a personal biography - her struggle is the common struggle of millions of women. Her tenacity is the collective tenacity of the entire female community. Remarkably, Yang Benfen refrains from portraying Qiu Yuan as an isolated sufferer. Instead, she reveals a grassroots alliance forged through small yet vital acts of kindness: mutual support between neighbors, former colleagues, and even strangers encountered on the street. This grassroots solidarity emerges as a lifeline under historical pressures, sustaining their survival through fragile bonds. Behind these narratives, Yang avoids dramatizing suffering or adopting a moralistic perspective. With warm, unadorned prose, she captures "the moral strength of extraordinary women in adversity, revealing the weight of time's sedimentation [1]." The author truly empathizes with women and their situations, constantly conveying to readers the truth that "women need to build a

strong sense of self-awareness, strive to break through their own limitations, view themselves as the fundamental cause and ultimate goal of their existence, and take on the responsibilities they should bear." [8].

### 4.3. Daily Narrative and the Development of the Times

Through depictions of rural life, daily routines, and historical events, female writers shift their focus from personal introspection to social realities, thereby enhancing the depth and multidimensionality of women's literary works [9]. *Qiu Yuan* observes the human world from a female perspective. The entire book is filled with descriptions of daily scenes, combining the "big era" with the "small daily life". The silt and sand carried by the torrent of the times, when falling on one person, would be unbearable. "Qiu Yuan is not the novel's central focus, but rather its narrative thread" [10]. Yang Benfen quantifies the era's cruelty through meticulous details of daily chores—shoe-making, garment mending, rice borrowing, housing searches, fire-starting, and cooking. The nation's fate is thus condensed into a family's survival struggles. The true weight of history is borne and chronicled through the tenacious perseverance of countless "Qiu Yuan" in their mundane battles for survival.

"I know that the stories I write are like a drop of water that will eventually flow into the long river of human history," this is a passage printed on the back cover of this non-fiction novel that focuses on women [11]. Yang Benfen has traversed the long river of a century of history, constructing branches under the grand historical backdrop with her own personal experiences, composing a unique family history of ordinary Chinese women. She "perceives the people and events worthy of recording and preservation in private memories with the sensitivity and delicacy unique to women, and writes a family history of individual memories in a plain yet moving way" [12].

### 4.4. From "Being Written" to "Self-writing"

In traditional literary history narratives, ordinary women often carry the values and aesthetic tastes in the hearts of men and are in an object position of being "written about" and "shaped". Under the influence of men's "imagination" and "observation", women usually lack the authenticity and complexity of life, and their language space has also been squeezed in the grand course of history.

In *I See Countless Her*, Zhang Li sharply pointed out the imbalance of narrative power and loudly called for a return of subjectivity - that is, women should become the writers of their own stories, transforming from the objects of "being written" to the subjects of "self-writing". *Qiu Yuan* is precisely the literary practice that this theory calls for most thoroughly and clearly.

In an interview, Yang Benfen mentioned, "Writing begins with the realization that 'a story does not exist without being told.' In fact, this 'existence' precisely means that ordinary women have their own space for expression." [12]. The narrative of *Qiu Yuan* stands as a heroic reclaiming of narrative power. The delicate and plain language in the book dilates the cold dominance of narrative power, reflecting the tender connection among women and a daughter's deep and pure love for her mother. It perfectly presents the theory that women need to answer "Who I am" by themselves rather than waiting for others to define it.

## 5. Theory and Practice

Zhang Li's "female perspective" criticism "sees" the female group that has been overlooked in traditional literary history, while Yang Benfen, from the perspective of a daughter and a witness, reshapes her mother, Qiu Yuan, from a vague figure ignored by the grand history, into a flesh-and-blood, rich and full life subject. Her creations directly put this kind of "writing" into practice, responding to Zhang Li's call for "letting the speechless speak up". Together, they form a profound and productive two-way dialogue. Zhang Li's "female perspective" criticism provides an extremely appropriate and profound analytical framework for interpreting *Qiu Yuan*. Conversely, the tremendous literary appeal and social resonance of *Qiu Yuan* perfectly confirm that Zhang Li's theory

is not a castle in the air. The combination of the two clearly demonstrates how theory guides creation, and how creation in turn nourishes and enriches theory, jointly promoting the exploration of the depth and breadth of contemporary women's writing.

The fusion of "seeing" and "writing" signifies a pivotal shift in women's narrative agency, transitioning from being passive subjects of documentation to active creators of their own stories. This transformation has profoundly fueled the awakening of contemporary women's self-expression consciousness. It demonstrates to countless ordinary women that their lives and emotions possess equal literary value when recorded. This awakening has helped more women pick up their pens and write about their mothers, grandmothers and even themselves, thereby fundamentally expanding the volume of women's discourse and changing the pattern of literary expression.

As a model work of non-fiction literature, *Qiu Yuan* has successfully raised the attention and recognition of the academic community and readers towards this genre, promoting the prosperity of non-fiction writing. At the same time, it provides literary writing with a kind of daily writing that is different from traditional grand narratives, with ordinary life and individual destinies at its core. This approach helps more people understand— "Every housewife peeling potato skins is carving the rings of existence, and every shirt crease seals an unsaid epic" [13]. This narrative paradigm enables literature to more inclusive and more authentically reflect the emotional structure and living conditions of human beings, enriching the literary landscape of China.

## 6. Conclusion

This study indicates that the "female perspective" critical theory proposed by Zhang Li in *I See Countless Her* forms a profound intertextual verification with Yang Benfen's literary creation practice in *Qiu Yuan*. The transformation of subjectivity between "being seen" and "self-writing" has awakened contemporary women's awareness of expression and writing, representing a reclaiming of narrative power. The value of this study lies in its first systematic connection between Zhang Li's critical theory and Yang Benfen's literary creation practice, revealing a positive interactive relationship between literary criticism and literary creation. Through the plain and delicate narrative perspective of *Qiu Yuan*, it advocates the literary paradigm of daily writing and promotes the diverse development of Chinese literature. Of course, this study has certain limitations and will only focus the discussion on the two books, *I Saw Countless Her* and *Qiu Yuan*. Future research can apply the "female perspective" to more female writings, establishing a more inclusive literary criticism and writing practice.

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