

**Politically Marginalized Female Figures:
*Female Grassland and Celestial Bath***

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Abstract

Yan Geling's early work *Female Grassland* 雌性的草地 (Yan, 1989) is a novel published in 1989, while *Celestial Bath* 天浴 (Yan, 2008) is a short story published in 1996. Both of Yan Geling's works focus on female sent-down youth, with stories set in the grasslands of the Tibetan pastoral countryside during the mid-1970s, in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 (1966-1976). This paper discusses women's fragmentation to analyze the obstacles to women's liberation during the sent-down youth movement, illustrating how female sent-down youth' tragic experiences resulted because of political power.

Keywords: *Celestial Bath*, *Female Grassland*, female fragmentation, oppression, Sent-down youth

It is important to have an overall understanding of the movement's significance to sent-down youth in China. Chinese sent-down youth, or the cohort of rusticated, or educated youth (Chinese: 知识青年/ 知青)¹ represents one of the largest worldwide migrations in history. As Gao Zongchi 高宗池 (born 1993) notes, tens of millions of young students were sent to the remote and poverty-stricken rural countryside in the 1960s and 1970s, all in the name of "re-education" (Gao, 1995). The relocation of millions of urban youths to the rural countryside became one of the major social events in modern Chinese history and has profoundly shaped the life experience and ideological outlook of an entire generation. As You notes in the article *Educated Youth Should Go to the Rural Areas: A Tale of Education, Employment and Social Values*, China's rustication movement represents the largest urban-to-rural migration known in human history, and estimates the effect of that relocation on the education, labor outcomes, and social values of youth in the rural areas (You, 2018).

Sent-down youth are widely described as successful and optimistic in the literary texts of the time. The political propaganda of the period portrays simplistic, stereotypical, and idealized female images, which do not come close to revealing women's practical life experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Yang and Yan demonstrate that previous studies understate the extent to which revolutionary dramas performance served as political propaganda in this period. Upon closer inspection, gender roles portrayed in revolutionary dramas can hardly be said to represent the actual oppressed status of women in China during the revolution (Yang & Yan, 2017).

Through all these studies, though, there is still little discussion about how females were oppressed during the Chinese sent-down youth movement. *Female Grassland* and *Celestial Bath* are the earlier works of Yan Geling and are very popular. Yan even reflected that *Female Grassland* is her best work, because she was young and passionate when she wrote that novel. *Celestial Bath*² was published in Chinese and won First Prize in the National Students and Scholars' Literary Contest (Taiwan). Later, this short story was translated into English and published in the collection *White Snake 白蛇 and Other Stories* by Aunt Lute Books (San Francisco) in 1999. Later, Yan wrote the script for a film adaptation titled *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* along with Joan Chen, a famous actress and director. The film stars Li Xiaolu 李 小璐 (born 1982), who acts as the heroine Wen Xiu 文秀. The novel and its adaptive film are mostly complementary in representing the plight of female sent-down youth.

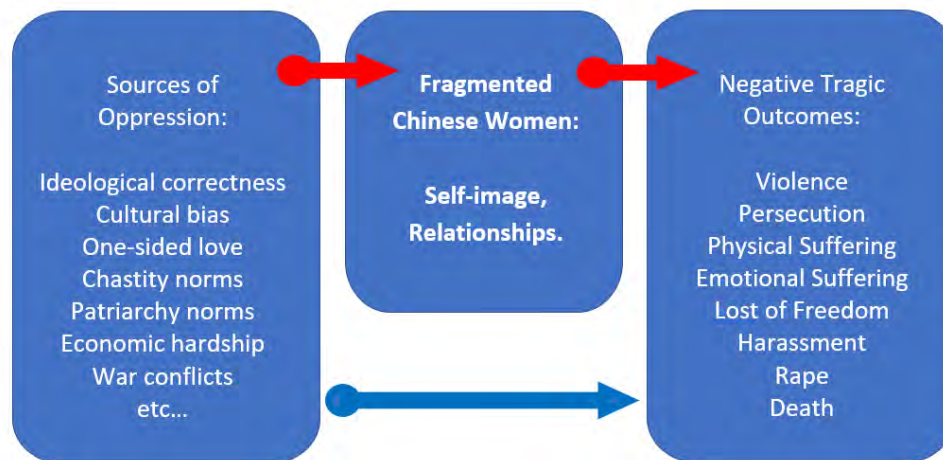
Yan Geling's early work *Female Grassland 雌性的草地* describes how a group of female sent-down youth join in a local cow farm and form a women's wrangler group. They are determined to complete their assigned mission despite an extremely cold climate and a shortage of food. *Celestial Bath* is a short story about Wen Xiu, a tragic sent-down girl from Chengdu, who struggles to return to her hometown, but in the end dies in those grasslands, while many of female sent-down youths are finding their way back to the cities.

The author of the article hypothesizes that female fragmentation is caused by oppression and can lead to negative (even tragic) consequences (see Figure 1).

¹ There are two pivotal events concerning the Chinese youths during the Cultural Revolution: the Red Guard Movement and the Rustication Movement.

² Awards and nominations: Golden Horse Awards 1998 (Best Film awarded to Joan Chen), 48th Berlin International Film Festival 1998 (nominated for the Golden Bear).

Figure 1
Theory of Fragmentation



The term fragmentation has been used in this paper to highlight women's experiences, which entails the sense of being separated into strongly opposing parts that are severely disconnected. Many feminists think there should be solidarity between women, even unity and sisterhood, but this is far from the reality, both in China and the world generally; in this sense, the term fragmentation suggests that an outside force, such as patriarchy, might be dividing women or keeping them apart. This fragmentation also applies to the individual female consciousness and self-image, creating psychological conflict and split personalities (Kohut, 1977; Scott, 1999; and Tissier-Desbordes & Visconti, 2019).

This paper will discuss how the oppression of women was rampant within the sent-down youth movement, which resulted in severe physical, emotional, and psychological trauma on female sent-down youth and caused the fragmentation of female roles and images.

Gender Roles during the Sent-Down Youth Movement: The Oppression of Females

This section discusses a clearer distinction between officially sanctioned propaganda memoirs and "freer" accounts. Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 (1893–1976) statement is officially-sanctioned propaganda. Mao Zedong's said: "Young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you." This call motivated millions of youths to energetically go to remote areas and to contribute to China and the world. Mao Zedong pointed out in his concluding speech to the Seventh National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in June of 1945: "We must work persistently, work ceaselessly, and we too may be able to touch God's heart. This God is no other than the masses of the people throughout China" (我们一定要坚持下去, 一定要不断地工作, 我们也会感动上帝的。这个上帝不是别人, 就是全中国的人民大众。) (Mao, 1965a, 1965b). This statement is nothing less than a call to sacrifice individuals' wants, needs, and desires, for the Party's higher truths. Women's public role as fighters and revolutionaries was glorified by the authorities, such as Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875–1907), Xie Bingying 谢冰莹 (1906–2000) and Zhao Yiman 赵一曼 (1905–1936) and like Chinese female heroes (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Chen et al., 2001). In short, many writers attempt to portray sent-down girls as idealized female role models.

Thousands of sent-down youths share their eagerness to join the rustication. That is how the state tried to make them see themselves through intense propaganda. For example, Wang Anyi 王安忆 (born 1954), a female writer, insisted on going to the countryside during the sent-down youth movement, despite the dissuading of her mother (Leung, 2016). In Wang Anyi's *1969 Junior Middle School Students*, Wenwen 雯雯 is determined to join the rustication movement despite her parent's efforts to stop her (Wang, 2001). Deng Xian 邓贤 (born 1953), a well-known sent-down youth writer, notes that there has never been another community like the sent-down youth in Chinese history, who fanatically worshipped a holy goal and yearned to achieve spiritual transcendence through self-sacrifice (Deng, 1993).

The first Chinese soldier writer Xie Bingying 谢冰莹 (1906-2000) narrates her experiences as a female soldier fighting against the warlord Xia Douyin 夏斗寅 (1885-1951) in 1927 in her novel *War Diaries* 从军日记 (Xie, 1933). She points out that the girls' team in the central military and political school are the real pioneers in China and beyond. She declares that "we have no home, and the Party is our home", and firmly becomes a party loyalist who ignores personal desires and ambitions in favor of the good of the whole. It demonstrates how an idealized sent-down youth image is.

Those heroic female figures are widely portrayed by Chinese writers. Liang Xiaosheng's 梁晓声 (born 1949) well-known novel *A Land of Wonder and Mystery* (*Zhe shi yipian shenqi de tudi* 这是一片神奇的土地) depicts three sent-down youths who died trying to open up the land beyond the Ghost Marsh (Liang, 2015). Liang portrays the trio as heroes instead of depicting them as victims of a terrible tragedy. The novel caused an immediate sensation after it was published in 1982. Liang Xiaosheng's *Snow Tonight* 今夜有暴雪 depicts the protagonist Pei Xiaoyun 裴晓云 freezing to death in the snow while attempting to fulfil her duties (Liang, 2012). The authority sets forth a collective myth: "they should be selfless helpmates for the state's interest". Zhang Xinxin 张辛欣 (born 1953), a female Chinese writer, observes that hundreds and hundreds of sent-down youth went to rescue public lands, disregarding their safety during the rustication movement (Kinkley, 1990).

Gao Zongchi 高宗池 provides a literature review on the sent-down youth movement (Gao, 1995). His work shows that whether it is the early novels on sent-down youth written between 1977 and 1982 or the revival of sent-down youth novels after 1985, the focus has always been on the challenges of sent-down youth themselves. In the mature period of 1983 to 1984, these novels focus on the contributions made by sent-down youths to the rural society in their respective posts after returning to the city. In the typical portrayal of a sent-down girl, we find her struggling in during the initial turbulent years before finally mastering her rural life and receiving recognition. These writings depict the sent-down youth movement as a positive experience.

These idealized youths are widely considered heroic by the state during the Maoist era. This is how the state tried to make them see themselves through intense propaganda. People are not only inspired by a deep sense of purpose, but also burdened with self-imposed feelings of guilt and sin: a sent-down heroine must constantly employ "the weapon of self-criticism" to examine her own consciousness "for the presence of bad thoughts" and she must continually struggle against "shortcoming and mistakes". As Meisner Maurice (1931–2012) observes, the sin of selfishness and the virtue of self-denial, the ethical value of hard work, frugality, self-discipline,

diligence and honesty, are the moral maxims that are constantly imparted to the Chinese people, especially to Chinese youths (Meisner, 1968).

Officially sanctioned propaganda memoirs differ from “freer” accounts. Some people would view them as victims of a brainwashing campaign that leads to needless loss of life of wasteful vanity projects. This article is to contribute to filling in the gap of victimized women. Similar studies on Yan Geling’s novel on *Flowers of War*, describing female youth’s image during the Sino-Japan war, have been done by Li and Xu (Li & Xu, 2021). This paper is based Yan Geling’s novel that’s after the Sino-Japan war, and during the Cultural Revolution.

This understanding of marginalized female roles has been extensively explored in other countries and contexts. For example, Cheng explored the representation of prostitution and material desire (Cheng, 2018), and Ishida investigated female soldiers in naval cultures (Ishida, 2018). The women’s roles from UK and Holland are westernized to meet their different desire, whereas Chinese women are widely expected to play a monotonous and heroic female role based on sanctioned propaganda. It shows that the political movement is decisive in affecting Chinese women’s destinies and wellbeing. Those marginalized women in UK and Holland contrast to those in Chinese context.

The Compulsory Sent-Down Movement

Heroic propaganda became a significant reason for teenage youth to participate in the sent-down youth movement. Chinese youth were encouraged to participate in the sent-down movement as a matter of patriotic duty. The sent-down youth were inspired by a sincere and sacred mission to improve the backward conditions of rural areas and were filled with heroic patriotic fervor.

The teenage youths are easily induced to join the rustication. Some sent-down youth join the rustication out of sincerity, others join out of curiosity, as described in the words that “where there is a good horse riding, a good shot back, and a charming big wood, why not go?” (那里有骑马的好地方，有不错的打猎机会，还有迷人的大树林，为什么不去？). Yan’s novel narrates Wen Xiu’s ideas of teenage notions about how good the sent-down youth movement is, only to meet with life-threatening situations after arriving in the country. The novel describes that from the first day Wen Xiu arrived, she regretted her decision deeply and began to doubt whether she could meaningfully transform the countryside.

The authorities actively promote educated youth to develop “close relationships” with poor and lower-class peasants.³ That is to say, the communist state requires that any choice of a spouse must take political and party considerations into account. This paper reveals the oppression of sent-down women resulting from this propaganda in the public sphere.

For sent-down youth students, there were usually three ways to return: first, being selected by a university to leave the countryside; second, being recruited by a public institution for work in the city; and third, as a last resort, returning to the city because of illness. Zhang Jie 张洁 (born 1937) expresses how frustrated youth became when they were able to go back to their cities. Without the expectation of returning home, some sent-down youth suffered breakdowns and fell into madness (Yan, 2008).

³ *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* was directed by Joan Chen and starred Li Xiaolu and Lopsang Qunpei. The film was shown at the Berlinale in 1998.

Zhou and Hou indicate that all social groups were negatively impacted by sent-down policy, and that such policies had lasting effects throughout an individuals' life, reflected in the decline of personal income and the patterns of later life events (Zhou & You, 1999). Chen and Cheng describe their personal sent-down experience, reporting that life in the countryside represented a major challenge to the rusticated youth (Chen & Cheng, 1999). Their personal experience and research clearly show that the sent-down youth struggled with their experience in the countryside. Currently, several studies uncover the oppressive nature of the sent-down youth movement, including the negative impact the movement had on sent-down youth marriages. For example, Wang and Zhou conduct surveys with careful sample selection, and find that those who participated as sent-down youth had worse marriage outcomes, lower-quality social networks, and a lower level of happiness than those not involved in the program (Wang & Zhou, 2017). Compared to their non-sent-down counterparts, the sent-down generation were more likely to "marry down"; their spouses were less likely to communicate their troubles, and were also less likely to do housework. As indicated by Glaeser et al., sent-down experience tended to have severe negative impacts on sent-down youth's career and social network (Glaeser et al., 2002). As Michel Bonnin (born 1949) points out, the sent-down youth experience created all kinds of suffering in the countryside, ranging from the poverty-stricken conditions in which they lived and worked, to violent sexual and physical abuse, all while denying youth opportunities for education, and meaningful careers. Thus, they are aptly referred to as the "lost generation" (Bonnin, & Horko, 2013).

In sum, the rustication movement was, despite the illusion of freedom, politically compulsory; teenage youth were required to be re-educated by living in rural poverty, all to further the state's perceived but misguided interests. For example, Bonnin and Horko indicate that "the movement existed and lasted for a decade because Mao wanted it" (Bonnin & Horko, 2013, p. 443). He broadly links the movement to Mao's anti-intellectual populist attitude, which in turn can be traced back to Mao's adolescence.

Asceticism and Oppression

The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has been defined as a period of "gender erasure" (Yang, 1999, pp. 35–67). Chinese youths were encouraged to give up personal desire and sexual pleasure which were considered to be sins against the Communist political ethic and the goals of the utopian future. Social repression addresses the regulation of desire, particularly sexual desire. Meng Yue 孟悦, a critic of the re-education and rustication progress, argues that revolutionary discourse limited and repressed the private realm of desire, love, sexuality, emotion, and the inner self during the Mao years (Meisner, 1999).

The repression of sexual expression peaked during the Cultural Revolution, with sex differences eliminated in clothing, and romantic love despised as bourgeois sentimentalism. Premarital sex or cohabitation was regarded as degenerate, and homosexuality severely punished (Pan, 1994). During this period, ideology held that sex drive should be subjugated to the communist ideals. Repression of sexual desire transforms into extreme sexual persecution when it subjugates personal desire to universal political imperatives.

Yan Geling's work portrays how female sent-down youth attempt to celebrate their sexuality under the extreme control and domination of political discourse. In *Female Grassland*, Xiao Dian 小点, as a sexualized female character, does not repress her sexuality but rather celebrates her sensual passion. The novel narrates how she enjoys her sexuality with her uncle-in-law: "every time he held her in his arms, she pushed him away, at the same time, she does not let

him go and desperately wants him” (Yan, 1989). Likewise, in the 1990s, the novels about sent-down youth are closely connected with the female body and their sexual needs. For instance, in Wang Anyi’s *The Century of The Hills*, the sent-down youth Li Xiaoqin 李小琴 enjoys sexual pleasure, although she trades her sexuality as a means to go back to the city (Wang, 2004).

Female Grassland also describes how Xiao Dian eventually pays a high price for her lascivious sins as set forth in the political ideal mandates of abstinence. When Xiao Dian falls in love with the battalion commander, she is conscious of her previous sensual passion, and how such actions were prohibited by party pronouncements. Seeing no way out, she commits suicide by burning herself in a fire. The battalion commander symbolizes the ascetic values of the communist party. Wen Xiu committed suicide due to the unbearable oppression that was rife within the political system of that era. The female sent-down youth subordinate all personal to random and artificial political imperatives. It shows how a forced woman to commit the propaganda poster.

Moreover, the novel *The Female Grassland* even describes how this political discourse applies to both animals and females, revealing the inhumanity of this type of sex-neutral political discourse:

To be a group of outstanding military horses, it has to get rid of its nature/instinct; to become a great dog it has to repress its nature; to be a loyal female soldier you have to get rid of her nature... She finally understands, the more honor she gets, the more she is not a person and woman (Yan, 1989, p. 5).

Stated differently, whether a horse, a dog or a female, all should get rid of their innate instinct on the altar of the “greater good”. The inhumanity of this period arises in that the party believes that individual’s pleasure and happiness are threats to socialist objectives (Chung-kuo ch’ing-nien, 1960, p. 2). *Female Grassland* describes Xiao Dian’s strong sexuality to contrast with the ascetic values of the battalion commander. The novel portrays how women are violently forced to remove their sexuality. And the novel did not describe the similar language comparing males to animals, this metaphor of using animal to describe those females shows the disadvantage of women during the sent-down youth movement.

Patterns of Female Political Roles

The Recognition of the Female Fragmented Dual Roles and Self Image

Female sent-down youth. This section discusses the removal of femininity as a source of oppression and an obstacle to women’s liberation. The sent-down youth movement was celebrated as “women’s liberation”, as large numbers of teenage girls are encouraged to go to the public arena to work. Under Mao’s instructions, women were ordered to remove their femininity in order to better serve the public socialistic good. These mandates violated women’s freedom of choice and are contrary to the physical and emotional natures of some women.

The gender norms governing women’s involvement in social events were deliberately reshaped in Maoist China. Masculine female figures, such as Hua Mulan 花木兰, Mu Guiying 穆桂英 and Qin Liangyu 秦良玉 (1574–1648), are rare in traditional literature as women were always trained to be feminine. So masculine female figures are considered as positive in 20th century in China. However, Yan Geling’s novel describes how female socialists were expected to

strictly transform themselves by adopting masculine traits and performing as men. In Maoist times, an increasing number of women warriors were produced.

However, masculine women became the ideal in the Maoist era. Under the banner of “men and women are the same”, masculinity is greatly favored in name of advancing the country. Women were forcefully trained to act masculine throughout the Maoist reign. Women were asked to take upon themselves the new roles of soldiering, manufacturing, farming, and construction, all closely aligned with state interests.

The Oppressive Masculine Image and Qomen: *Female Grassland*

Chinese women in the 20th century attempted to achieve their equality during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976). This period of history is marked by a governmental attempt in China to erase or cancel femininity and feminine traits. In the words of Mayfair Mei-hui Yang 楊美惠: “[t]here was a dearth of both public and private discussion of sex during the Cultural Revolution, particular to female sent-down youth” (Yang, 1999).

It must be noted that, in some respects, women did benefit from the communist movement. In traditional and historical China, women had no rights at all: they were the victims of a Confucian patriarchal family system in which the females were relegated to the status of inferior beings. This position did not change significantly until the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949. In the 1954 constitution, women were assured of “equal rights with men in all spheres-political, economic, cultural, social and domestic” (*Constitution of the People’s Republic of China*, 1954, p. 96).

Women’s masculinization under the leadership of Chairman Mao promoted “Chinese women in new China” and “women’s liberation” that differentiated the feudal and socialist periods (Li, 2020). Mao’s slogan, “Whatever male comrades can accomplish, female comrades can do too” (男同志能办的事情, 女同志也能办到) was widely broadcast (Honig, 2000, pp. 97–110; Jin et al., 2006, pp. 613–634). This caused women to hide and suppress their true female identities, and in turn created fragmentation in their self-image. In the novel *Female Grassland*, a sent-down girl denies she is a woman and contends that, “for the sake of the revolution, I would rather be a man.” Thus, women’s public roles as fighters and revolutionaries were glorified by the revolutionary authority, resulting in the annihilation of their femininity (Yang & Yan, 2017).

Female Grassland narrates the tragic experiences of the humble but heroic Shen Hongxia. Shen Hongxia grows up in a military family where she cultivates virtues of heroism and obedience to the orders of superiors. She aims to fulfil the Maoist Utopian goals of an egalitarian society. As a female sent-down youth, Shen Hongxia has subordinated all personal pleasure to the duty of serving the Party and regards that as the only true source of joy and happiness. She does not even feel the pain of her traumatized body and continues to stay in the Northwest Steppe to look after the military horses for a decade after other girls and women have left the grasslands.

The idealized masculine woman Shen Hongxia represents the approved political expectation. However, the novel demonstrates that Shen Hongxia’s efforts, ordered by the Communist Party, are a phony, ridiculous, and meaningless political construct. At the end of Yan Geling’s *Female Grassland*, the conclusion reveals the uselessness of the sent-down movement to society. It demonstrates a great spot to work in an image of propaganda poster on this theme.

The novel narrates Shen Hongxia’s failed destiny after the end of the sent-down movement. Everyone has left and she still works at the grassland. Her political mission and false beliefs

make Shen Hongxia ignore her bodily condition, ravaged by long years of hardship. However, her physical damage is soon forgotten by the authorities, thereby intensifying her tragedy. The tragedy of Shen Hongxia implicitly excoriates the sent-down movement. At the end of Yan Geling's *Female Grassland*, Shen Hongxia's heroism and idealism regarding the revolution comes down to this:

“I have remembered everything she [Shen Hongxia] gradually has dedicated: her leg is lost first, and then her throat and eyes are lost...I watched her pass away from me with a flock of horses, continuing on her long journey like a saint's expedition. Her thin and naked body contrasted by a dazzling red cotton bag that she wears, which makes the image even crueler” (Yang & Yan, 2017, p. 486).

Her traumatic labor effort does not result in any contribution to society. The sacrifices of youth are useless to the military. Yan Geling's *Female Grassland* is written to criticize sent-down youth heroism and idealism as naive, shallow, and illusory. The final insult is that the iron girls' wranglers are not even recognized by the authorities⁴:

“The local cadre said: where did those iron girls come from? We do not have that establishment...There is no existence of the iron girls' wrangler” (Yang & Yan, 2017, p. 475).

This novel directly criticizes the cruelty of the sent-down youth movement, which badly tortures Hongxia's body as a result of the conflicts between individual wellbeing and loyalty to an absurd and disorganized movement. The girls' wrangler project was not even officially registered publication. The novel examines the absurd and failure of the rustication movement, and it is deleterious effect on women's most basic human rights. Huang Guozhu notes that “*The Female Grassland* reveals a strong tendency towards political reflection and criticism. This is an absurd outcast legend of female sent-down youth in the grassland. It shows the distorted picture of human nature during turbulent times (Huang, p. 488). (《雌性的草地》十分明显的政治反思和批判倾向。这是一个关于流浪儿和女知青草原放牧生活的荒诞的传奇，这是遥远的文革年代过去之后悠长的回声，这是动乱时代中人心扭曲的变形的图画。)

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) discusses two factors that explain the change in women's condition: freedom from reproductive slavery and participation in production (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 139). Her articulate account of the oppressive effects of prevailing notions of femininity appeared in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*, 1949), which argues that women's biological factors lead to their disadvantage:

Indeed, female adolescence is more vulnerable than before. Female organs are vulnerable and tender...It reveals the biological difference between genders in the physiological and the psychological reality of these adolescent girls (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 380).

Yan Geling's *Celestial Bath* portrays Wen Xiu's physical appearance at the meadow. Her “wasp-like body” (Yan, 2008, p. 66) is damaged by the cruelty of daily life on the steppes, where a tender teenage girl is exposed to the cruel natural environment and heavy labor. Even her new outfits quickly deteriorate to look like old outfits, with many tiny holes shot through them by sparks from the fire pit.

⁴ A group of female sent-down youths and local cow women are assigned a mission of looking for horses.

Liu Zhonglu 刘中陆 details the experiences of 50 women's sent-down youth' stories in the novel *Youth Equation: Youth Equation: Self-reports of 50 Beijing female educated youths* 青春方程式: 五十个北京女知青的自述. She shows the hardship and severe environments encountered by these girls (Liu, 1995). The harsh environment causes many of the sent-down girls to be afflicted with gynecological diseases.

Although one of the aims of the sent-down movement was to eliminate old traditions, this paper shows that the inequality enshrined by centuries of traditions is still alive and well in China. The sent-down women were victims of far more severe oppression than their male counterparts because of discrimination inherent in the local customs of remote areas. For example, in the novel *Celestial Bath*, the heroine Wen Xiu suffers a series of sexual violence episodes, and finally is killed by Lao Jin. These events were the result of warped local customs and traditions that fragment Wen Xiu's self-image and relationships with others to the point she can no longer live.

Many sent-down youths were not permitted to go back to their cities, and they tried every means possible to gain permission to return. Michel Bonnin states that sent-down youth and their parents made a great effort to obtain the legal documents necessary to return to the city (p. 345) Less well-off young people tried other means: flattery, bribery, and providing all manner of service, including the sex trade (Bonnin & Horko, 2013, p. 346).

Lori Heise adopts an ecological framework to discuss the causes and the consequences of violence against women (Heise, 1998, pp. 262–290). Lori organizes the existing research into an integrated framework with results from international research across different cultural background, and promotes a theory-building method regarding gender violence. Peggy Reeves Sanday's book *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Sanday, 1981) also explores the origins of sexual inequality and answers basic questions regarding male and female power.

Wen Xiu in *Celestial Bath* finally realizes that her body is the only capital that she can rely upon, "for a girl with no money and no connections, isn't this her body the only asset she has got left?" (Yan, 2008, p. 78). The novel shows that Wen Xiu's quest to return home makes her a victim of sexual abuse.

This violence to teenage girls involves unknown men from the local Communist headquarters. However, during her plight, we see that the sex trade not only fails to help her to win a "way out" back to Chengdu, but also finally results in her needing an abortion. She falsely believed that "important people" will help her return, but in the end, she sees that they betray her. Wen Xiu feels abandoned and deceived as a result of her sexual encounter: at the beginning of winter, Wen Xiu lay in the infirmary having just received an abortion (Qiao & He, 2008, pp. 111–117). In addition to the cold weather and poor hygiene that resulted in her miscarriage, her body could not bear such frequent sexual violent acts.

In the infirmary, the public, especially the nurses openly referred to Wen Xiu as a "worn-out shoe" and "the wild nymphet". The nurses' taunts and sarcasm upheld and served the patriarchal hierarchy. As Kate Millett points out, women denigrate their own, thus the culture can be kept male, the patriarchy can be maintained and the power can always be obtained (Millett, 2016). It clearly reveals gender discrimination inherent in the rustication movement, which offers an opportunity to victimize teenage girls.

The novels referred to above not only explore the sexual exploitation of women in the rustication movement, but also demonstrate the severe gender inequality and political marginalization of teenage girls who were victimized by the movement. The novel *Celestial Bath* describes Wen Xiu's lifestyle reflects her antagonism toward the Maoist ideology in vogue at that time. As Leung Laifong points out "this sense of betrayal by the revolution was intensified by the increasing bleak reality of poverty in rural China: the failure of the people's communes, the corruption of the local cadres, and above all, the futility of the many projects" (Leung, 1994).

This socially oppressive phenomenon is also set forth in Tiening's 铁凝 (1957-) novel *The Rose Door* 玫瑰门, where the female protagonist Si Qiwen 司猗纹 believes she can achieve liberty through participation in the sent-down movement. However, after participating in the program, she suffers a nervous breakdown with due to the fragmented self-image that results and becomes a psychopathic shell of a woman due to various persecutions (Tie, 1989, p. 26).

Within the rustication movement, Bonnin and Horko note that compared with class struggles, agricultural production, and political allegiance, gender equality was given a much lower priority for Chinese girls by local and national planners (Bonnin & Horko, 2013). As Gao Zongchi 高宗池 points out, "they [the girls] paid a heavy price including suffering and psychological trauma... much heavier than male sent-down youth" (Gao, 1995, pp. 18-23).

Yang and Yan (2017) argue that Mao's famous political slogan states: "The times have changed, men and women are the same" (时代不同了, 男女都一样) conflated the concepts of equality and sameness (pp. 63-83). The slogan was utilized by the Chinese Communist Party to achieve its cultural and political aspirations. The phenomenon of "the body invisible" as a moral code oppressed the individual, especially women, making them the most oppressed group in the Maoist era.

To Kate Millett (1934-2019), women are sexually oppressed because of their powerlessness. These realities were brought to widespread attention with her publication *Sexual Politics*. The writing explores how power is misused by men to further their sexual privilege. Political corruption represents a barrier to women's access to key public services. This is particularly true regarding sent-down youth, the most vulnerable members of society (Swamy et al., 1999). The sent-down movement did not protect women in the public arena, but rather exposed them to sexual oppression.

Although Mao's political movement encouraged women to participate in the public arena, the movement did not foster gender equality. Even Mao Zedong admits that women had not yet attained full equality. In 1971, Mao explained this failing to Edgar Snow (1905-1972) in an interview that "it is not possible" to "achieve complete equality between men and women at present" (Snow, 1973, p. 171). The paper shows the patriarchal power of this era. It conveys the notion that although men and women are viewed as the same under the new sexless ideology, through it all is relentless patriarchal indoctrination. It kept women subjugated by permitting men to oppress women in the name of ignoring the difference between men and women.

Conclusion

Yan Geling beautifully captures these mixed and conflicted emotions of female sent-down youth. In particular, Yan Geling shows the tragedy of female sent-down youth during the rustication movement. It interprets the idealized sent-down youth and how they become 'loyal

soldiers' in the movement. This paper attempts to demonstrate the many ways this movement forcefully abrogated feminine characteristics and further reinforced gender discrimination, all in the name of equalizing and liberating women.

This paper explores the oppression of women through the sent-down political movement. It shows the physical, sexual, and psychological trauma to the girls of that movement that causes fragmentation of their self-image and relationships with others. Eli Zaretsky (1942-), a Marxist sociologist, theorizes that under communism, private ownerships would disappear in favor of public sharing, therefore resulting in gender equalities (Silvestri et al., 2013, pp. 61–73). However, in practice, Marxist feminism encountered obstacles: women did achieve equality in the public social arena, instead of experiencing inequality in these spaces (Huang, 2013). Yan Geling sheds light on the horrors of the Cultural Revolution in writing *Celestial Bath* (Zhuang, 2006). She also criticizes the exploitation of vulnerable girls during the rustication movement. She focuses special concern on women's human rights through the lens of girls swept up in the cruel and futile political movements.

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