

An Analysis of Views on Women From the Perspective of Klara Blum as a Jewish Chinese Female Writer

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Abstract

Klara Blum, leading a legendary life, was the only Jewish Chinese female poet that composed in German. This paper is an attempt to analyze her views on women and to illustrate the integration of her viewpoints of marriage, love and women in Chinese and western culture presented in both her personal life and works.

Key words: Klara Blum; Views on women; Integration of Chinese and western culture

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INTRODUCTION

Klara Blum, born in a Jewish family in Czernowitz on November 27th, 1904, was officially entitled to Chinese citizenship on June 21st, 1954. She was so far the only Jewish Chinese female poet who composed in German language. On May 5th, 1971, she died at the age of 67 for a liver disease.

Klara Blum led a legendary life. In those youthful years when her parents were divorced and wars broke out, she wandered around places like Vienna and Moscow, none of which was home to her. While Blum had not experienced marriage in her life, she came to China from the other end of the continent for the search of her lover, and devoted her lifetime to the country. Such unprecedented experience contributed to her views on

love, marriage and women that are presented in her poems and novels.

1. YOUTHFUL YEARS: A FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM

In her youth when her parents were in tension, sympathy for women and the weak was sprouting inside Klara.

Klara's father, Josef Blum (1850-1934), was a successful businessman and became a local landowner in Czernowitz by loan sharking. Her mother, named Cypre Maschler Kaner (1876-1937), was married by her parents to Josef Blum, twenty-six years older, after her first husband passed away, leaving her with a son. From Klara's perspective, the match of her parents was no better than the mismatch of a fox and a nightingale. Cypre Maschler, motivated by the European feminist movement early that century, pursued political democracy and women's equal status in society. Increasing discord with Josef came as a result of marital violence and subordination.

In Klara Blum's autobiographical novel *The Shepherd and the Weaver (Der Hirte und die Weberin)*, a dialogue between the two protagonists unfolds as below.

My father was twenty-seven years older than my mother. My grandparents sold their daughter to him. Not literally but analogously. She was a young widowed mother with a little son, and my grandfather's drapery was bankrupt. So they had to accept the proposal from old Bilkes, one of the big bankers, financiers of the Drohobycz salt mines and the drunken Polish noble. That was the pair – an astute business man and a young woman – a feminist and Zionist, small, unimpressive, unpleasant, but of enchanting spirituality. This is how I came to the world as a product of a fox and a nightingale, in a word as a legitimate bastard.

"But you have only developed after your mother," Nju-Lang decided.

"After my mother and unlike my father," confirmed Hanna. The marriage was horribly unhappy. When I was eight years old, I

*startled the noble party with a saying, "I'm in favor that Daddy and Mommy get divorced."*¹ (Blum, 1951, pp.74-75)

It is a loyal portrayal of the marital life of Klara's parents. The father, belonging to the noble, was as cunning and shrewd as a fox, and the mother, from the underclass, has a small figure but intriguing talents. In fact, the match was a practice of mercenary marriage, involving no love and no happiness. Thus Klara's birth came as the implementing of marital obligation. The difference between the couple did not only lie on the age, but more crucially on the values, so melancholy inevitably dominated the days they spent together, which eventually led to separation in the year 1913. According to the court, the father, who was more financially secured, should have undertaken the responsibility of attending Klara. In July, 1914, however, the First World War broke out. Klara, then 9, fled with her mother to Vienna. Despite a difficult and unsettled life, Klara would rather stay there and named herself after her mother till the age of eighteen. So significant influence had her mother imposed on her (Yang, 2001, pp.16-18).

In June 1922, Klara Blum graduated from high school. She once returned to the hometown and visited her father, but a conflict bursts out between them.

*My father now attempts to arrange marriage for me as feudal patriarchs do, which forces me to sever all ties with him.*²

The tensional relationship was recorded in her personal file in October, 1952.

At the age of eighteen, Klara had grown up from a childish girl that would follow as told. She was determined to rid herself of federal suppression and fight for a better future. Never would she forget her mother's desperate longing for freedom nor the understanding and support from her. In Klara's early works, therefore, Jewish women became a constant focus.

¹ Translated from the German version.

"Mein Vater war um siebenundzwanzig Jahre älter als meine Mutter. Meine Großeltern haben sie ihm verkauft. Nicht buchstäblich aber dem Sinne nach. Sie war jung verwitwet, hatte einen kleinen Sohn, und der Tuchladen meines Großvaters stand vor dem Bankrott. Da musste man also die Werbung des alten Bilkes annehmen, das großen Bankiers, Finanziers der Drohobyzyer Salzgruben und einiger versoffener polnischer Edelleute. Das war ein Paar – der gerissene Geschäftsmann und die junge Frauenrechtlerin und Zionistin, klein, unscheinbar, unschön, aber von bezaubernder Geistigkeit. So bin ich zustande gekommen, als Produkt eines Fuchses und einer Nachtigall, mit einem Wort als legitimer Bastard."

"Aber Sie haben sich doch nur nach dem Beispiel Ihrer Mutter entwickelt", entschied Nju-Lang.

"Nach dem Beispiel meiner Mutter und im Gegensatz zu meinem Vater", bestätigte Hanna. "Die Ehe war haarsträubend unglücklich. Mit acht Jahren schokierte ich eine elegante Gesellschaft mit dem Ausspruch: Ich bin dafür, dass Papa und Mama sich scheiden lassen."

² Translated from the Chinese version preserved in the Archives of Sun Yat-sen University.

我的父亲此时企图以父母之命、媒妁之言的封建市民方式把我嫁出去，使我不得不与他断绝父女关系。

In *Women Worker Movement in Palestine (Arbeiterinnenbewegung in Palästina)* (March 6th, 1931), a book review published in *Worker's Daily* in 1931, Klara directly pointed out that *"the struggle of the Jewish women worker is a threefold – It is at the same time directed against the exploitation of the proletariat, against the special status of the Jewish people, and against the depreciation of women."*³ Later she reviewed on *Working Women in Palestine (Arbeiterinnenbewegung in Palästina)* and *Speech from Working Women*, both from Palestinian Communism. In the former one, she cast her eyes upon the lengthy and arduous path Jewish women took to establish the nation of Israel. The latter is a collection of letters, poems and diaries where personal experiences and struggles of Jewish women are recorded (Blum, p.1931). Klara showed great concern about Jewish working women in her works, which is not only because of her gender, but more related to her leaning to socialism.

2. LOVE UNTO DEATH

In the year of 1937, Klara Blum experienced her milestone in life – she met Zhu Xiangcheng (1901-1943) from China in International Working Service Center.

Zhu was born in an aristocratic and merchant family in Wu County, Jiangsu Province. After finishing his high school education, he entered the service of foreign firms and, in order to comply with his parents' order, married a wife and had children. In addition, he was engaged in amateur dramatics and founded Xinyou Drama Club, which was the precursor of the drama movement in China's early revolution. In the autumn of 1931, Zhu bid farewell to his family and headed for France for further study. In Paris, he became member of the French Communist Party and involved in revolution activities. Later in 1933, he worked for the Vakhtangov Theater and Foreign Worker Press in Moscow.

At the end of 1933, the two met in the city of Moscow. Far from homeland and drifting as wanderers, Klara and Zhu grew attached to each other. She was passionate about him despite the fact that he never gave a hint of his residence and that they met only twice a week. The great amount of poems themed love that Klara composed is the evidence for it. As seen from the poems, Klara was appealed by the flourishing culture of the aged China and its similar ethnic struggle shared with France, as well as Zhu's personal disposition as understanding, diligence and resilience.

The European society was then dominated by rampant growth of Fascist and anti-Semitic emotions. Oppression

³ Translated from the German version.

Der Kampf der jüdischen Arbeiterin ist ein dreifacher: er richtet sich gleichzeitig gegen die Ausbeutung des Proletariats, gegen die Sonderstellung der jüdischen Massen und gegen die Entwertung der Frau.

and ethnic hatred swept throughout the region. In Asia, militaristic Japanese government was expanding its power and had launched massive aggression against China. Klara Blum and Zhu Xiangcheng, though from different ends of the globe, were passionately bonded with a shared cause of fighting for the freedom, democracy and betterment of human beings. Moscow, behind the enemy lines, provided a peaceful land and a free air for the couple, where free love began to be valued by the Soviet Union community. However, the days they spent together did not go beyond four months. In April, 1938, Klara lost contact with Zhu in Moscow. He was conjectured to be dead, but Klara was convinced that Zhu was still secretly serving for the revolution, for which she had long been prepared. In a letter written to the Communist Party organization on December 17th, 1958, Klara described how she had got along with Zhu.

In January, 1938, I became his wife, but we did not live together. His residence was a secret. He studies on some issues, but I did not think I had the right to ask about them. I know one day he will leave in confidence without saying goodbye to me. On April 18th, 1938, he did leave without saying a word.⁴

The departure was represented in the poem *Silent Farewell (Stummer Abschied)*.

In *Nju-Lang* (1941), Klara again expressed her ardent love for Zhu Xiangcheng.

*“And because I was only in the midday sun,
After dull youth, only now found you,
Where heart and spirit no longer contradict each other,
The light the glow strengthens, the glow the light -
Because every morning, the fight will meet you,
Because a woman who dares to choose you,
Defies all sorrows,
I belong to you in life and death.”⁵ (Yang, 2001, p.316)*

This is not an oath that defies the limits of heaven by a young girl in love, but a declaration of love by a sophisticated woman who bathed in love after longterm suffering. It is such intense and profound love! In fact, Klara's love for Zhu had seen forty years till her death. As soon as the Second World War came to an end, among the German writers who had exiled in Soviet Union, some returned to Europe, some headed for the United States and some even went to Palestine where

political movement were arising for the establishment of a national homeland for Jews. As for Klara herself, she embarked on the journey to China as planned for the search of Zhu in addition to reporting on the country. Nevertheless, the journey was not as smooth as imagined. Fire of war had ceased, leaving the community boiling in unrest. It was far beyond tortuous. With required documents inavalible and no money with her, Klara could do nothing but detour to the city of Paris via Warsaw, Prague and Budapest. Finally she stepped on the continent of China in August 1947 with a visa warrented by Shanghai Jewish Rescue Commitee and approved by the Chinese Embassy.

Shanghai, as a metropolis, had received an influx of Jewish refugees during World War II. When the war came to an end, Jewish people gradually trickled out. Data show that the last ones to leave were 295 left wings members with their families that arrived in Berlin on August 21st, 1947 (Wang, 2008, p.337). It was right then that Klara Blum arrived in Shanghai. To make a living, she wrote a letter to the UNESCO office in Paris to apply for a job, and was later introduced to Hu Shi and a department in Nanking Kuomintang Government, but was indifferently turned away. Hopefully in the autumn of 1948, Klara commenced her teaching in Tongji University. At the end of that year, People's Liberation Army advanced to the northern China, and Peking was about to be freed from the foreign hands. Klara traveled up to the capital twice in search of her “husband”, in and out of different departments. But the result came unwanted. As a stateless foreign national, Klara could only return to Shanghai instead of settling in Peking. Even though life was hard, never did the notion of searching her lover Zhu escapes her.

In *The Shepherd and the Weaver*, Klara Blum tells the relationship between Hanna and Zhang Nju-Lang through diary by Hanna.

*Actually, it is a Jewish impertinence that I always call myself your wife. I feel like the blessed Napoleon, who has crowned himself. In fact, I had only 'a small relationship' with you in Viennese.
And yet you are my husband! And no statutes can sanctify our marriage as I have sanctified them.⁶ (Blum, 1951, pp.168-169)*

Another one was written after Hanna rejects a man who attempts to approach her and talk her into quitting the idea of waiting for Nju-Lang.

The lover's illusions entail a deeper truth than the indifference of the ones who don't care. In mankind, as in every individual, possibilities are concealed, intimidated, stunted possibilities,

⁴ Translated from the Chinese version preserved in the Archives of Sun Yat-sen University.

1938年1月，我做了他的妻子，但我们不住在一起。他的地址是秘密的。他研究某些问题，但我感到我没有权利询问他关于这些问题。我知道最终有一天他要连再会也不对我说一声就秘密地离开。1938年4月18日他真的一声不响地走了。

⁵ Translated from the German version.
*Und weil ich erst im Mittagssonnenbrand,
Nach trüber Jugendzeit erst jetzt dich fand,
Wo Herz und Geist sich nicht mehr widerspricht,
Das Licht die Glut verstärkt, die Glut das Licht -
Weil jeden Morgen neu der Kampf dir tagt,
Weil eine Frau, die dich zu wählen wagt,
Jedweder Sorgenqual die Stirne bot -
Gehör ich dir im Leben und im Tod.*

⁶ Translated from the German version.

Eigentlich ist eine jüdische Frechheit, dass ich mich unentwegt deine Frau nenne. Ich komme mir vor wie der selige Napoleon, der sich selbst die Krone aufsetzte. In Wirklichkeit habe ich mir dir auf gut Wienerisch nur ein kleines Verhältnis gehabt.

Und dennoch bist du mein Gemahl! Und kein Standesamt kann unsere Ehe heiligen, wie ich sie geheiligt habe.

which no one can guess without love. If you, Nju-Lang, wanted to glorify yourself today, I would stay faithful to you, even after five years or ten years of separation, even if a mockery of all clever people would be the answer: "What self-deception! What illusion!"

Illusion? - I'll make them real."⁷ (Blum, 1951, p.127)

These diaries are Hanna's confession of love and a voice deep inside Klara as well.

It is noticeable from Klara's searching that she once, with the help of friends, got in touch with Zhu's relatives and lived in their house for some days. Traditionally, Klara did not officially marry Zhu despite the fact that she took him as a husband. She confronted Zhu's wedded wife after she eventually found the family. For the following decades in China, Klara had announced herself as Zhu's wife. All these decisions were based on a combination of Klara's loyalty to love, independence and perseverance.

3. CHINESE WOMEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A JEWISH FEMALE POET

For the years in China, Klara had been diligent in writing. She produced a series of poems and novels, in which Chinese women characters are shaped of a high proportion. Hence, these works become the best materials where people can learn about Chinese women from the author's perspective.

Hanna, one of the protagonists in *The Shepherd and the Weaver*, is an adapted version of Klara herself. At the end of the story, she, searching for her "husband", goes to Shanghai and becomes the teacher of Zhang Nju-Lang's son. She even finds Zhang Nju-Lang's wedded wife, Mee-Tsjing, and holds her in esteem. Reversely, Hanna gains the recognition from her. It can be seen that Klara was in pursuit of the equality of women's social status. In Chinese tradition, marrying more than one wife was a common phenomenon. In Klara's point of view, however, a true love should not undergo the judgment from the society. Even Zhang Nju-Lang's wife and his family accept their relationship. It is likely that Hanna's admiration for Mee-Tsjing has something to do with how Wang Lifeng, Zhu's wife impressed Klara. Wang was married to Zhu by her parents, but she herself was an independent woman. She had participated in Drama

⁷ Translated from the German version.

In den Illusionen der Liebenden ist oft eine tiefere Wahrheit enthalten, als im Naserümpfen der Gleichgültigen. In der Menschheit wie in jedem Einzelmenschen sind Möglichkeiten verborgen, verschüchterte, verkümmerte Möglichkeiten, die niemand ohne Liebe erraten kann. Wenn du, Nju-Lang, dich heute rühmen wolltest, ich würde dir die Treue halten, auch nach fünfjähriger, auch nach zehnjähriger Trennung, ein Hohngelächter aller klugen Leute wäre die Antwort: "Welcher Selbstbetrug! Welche Illusion!"
Illusion? – Ich werde sie zur Wirklichkeit machen.

Movement in the early days, and risked her life to rescue Wu Xueqian, a leader in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Shanghai Committee. With her husband lost in contact, Wang all by herself raised three children and educated them for the revolution. In the novel, Mee-Tsjing's sister, in her own words, says, "*Mee-Tsjing is a strange but completely harmonious synthesis of traditional and progressive ways of thinking.*"⁸ (Blum, 1951, p.208) This is the most precise description of Wang's personality.

Tzai-Yün, sister of Mee-Tsjing, is another typical character in *The Shepherd and the Weaver*. She comes from a deprived family, so unfairness dominates her childhood. As the social climate changes, Tzai-Yün gets to learn new ideas and chases after advancement, finally becoming an amateur actress in an opera troupe. From traditional views, acting was not a serious business for girls, but Tzai-Yün, in intrepidity, communicates the ideas to young men and women through performances and speeches, which contribute to the nurture of a pioneer in women's emancipation. The writing presents Klara's respect and endorsement for these women equipped with new ideas and persistent pursue for advancement. Although Klara herself grew up in a different culture with these Chinese women, they share a common idea of independence and freedom, which is the very embodiment of the integration of Chinese and western culture shown in her works.

The Song of Hong Kong (Das Lied von Hongkong), a collection of 5 novellas, was published in 1959. From this collection, readers can notice that Klara has shifted her focus from her personal experience to social sufferings of the Chinese commons. In *The Three Righteous Concubines (Die drei gerechten Konkubinen)*, Klara depicts women from different classes – a housemaid sold to a landlord at an early age, a peasant girl unwillingly married to a landlord as concubine, a young lady deceived into marrying a bourgeois with a family of his own, and a middle school student with new ideas in mind. All of them live in Shanghai before it is freed. Gradually, they learn the advanced ideas in their own ways and take active roles fighting against imperialism and capitalism before finally casting off the unfairness in life and enjoying happiness (Lin, 2016). The images of the Chinese women in Klara's works reflect the twists and turns Chinese women are confronted within such historic time, and further unveil the pursuit of women's freedom and equality ingrained inside the author.

CONCLUSION

Klara Blum's life of ups and downs determines her concern about women. From her personal experience and

⁸ Translated from the German version.

Mee-Tssjing sei eine merkwürdige, aber völlig harmonische Synthese von traditioneller und fortschrittlicher Gesinnung.

literary works, a female poet in pursuit of independence and freedom emerges. A love that transcends death with a Chinese “husband” and years of living in China enables her to mold distinctive female characters by integrating the independence and audacity of western female and the perseverance and tolerance of Chinese women.

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