

# *Interpretation of Bing Xin's "Philosophy of Love" from the Perspective of Life Moral Education*

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**Abstract:** In response to the great changes that have taken place in the field of thought and cultural values since the May Fourth Movement, the writer Bing Xin used "philosophy of love" to express her deep thoughts about the changes of the times and the development of morality, and in her work, she criticised the suppression of the old moral concepts of the feudal family and the old tradition and attempted to put forward a ideal model of family morality. The specific embodiments are: criticism of patriarchal thinking, reflection on maternal love and awareness of gender morality. The critique of patriarchal ideology includes not only the embodiment of the majesty of patriarchal power under the feudal cultural tradition in the characterisation of Bing Xin's novels, but also the transfer of family power when the children become adults and their parents grow old, on the basis of which Bing Xin advocates a reformist view of family morality and an ideal model of family morality. In Bing Xin's "Philosophy of Love", she used maternal love as a driving force for social reform, but as she accumulated life experience, she also recognised the complexity and reality of maternal love. Finally, in the early stage, Bing Xin's understanding of gender morality focuses on portraying the image of "new ideal type of womanhood", emphasising the importance of women and their responsibility for the family; in the later stage, Bing Xin's works focus on the women's living condition, criticising the male's inaction in the family, and gradually converging to the real equality in the demand for gender morality. This is a brave attempt to construct a new morality, and also reflects the writer's own concern for life.

## **1. Introduction**

Feudal rule in China was fundamentally a concrete manifestation of the family-oriented ethical morality maintained by the feudal extended family system, which manifested itself in behaviour based on filial piety as the core, and a strict hierarchical order of subordination based on the principle that the subject, son and wife must be absolutely obedient to the ruler, father and husband, and that the ruler, father and husband must be exemplary for the subject, son and wife. The meaning of "filial piety" in the old traditional Chinese morality has been expanded as the starting point of all education and has covered all the highest virtues. The meaning of "filial piety" in the old traditional Chinese morality has been expanded as the starting point of all education and has covered all the highest virtues.

During the period of the 20th century, Chinese society was in a state of flux, and as the most

important event in the history of modern Chinese thought and culture, the New Culture Movement erupted with an unstoppable tendency, pointing directly at the shortcomings of traditional thought and culture and showing a resolute stance of revaluing all values. One of the important aspects of the New Culture Movement was to promote an ideological and cultural change aimed at “opposing the old morality and advocating the new morality”, and to promote the “liberation of human beings”. In the face of changes in the realm of ideological and cultural values, many literary figures such as Lu Xun, Eileen Chang, and Lin Huiyin rose to prominence, ushering in a golden age of Chinese literature. In this era of a hundred schools of thought, Bing Xin was known for her unique literary style and ideological views. Bing Xin took the "Philosophy of Love" to write her thoughts, criticised the old morality in her works, and tried to construct a moral world of equality, fraternity, freedom and humanity which embodied Bing Xin's personal moral ideals.

This paper interprets Bing Xin's “Philosophy of Love” from the perspective of life ethics education for the following reasons: firstly, life ethics is the morality of adjusting the relationship between human beings and their own lives, the lives of others and the lives of other kinds of beings. The purpose of life ethics education is to make a dynamic balance between the stretching of individual life and the harmony and order of social life. The connotation of Bing Xin's “Philosophy of Love” is that Bing Xin, based on his own family love and Christian love education, writes about mother's love, children's innocence, nature and other dimensions, and discusses how people can love themselves, care for others, cherish nature, using love as the driving force for social transformation and moulding the true, good and beautiful national personality. Therefore, life moral education and Bing Xin's “philosophy of love” are interlinked in connotation and have the same purpose.

## 2. Criticism of patriarchal thinking

### 2.1 The majesty of patriarchy

In Bing Xin's novel *The Person is Toilworn Alone*, writing out the theme of parent-child conflict, criticize the patriarchal oppression of their children's behavior is immoral. The two young men, Ying Ming and Ying Shi, who are slightly patriotic, as newly enlightened youths, attempt to participate in social activities but are restricted by their father, Hwa-qing, who is the head of the feudal family. The father figure here is tyrannical and aggressive. The young man is unable to get rid of his father's authority, and his dreams are eventually dashed. In the work, the father Huaqing once blamed the two children who had participated in the May 4th student movement, “I really hate that you don't learn to be good, and when you are out of my sight, you forget the words that I have told you, and join with those bloodthirsty people who want to commit crimes, I really don't want to have such a great hero's son!<sup>[1]</sup>” He was even so stupid as to call white black: “As for Tsingtao, Japan took it from the Germans, and since our country is still a neutral country, it should rightly be returned to them. Moreover, they said that they will administer it together with us, so it is a kindness to us! Now, which of the government's funds are not borrowed from them? How can we offend such friends who are so friendly?” In the novel *Who Ruined You*, Yixuan, a daughter who has just gone away to school and has not even been enlightened, has her life cut short under the authority of her father, simply because of an invitation to go on a date.

The core of life moral education is to make life loving. According to Fromm, there are two definitions of love: “existential love” and “possessive love”<sup>[2]</sup>. Existential love focuses on creation, bringing vitality to the other in the process of loving. Possessive love, on the other hand, tends to deprive others of their rights and freedoms, turning them into subordinates. Obviously, this kind of behaviour, in which the father's authority is used to oppress his children without regard to their ideas and thoughts, is clearly possessive love. The father as “absolute ruler” of his children,

consolidates his authority and dominates their lives by refusing to pay school fees and restricting their reading the press. In this process, the children merely become the victims of the father's authority and the have to fulfil the will of their parents. As Lu Xun pointed out in his essay *Now How We Do Fatherhood*, it is emphasised that the older man has a higher authority and status in decision-making, family affairs and social activities and therefore the old man of course can say anything, but the son has something to say that is already wrong before it is said<sup>[3]</sup>.

## 2.2 Transfer of authority when Children reach adulthood

In the father-child relationship, Bing Xin not only depicts the immoral behaviour of the father's oppressive control over his children, but also the immoral behaviour of the children who interfere in their parents' lives when they become adults and their parents are old and their status is inverted. In Bing Xin's 1980s novel *Interference*, the daughter Xiaolan's obstruction and sabotage of her widowed father, Professor Yang, in his later years of life, when he falls in love and remarries. Xiaolan is worried that her father's behaviour is demeaning and that "If dad really marries Professor Liu, we will have to give up the house and return to the narrow flat, where we will have to live in poor conditions, and we won't even be able to hire a nanny<sup>[4]</sup>." This is a reflection of the fact that the family is bound by the feudal concepts and is selfish and thinks only for itself. Its essence is the same as the patriarchal power of the feudal family, which is possessive love. This kind of "possessive love", which imposes one's own values on the other in the name of "caring" and interferes with the other's life choices in disregard of the other's thoughts and feelings, is also a love that strips away the morality of life.

## 2.3 Reformist view of family morality

Chen Tu-hsiu made it clear that in the oriental civilisation of the family or clan unit, there was little attention given to individual power, autonomy and the development of personality in terms of ethical and moral principles. And therefore the individual in society lacked independence and became part of the family or clan as a whole. Therefore, Chen Duhsiu advocated that "individualism should replace the family system, and ethics should favour the protection of individual freedom<sup>[5]</sup>." However, Bing Xin clearly disagreed with this view of individualism. In the essay *Sacrifice under the Small Family System*, the old couple sold their house in order to pay for their son's education, but when the child got a good job and started a family, he insisted on individualism and paid no attention to his parents. He even adamantly states in a letter to his parents that he wants to disassociate himself from the family relationship. He claimed, "What is the reason for China's poverty and weakness? It is because the Chinese people have such a deep sense of family. The evil system of the extended family has created a habit of dependence on each other. Young people like us, in this time of transition, should do our best to break such habits. For the sake of the future of our country and society, we have to sacrifice you two<sup>[6]</sup>."

It can be seen that, on the question of how to be a child, Bingxin denied both the childish youth who always "reddened their eyes" and "the tears rolled down again" and the polarised attitude of children who, when they became adults, took control of and interfered with their parents or turned their parents away from them. Perhaps because Bing Xin lived in a sound and enlightened family since her childhood, her parents' love cultivated Bing Xin's ability to love, but it also made Bing Xin hold a reformist view of family morality.

The figure named Jingzhen in *The person is Toilworn Alone* is an example of a reformist during the period of social change. She is powerless to change her father's thinking, but can only agree with her father and cater to his authority in the public eye, and do some real things in secret, which shows that she is afraid of the feudal patriarchal power, so that she can only compromise with it,

and gain a little trust from her father so that she would be able to practise these reformist measures<sup>[7]</sup>. In The fact that in this essay her's younger brother agrees with Yingzhen's views shows that Bing Xin is less critical of this character. Bing Xin also believed that this is a practical way for underage and economically independent children in feudal families to try to develop, and they have no choice at that time.

## 2.4 Ideal models of family morality

Then, there is no place to find the harmony of parent-child relationship? In fact, Bing Xin has also depicted the ideal family morality and father-child relationship in her works. In the novel *A Soldier*, an ordinary soldier without a name, meets the child Xiao ling, which makes him miss his child Sheng er at home. Every day, he wants to watch Xiao Ling play for a while, even if it's just bouncing by. When the troop started to leave, he gave her a small wooden gun with red paint on it. This is the love of his own children and spreads to the love of the world's children, is missed and cared for, is the natural feelings. Bing Xin has a deep meaning in setting up the image of the soldier, which reflects the attitude of “young people first”. He has no relationship with Xiao ling, but he thinks of his own child, and then he puts his father's love on Xiao ling, showing that people can be sympathetic to each other. The fatherly love shown by the soldier is an existential love that is in line with life moral education, and it is “an innate love that is free from transactional relationships and interests”. He treats Xiao ling as his own child, and is afraid that his frequent appearances will annoy Xiao ling, so he only watch her from a distance.

The true ideal of family love is the love that does not hinder, does not force, attributes love to creation and devotion rather than possessive love, truly respects the other person in the process of love, truly thinks from the other person's point of view, and is the existential love.

Bing Xin once mentioned her parents in her article *Memories of May Fourth*: “Whenever I wrote something, I would ask my parents to read it first. My father was quite open-minded and never hindered me from engaging in the student movement. My mother was especially enthusiastic about the resistance to Japan and rescue our country, and sometimes she even helped me to change the words and phrases. In *The Person is Toilworn Alone*, my mother added several lines to the conversation between the patriotic youth and his stubborn mother<sup>[8]</sup>.” Such a harmonious and loving family relationship is enviable, and must have been a luxury for many people in that period.

We should be aware that parents are important imitators in a child's development. If a child does not feel love and respect, and learns how parents and children communicate and get along with each other, it is very likely that he will later become a replica of the parent he fears. The child who is trembling now may turn into an angry and destructive parent in a few years' time, and this is the way parenting styles shape the child in a subtle way. As we become the power figures in our families, are we still able to look back with empathy? Discover the needs and desires of being a child and give what he or she needed rather than what I want. The family is a warm place where ideas are passed on and support is given so that the child can become the author of his/her own life, be brave and confident enough to enter society, and accept failure and heal in the family. This is the mission of the family and the purpose and value of “existential love”.

## 3. Reflections on maternal love

### 3.1 The Power of Maternal Love

Bing Xin mentioned her mother in her work *To Young Readers*: “She was the first and the last person I adored. When I was writing, her brows or smiling face always appeared in front of my eyes. Her love made me seek death from life - to bear the pain of others; and made me seek life from

death - to forget my own pain<sup>[9]</sup>.” In countless poems, her even directly expressed her attachment to her mother: “Mum, You are a lotus leaf, I am red-violet, in the heart of the rain, in addition to you, who is my secret of shade of the sky”.(*Past Events VII*)

In many of her early works, Bing Xin firmly believed that mother's love is the same. This is also the common ground for all people, no matter how rich or poor, no matter what religion they are. In her essay *To Young Readers*(chapter 10), Bing Xin wrote: no two things in the world, is identical; even two hair in your head , cannot be general length. Only the love in this world, whether hidden or visible, whether out in the open or not, whether measured with a bucket, a ruler, or the heart, is profound. The love my mother has for me, your mother for you, her mother, his mother, and their mothers for her and him, is equally long, wide, deep, and not a bit less.” Therefore, Bing Xin initially used mother's love to comfort the youth, and used mother's love as a kind of power to help the world, in order to achieve the purpose of reforming the society. He Bin, the main character of the novel *Superman*, was originally leading a transcendent life, hatred of human society, “Superman”, with Nietzsche's thoughts, armed with book knowledge of Superman cannot defeat the memory of warm mother's love. When he hears the groans of Luer's illness, he cannot help recalling the past, he may think of himself as a child, he was also sick like this, it is his mother's care that makes him healthy again. Eventually, he realises that people in the world are “all connected, not abandoned by each other”. The article asks the ultimate question, “What is life really about? Is it ‘love’ or ‘hate’ that governs life?” The answer is self-evident.

### 3.2 The Complexity of Maternal Love

However, with the accumulation of Bing Xin's life experience, Bing Xin also recognised the complexity of mother's love itself when she constructed the noble and perfect ideal of mother's moral model. On the inner level, mother's love also has selfish tendency, not entirely selfless to contribute everything for the sake of children.

In Bing Xin's 1930s work *Photographs*, Mrs Shi shows an almost great motherly love as she adopts Shuzhen and cares for her as if she were her own daughter. However, Mrs Shi's motherly love also reveals some selfishness, seeing Shuzhen as a solace for her own lonely soul, and even worrying about "what if Shuzhen marries?". When they arrived in New England, Shuzhen is transformed by the excitement of her new life and love, and becomes lively, almost the embodiment of the young Lady Shi. This causes Ms Shi to sense a complex crisis, and eventually decides to return to China at the end of the essay, implicitly suggesting that Shuzhen's longed-for dream of an American university may be dashed, and with it the possibility that Shuzhen's vitality may disappear once again. In the text, Ms Shi's memories of China seem to express her attachment to the people and things that have passed away, but in reality she puts her own feelings and life first, even sacrificing the happiness of her adopted daughter in order to fulfil herself. As a result, her motherly love shows a certain degree of degeneration, and is an immoral and possessive love<sup>[10]</sup>.

Later, Bing Xin said in her essay, “I used to mistakenly think that the parents of all the people in the world would love their children, and once I saw a father who loved his children, but beat a young maid, and I learnt that love has class nature”<sup>[11]</sup>. And not all mother's love can be perfectly realised, can play the role of soothing the children's hearts, protection, assisting the growth of children. In the novel *Who Ruined You*, Bing Xin criticised the foolish mother in the feudal family. “Yixuan sat up with tears in her eyes and said: ‘Mummy! My heart, only Mum knows!’ The desperate, speechless child longs for her mother to understand her, but the result is that her mother also cried and said, 'There's no need to talk about the past - it's all your uncle's fault!’(Her uncle suggested that she go to school)Hearing this, Yi Xuan felt a sense of injustice and suddenly laughed miserably and lay down facing the wall.” At this time the mother, even if for the daughter has a

natural love, but because of the difference in thinking, the inability to understand the child and the spiritual disconnect with the child make her become an accomplice in the destruction of the child's life<sup>[12]</sup>.

### 3.3 The reality of maternal love

Moreover, at the internal level, even if mothers' love for their children is unanimous, because of a number of practical factors, not everyone has the opportunity to enjoy it. In Bin Xin's work *Fen*, the son of a school teacher's, even if his mother had no milk, but he was able to eat powdered milk and later drink orange juice, his parents accompanied the child as he grew up and devoted themselves to the child's education. The son of a butcher's family, however, was born to a mother who had milk, but she had to work as a milkmaid to make ends meet, so the son was discharged from the hospital to live with his grandmother, who was over 60 years of age, and ate rice soup for a living. This kind of life dilemma is unavoidable in any society. Love is constrained by economic factors and separated by cultural factors, but love is still great, and it is the ability and hope to be passed on among human beings. Let us believe in life, be grateful for life, give to love and strive for love. This is also the human attitude promoted by life moral education.

In *My Children*, Bing Xin said: "I often appreciate my kind father, they cultivate me to respect life, treasure love life, I treat the earth without complaining, I think a lot of shortcomings can be improved, as long as our people have faith, willing to fight. Not only do I always remember my father, but I am always reminded of how we should be parents<sup>[11]</sup>."

## 4. Awareness of gender ethics

### 4.1 Different requirements for family morality for the two sexes

In Bing Xin's works, a good and harmonious relationship between husband and wife is an important part in constructing an ideal model of family morality<sup>[13]</sup>. However, there are gender differences in Bing Xin's requirements and understanding of gender morality.

A large part of Bing Xin's ideal wife image in her novels is the image of a "new ideal type of womanhood". For example, in his novels of the May Fourth period, he depicts Yaxi in *Two Families*, the mother in *Superman*, sister Liuyi in *Sister Liuyi*, Yi aunt in *Farewell*, Ying in the novel *The First Banquet* of the late 1920s, C in the novel *my classmate* in 1940s, and the mother in *Bridge* of the 1980s. This "new ideal type of womanhood" is characterised by the following features: firstly, a beautiful and elegant appearance and an understanding temperament; secondly, a good education and a brilliant expression of emotions; and thirdly, a sense of responsibility and the ability to deal with domestic affairs.

Yaxi in *Two Families* is an educated woman, she shows her literacy talent at the intellectual level. In terms of housekeeping, she cooks delicious dishes and makes her home look exquisite. Yaxi's education for her children was a combination of tender maternal care, compensated by the rationality and wisdom that was difficult for feudal women to achieve. She never tells her child tales of gods and monsters or misery to stimulate his delicate mind, so that even when it is night, the child understands the reason for the darkness and does not feel afraid. In Bin Xin's novel *Bridge*, Linda, as a Chinese American, is given the responsibility of exchanging cultures and feelings between two countries. Her love and understanding of China entirely comes from her mother. Her mother is a demure and serene woman who loves literature and often recites Chinese poems and novels in her spare time while she works around the house. Linda stayed close to her mother and listened to her as she recited, listening to her descriptions and reminiscences of her country's capital and the scenery of Jiangnan. Her mother also encouraged Linda to write poems, recorded her poems

and kept them neatly in a small book. Thus, in Linda's eyes, her mother was an abstract motherland.

From the above works, we can see that in the construction of modern family's ability and value, Bing Xin overly valued the role of women, and less demand for men in the family, presenting an unfairness in the requirements of the moral standard of the two genders. Only women are required to have good qualities and actively undertake their own responsibilities, while there are fewer requirements on male morality and the responsibility that a husband should have for the family and the wife. For example, Chen Huamin in *Two Families* blames his wife's responsibility for the failure of his family stuff, which also shows Bing Xin's tendency in the construction of gender morality in the 1920s: "When I came back to my home, I saw the messy and disorderly housekeeping, and the voices of the children's cries, it really made me a hundred times upset. My wife is a young lady from a noble family, she doesn't know all the ways of household and management, she only goes out to social gatherings and banquets every day, and she doesn't educate children, only depend on servants to do everything." Facing his wife's neglect of her duties, the husband, powerless and impatient at the same time, had only to flee far away. "Go to that place where there are lively and bustling like theatre or pub, to wash away the troubles in my heart." The article is titled *Two Families* and actually explores a comparison of two wives. It centres on family happiness and misery, and the impact for men's career. Among the key factors determining whether men can successfully build their careers, apart from social clarity, the wives' competence is also crucial<sup>[14]</sup>. Overemphasising wives' role has actually neglected exploration of the intrinsic factor of male self-personality, so that women not only have to bear the defects of not being able to fulfil their family responsibilities, but also have to bear the responsibility of men's lack of their will to live and their self-abandonment, which has led to a lack of attention to men's responsibility in the family ethics.

As for building the morality of an ideal family, it is not enough to have responsibility and competence, it is also necessary to have love. The greatest immorality for the family is the lack of love. In novel *Two Families*, because Mrs Chen does not love Mr Chen, she does not spend her time at home, and she is not interested in housekeeping. Even if the children are yelling, she just give a few money to send off, only dress in bright and cheery colors and busy herself with entertainment. Mr Chen because of the lack of love, no emotional communication with his wife, only shirked family responsibilities or blame each other. Therefore, the highest moral for the family is love, love is also the basis of a family's harmony.

#### 4.2 Rethinking Family Ethics for two sexes

In Bing Xin's works of the 1930s and 1940s, there was also a development in the understanding and writing of gender morality. In Bing Xin's work *West Wind* in the 1930s, the main character Qiu Xin sacrifices her love and gives up her marriage for the sake of her career, and ten years later she meets her boyfriend Yuan, who has already established a family and a career, and a sense of female loneliness and loss wells up in her heart, which is secretly infiltrated by the author's views on the relationship between marriage and career, but what the author gives to the character is understanding and sympathy. In Bing Xin's novel *My Student* in the 1940s, Mrs S is smart and lively, loves dancing and acting, and is also competitive and strong. Even under the difficult conditions at the rear of the Anti-Japanese War, she also endeavours to support the household management, builds furniture, takes care of the vegetable plot, and she is so kind-hearted, so she loses her life at a young age when she donates too much blood for the sake of saving her colleague's wife. A woman like that, who devoted herself to building her family and her life, ended up having a "heart higher than the sky and a life thinner than paper". The novels *The Landlord* and *My Neighbour* write about the contradictions between a woman's commitment to her family with her health, the contradictions

between a woman's career development and the organisation of her family, as well as the inconsistencies in the moral requirements of the family for two genders. As a result of these contradictions, Miss R in *My Landlord*, decides not to get married for the rest of her life, even though she likes to have a perfect family. Mrs M, the talented woman in *My Neighbour*, commits herself to her family, but is imperfect in both career and family. The two essays depict critical and mean-spirited men in family life, criticizing men's love as transient and delusional, and their immoral behavior of focusing solely on careers while shifting all familial responsibilities onto women. This reflects Bing Xin's profound contemplation on the moral dynamics between the sexes.

The meaning of these women's image is that women are no longer encouraged to establish a family and take up family responsibilities, but based on the unequal status of men and women in family life, women are allowed to make independent choices, women are selfish at the same time as they are selfless, women are concerned about their real-life existence, women are not bound by love and responsibility, women are concerned about their happiness and wellbeing. And the moral requirements for the two sexes have gradually tended to become truly equal.

## 5. Conclusion

Bing Xin discusses how to build an ideal family morality with her "Philosophy of Love", and reading her works always leads us to think about life. How do we love? Is it "existential love" or "possessive love"? Should we endeavour to develop our personality, or should we shift the responsibility to others and merely ask them to give? In what way do we give love and compassion? Do we take moral and psychological supremacy and give to others, or are we willing to give to them as true equals from their point of view? Schweitzer says that: if I were a thinking being, I would have to honour other beings with equal reverence, and not just confine myself to my own little circle, because I understand her deep desire for fulfilment and development is exactly the same as mine.

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