

Re-examining feudal ethics and individual awakening in Ba Jin's *Family*

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Abstract. *Family* is set in the early 1920s in Chengdu, Sichuan, against the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement, depicting the collapse of a feudal family system. Feudal ethics in the Gao family manifest in its rigid hierarchical structure, tragic feudal marriages and love stories, and the social reality of class discrimination. The younger generation—Juehui leaving home to establish a newspaper promoting new ideas, Juemin fleeing an arranged marriage, and Qin attending a women's normal school—represents not only a pursuit of personal freedom and progress but also a challenge to the entire feudal system. Through close reading, historical contextual analysis, psychological analysis, and comparative study, this paper focuses on the younger generation, represented by the three brothers Juexin, and their existential dilemmas. It exposes the inherent hypocrisy and decadence of feudal ethics, which intertwine superstition, hierarchical order, and familial morality, revealing the darkness and corruption of Chinese society at the time and delivering a scathing critique of feudal traditions.

Keywords: Ba Jin, *Family*, feudal ethics, resistance, awakening

1. Introduction

Ba Jin is a towering figure in modern Chinese literature, whose works profoundly reflect the transformations of his era. Born into a bureaucratic feudal landlord family, he witnessed the oppression of clan elders and the infighting within his family, gaining a clear understanding of this hypocritical patriarchal system. In 1919, the influence of the May Fourth Movement reached Chengdu, Sichuan, where Ba Jin, inspired by the anti-feudal ideologies of the time, yearned to break free from the decaying constraints of his clan and seek a new world. He immersed himself in progressive journals such as *New Youth* and *Weekly Review*, drawn to the anarchist doctrines of Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin, which emphasized individual freedom and liberation while opposing all forms of oppressive authority. "I want to shout my 'I accuse' at a dying system." It was in this spirit that *The Family* came into being. The novel truthfully depicts the decay and collapse of the Gao family, a highly representative feudal household, serving as a microcosm of the era. In the history of modern Chinese literature, it was the first to systematically and comprehensively portray, in the form of a full-length serialized novel, the gradual disintegration of a feudal family during the transition between the old and new societies. This paper employs diverse methodologies, including historical contextual analysis and psychological analysis, to explore the oppressive nature of feudal patriarchy, the varying degrees of individual awakening, the unique resistance of women, and the inevitability of the feudal family's collapse—thereby exposing the "man-eating" essence of feudal ethics. To this day, *The Family* remains a work of significant value. Although the feudal exploitation system has long vanished, its revelations about power oppression, the fate of women, and class discrimination continue to provoke contemporary reflections on social structures.

2. The Confucian feudal morality of the Gao clan

2.1. The rigorous family structure

The family system is a social organizational form that maintains familial order through a set of strict ethical norms, economic structures, and power hierarchies. It served as the cornerstone of traditional Chinese society, yet became a shackle suppressing individual freedom.

Grandfather Gao occupies a pivotal position in the Gao family, representing feudal patriarchy. He controls the family's fate with an autocratic hand, dictating and commanding all affairs. Nurtured by the feudal patriarchal system, he has gained everything

at the cost of humanity [1]. When Juexin was full of hope for the future, Grandfather Gao "held the power of life and death in a single word," severing Juexin's "wings" that would have carried him to a new world. Together with the elder generation of the Ke branch, he decided on Juexin's marriage through an almost absurd method—drawing lots. Citing the reason that "you already have a wife, and the Gao family has not yet divided its estate," he forbade Juexin from continuing his studies, ruining his future and condemning him to a lifetime of suffering and self-reproach. When Juehui participated in the student self-defense movement to resist the warlord government's unreasonable rule, Grandfather Gao deemed it an act of rebellion and lawlessness. He forbade the younger generation from engaging with new ideas, threatened Juehui, and confining him at home. After his sixty-sixth birthday, Grandfather Gao arbitrarily arranged Juemin's marriage to the grandniece of Old Master Feng. Sensing Juemin's resistance, he angrily rebuked, "If I say it's right, who dares say it's wrong? What I say goes!" Grandfather Gao knew only two things: first, that his authority had been challenged and must be restored through harsh measures; second, that parental orders, matchmaker's words, and the patriarch's decision in marriage were unshakable principles—those who defied them must be punished. As for the happiness and hopes of the young, he gave them no thought at all.

However, just when Old Master Gao had built a large family and a prosperous estate, fully convinced that he could ensure its continuous growth and prosperity, his efforts instead resulted in his own present loneliness—disappointment, disillusionment, and darkness. He came to realize that beneath this facade of prosperity and harmony lay a gradually decaying core, and the final outcome was already foreseeable. Old Master Gao's death was not merely the end of an individual life but also symbolized the bankruptcy of feudal superstition and oppressive authority, heralding the inevitable collapse of the old order as dictated by historical trends.

2.2. Feudal matrimony and the tragedies of romantic love

In traditional Chinese society, women were consistently positioned in a subordinate status to men. The 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' represented the institutionalized demands imposed on women by the old social order. This framework not only shaped women's prescribed social roles but, more significantly, functioned as an instrumental mechanism for maintaining the feudal patriarchal system.

Family exposes the oppression of women under feudal ethics through the tragic fates of three representative female characters: Stepmother Zhou, Mei (Qian Meifen), and Ruijue, revealing how female dignity and lives were ruthlessly trampled, while calling for greater advocacy of women's liberation and self-actualization. As the matriarch of the Gao family and stepmother to the three brothers (Juexin, Juemin, and Juehui), Zhou is gentle yet weak-willed. When Mingfeng is forced to marry Old Master Feng, Zhou sympathizes with the maid's plight but dares not defy the patriarch's will, remaining passive despite Mingfeng's desperate pleas. Similarly, when Ruijue goes into labor, Zhou initially resists but ultimately yields to the clan elders' superstitious demand that the expectant mother be banished from the household to avoid "blood pollution" offending the deceased. In essence, Zhou becomes an accomplice to the patriarchal system, silently endorsing oppressive traditions that crush the younger generation. This reflects how years of feudal indoctrination have "domesticated" her, embodying the tragic powerlessness of senior women in traditional extended families.

Mei and Juexin were childhood sweethearts, but they were forcibly separated due to a quarrel between their mothers over a gambling dispute. Meiben was compelled to marry into the Zhao family as a "bride of auspiciousness," only to become a widow shortly after. Her in-laws regarded her as a "husband-killer," and she eventually died in sorrow, consumed by pain and longing. Her thoughts and soul had begun to break free from feudal traditions, yet she was dragged back into the shackles of feudal ethics, ultimately devoured by them [2]. Though Mei embraced new progressive ideas, she could not escape the constraints of her family. She was treated as a bargaining chip for familial interests, becoming a sacrificial victim of an arranged marriage.

Li Ruijue was Juexin's wife—gentle, kind, and deeply devoted to her husband. She cared meticulously for her children and treated her siblings with generosity and tolerance. Though her marriage to Juexin was arranged by their families, it turned out to be a happy one. She gave birth to a son, Haier, and was filled with hope for their second child. Her life could have continued in this blissful manner, yet she died in childbirth due to the feudal superstition of the "curse of blood." Superstition served as a crucial tool for suppressing resistance and maintaining the old order. Behind this lay not mere ignorance but a deliberate means for the feudal family system to uphold its dominance. Her death exposed the disregard for women's lives in the old society, as well as the devastation and oppression inflicted by feudal superstitions on individuals.

Throughout history, women have been confined to the roles of virtuous wives and nurturing mothers or reduced to reproductive instruments, devoid of autonomy. This habitual self-effacement that transforms them into complete mollusks leads to the loss of inner fortitude and personal identity, while also inviting societal disdain [3]. Furthermore, women are trapped in the structural cage of being "family appendages," disciplined by this framework, which strips them of both social and self-worth. Their tragedies represent the epitome of an era, revealing how feudal ethical codes often forced women into predetermined tragic destinies.

2.3. The societal reality of class-based discrimination

In the early 1920s, the Gao family, as a typical feudal bureaucratic-landlord household, represented the privilege and oppression of the gentry class, while the lower classes were entirely dependent on their masters, devoid of personal freedom and economic

independence. The Gao family celebrated the 66th birthday of the Old Master Gao with grand ceremonies, where some "distinguished guests" rewarded the female opera performers with monetary gifts. However, these "distinguished guests" were not entirely satisfied with mere flirtatious glances as expressions of gratitude. They would then have the rewarded performers come offstage to drink with them, taking the opportunity to take liberties. People like Keding found amusement in setting off fireworks dangerously close to the bodies of dragon dancers. The laboring people of feudal society endured extremely cruel exploitation and oppression. Faced with such brutality, their choices were either to endure silently and submit to their fate or to resist when the suffering became unbearable [4]. These behaviors rendered their usual devotion to the Confucian Church and their self-proclaimed status as "reputable gentry" utterly ridiculous. Mingfeng's suicide by drowning in the lake was also a direct manifestation of hierarchical oppression. As a maidservant in the Gao household, Mingfeng existed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. She was arranged to become a concubine for the Old Master Feng, treated as a mere "object" to be disposed of at will, with no one considering her own wishes. Mingfeng pinned her hopes on Juehui, the man she loved, but his feelings for her were always tinged with a "savior" mentality. He failed to perceive her despair, leaving her unable to escape the reality of being manipulated by the upper class.

Furthermore, *Family* also portrays numerous marginalized characters, such as Huang Ma, Zhao Sheng, Gao Zhong, and the sedan-chair carriers. Despite their unwavering loyalty to their masters, they remain confined to their servile class status and are viewed as inferiors by the Gao family. Their existence further highlights the stark wealth disparity and class discrimination prevalent in society at the time. Such phenomena were not isolated incidents but rather a microcosm of the old society—a collective product of feudalistic traditions, power oppression, economic structures, and cultural psychology.

3. The revolt of young characters

3.1. Juehui: the vanguard of rebellion and resistance

Juehui, the third young master of the eldest branch of the Gao family, is a rebel against the old Confucian moral code—an immature yet bold rebel. Deeply influenced by the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth era, he pursues humanist ideals, participates in student protests against warlord rule, and founds *The Dawn Weekly*, where he publishes articles. These actions embody qualities that most members of the Gao family lack, making Juehui feel increasingly out of place in this traditional household. He cannot understand why his grandfather constantly boasts about the Gao family's scholarly heritage and moral teachings while turning a blind eye to his sons' vices—gambling, drinking, and womanizing. He cannot fathom why his fifth uncle, Ke Ding, hypocritically lectures the younger generation as a morally upright elder while keeping a mistress and amassing huge debts. He is baffled by his third uncle, Ke Ming, who, despite his education, remains indifferent to the family's unjust traditions. Most of all, he cannot accept his eldest brother Juexin's philosophy of "non-resistance" and "kowtowing compromise." He often asks himself, "Is it people who have changed, or is it the environment?" Though he cannot find a clear answer, Juehui grows more distant from his family with each passing day, as if walking an opposing path. However, Mingfeng's death strikes him like a thunderbolt, becoming the catalyst for his final break with the Gao family. "It's not just me—our whole family, this entire society, are all murderers!" he realizes, finally seeing the bloodthirsty nature of feudal oppression. From then on, he refuses to participate in the funeral rites for the Old Master Gao, supports Juemin's escape from an arranged marriage, and attempts to resist this "man-eating" family. Yet, when his sister-in-law Ruijue dies tragically, he loses all hope for the Gaos and resolutely leaves home. Juehui represents the countless progressive youths of the 1920s—an embodiment of his generation's determination and hope to break free from feudal shackles.

3.2. Juexin: contradictions and struggles beneath awakening

Juexin, as the eldest grandson of the Gao family's main branch, bears the heavy responsibility of managing the household. Initially regarded as a favored child of destiny, he received a modern education and had a bright future. However, indoctrinated since childhood with the ideology of familial duty, he became a man of "dual personality"—"new in thought but old in action." Unlike Juehui, Juexin is hesitant and weak-willed, resigned to being a sacrificial victim. When his marriage was arranged by the family, he could only abandon his love and the promising future he once took pride in. When Juemin fled from an arranged marriage, Juexin had to side with the elders, becoming an "enemy" to his younger brothers. When his wife, Ruizhi, was sent to the outskirts to give birth under the absurd pretext of avoiding "blood calamity," he dared not defy the family for fear of being branded unfilial. In the face of the conservative and obstinate Old Master Gao, he never resisted, only obeying blindly. Confronted with the radical and courageous Juehui, he evaded the truth, unwilling to face his real self. Juexin believed that his "doctrine of non-resistance" and "kowtowing compromise" could secure the family's peace. Yet, under the oppression of feudal patriarchy, such a strategy of concession proved futile. "I am not a youth; I have no youth." This is Juexin's despair over his own fate.

These plotlines illustrate Juexin's struggle between the old society and the new era, highlighting how feudal ethics constrain and crush human nature. His fate reflects the dilemma of young people torn between tradition and modernity, who, despite the surging tides of progress, willingly submit to the shackles of outdated moral codes and remain trapped in the cage of patriarchal families [5]. Though possessing an awakened consciousness, they ultimately fail to act due to the pressures of reality.

3.3. Qin: a representative of the new era woman

Qin (Zhang Yunhua), a cousin of the Gao family, lost her father at an early age and was raised by her mother, Madame Zhang. Though she endured the cold disdain of her relatives, this also spared her from the oppression of patriarchal authority. As a child, Qin was not forced by her mother to bind her feet and was allowed to attend school alongside her male cousins from her maternal grandfather's family. In this regard, Qin's fate was far better than that of female characters like Shuying, yet her path was not without obstacles. When Juemin's school began admitting female students and promoting co-education, Qin was eager to enroll in the modern institution but faced opposition from her mother. When her peers cut their hair to break free from outdated traditions, Qin hesitated, mindful of her mother's circumstances. Though Qin received a modern education, Madame Zhang remained deeply influenced by feudalistic ideas, forcing Qin to balance her rebellion against old norms with the pressures of family expectations. This reflects how women of the time, despite their pursuit of progress, remained constrained by feudal ethics, hindering their efforts to realize self-worth. Qin and Juemin fell in love, but Juemin was forced into an arranged marriage by the Gao family patriarch. Unlike Meifen or Mingfeng, Qin chose to resist, forging a different destiny. Together with Juehui, they formed a trio to oppose patriarchal oppression, ultimately succeeding in defying the feudal marriage. A life of courageous resistance is a life of true agency; a woman who dares to challenge a fate of suffering is undoubtedly one worthy of respect [6].

The triumph of Qin and Juemin's free love represents a rare case of concession within the Gao family. Had Qin succumbed to the discipline of feudal ethics like Meifen and others, her fate might have fallen into a tragic cycle similar to theirs. This further highlights Qin's courage to challenge traditions and authority in pursuit of marital freedom, embodying the awakening of new women in that era and symbolizing the inevitable trend of female emancipation.

4. Conclusion

The society of the early 20th century was a period of intense transformation and upheaval. Coinciding with the climax of the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement, it championed democracy and science, rejected outdated rituals, and advocated for new ideologies, with liberalism and diverse schools of thought flourishing side by side. Further influenced by Ba Jin's admiration for anarchism, the core ideas of *Family* took shape. This work is not merely a literary masterpiece but also a battle hymn of its era, showcasing the profound social changes during the May Fourth period. It condemns the sins and decay of feudalistic extended families, their destruction and disregard for life, while celebrating the younger generation's spirit of resistance against archaic traditions. Today, as we reflect on this history, contemporary individuals should draw inspiration from its positive energy, maintaining a calm and composed mindset in this extravagant world to kindle the courage to pursue a brighter future.

Although this study provides a relatively systematic exploration of feudal ethics and individual awakening in Ba Jin's *Family*, certain limitations remain, such as a singular research perspective and a lack of comparative analysis. Future research could situate *Family* within different historical periods to examine its practical significance for youth across eras or employ interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating sociological theories, to delve deeper into the operational mechanisms of feudal ethics and re-examine character destinies. The study of *Family* still holds vast potential, as the richness and profundity of its ideological core continue to offer new possibilities for literary discourse.

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