

## **Subjective Construction of Yuezibing:**

### **Illness Narratives of Two Elderly Women Who Once Lived in China's Collective Past<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of Subjective Constructivism, this paper examines the relationship between China's collectivist period and *Yuezibing*, a female-specific and age-related illness, of two aging women. On one hand, *Yuezibing* is deeply engaged with their historical experiences decades ago: their illnesses stems from their unfortunate *Zuoyuezi* experiences in the Maoist Era, which exposed them to the threat of *Yuezibing*. On the other hand, their narratives of *Yuezibing* are expressed from the vantage point of the present, profoundly affected by their experiences of illnesses and encounters with new life. These women's narratives of *Yuezibing* are reconstructed by imagination of specialty of "body of *Zuoyuezi*" and comparison between historical contexts of the past and the present, and these narratives signifies their sacrifices and contributions to their families, endowed with their understandings of personal virtues. The study of their narratives of *Yuezibing* reveals how women's bodies are influenced by their lived experiences in Maoist Era and how the past is subjectively perceived from these women's comprehension of *Yuezibing*.

**Key words:** *Yuezibing*, *Zuoyuezi* experiences, Socialist China, narratives of illness

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1-1. Introductions on *Zuoyuezi* and *Yuezibing***

Generally speaking, after giving birth to children, women in China are asked to practice *Zuoyuezi*, or "sitting the month" literally, for a month, exempted from housework, protected from "wind" and "water", fed with special but tonic diets (Shiuan Sanna Chen 2010). The use of this term can be trace back to *Liji neize* in Han Dynasty, which mentioned specific instructions for women's postpartum practices (Wen 1994). Postpartum confinement, a practice strongly related to today's form of *Zuoyuezi*, was recorded in traditional Chinese medical classics after Song Dynasty (Furth 1999). The most common type of *Yuezibing*, or the illness of *Zuoyuezi*, should be attributed to the entry of wind and water (or *feng* and *shui*) into women's body (bone gaps, or *gufeng*) during the period of *Zuoyuezi*.

### **1-2. Researches on *Yuezibing* and Illness**

Medical researches on *Yuezibing* focus on relations between *Zuoyuezi* practices and physical health. From the view of modern western medicine, *Yuezibing* is aches throughout the body (You Caizhen, He Huiling and Wu Huaizhen 2008) caused by puerperal infections, which can be aggravated by unhealthy and unscientific postpartum practices (Zhang Tao 2011). This view point is refuted by practitioners and scholars of Chinese medicine, who argue that the validity of *Zuoyuezi* descends from traditional Chinese medical concepts (like wind, or *qi*) and logics (treating the not yet

ill) (Zhu Yun 2011).

However, *Yuezibing* has diverse and complex meanings, which cannot be reduced to medical concepts. Shigehisa Kuriyama argues that the body and disease cannot be taken merely as objects of medical knowledge, but also lived experiences of individuals. He wants to explore what body expressed in different medical traditions through the study of perceptions of the body (Shigehisa Kuriyama 1999). Susan Sontag underscores metaphoric aspects of diseases. She contends that meanings of diseases such as cancer and AIDS are consequences of cultural and political construction (Sontag 1978). Nonetheless, her Symbolic study of diseases neglected embodied experiences of patients. Arthur Kleinman's studies of narratives of chronic illnesses emphasize that illness is biological, psychological and social experiences of patients (Kleinman 1989). Although individual narratives of illnesses are included in his medical anthropological studies, he ignores patients' subjective constructions of causes of illnesses. For many chronic illnesses sufferers, their own understandings of causes of illnesses mean a lot to them, but how causes of illnesses are subjectively constructed by them is still unclear.

### **1-3. Perspectives**

Compared with previous studies on illnesses, my research on *Yuezibing* has a unique perspective of Subjective Constructivism. Proposed by Professor Pan Suiming, the perspective of Subjective Constructivism underscores individuals' interpretations of practices and their understandings toward life. Informants are authors of their stories, and each of them has a distinctive comprehension on certain concepts; therefore, individuals' practices, emotions and attitudes should be analyzed in contexts of their own life histories, rather than understood merely as consequences of social, cultural and political constructions (Pan Suiming and Huang Yingying 2007). These stories are meaningful expressions of informants and the presence of these stories signifies their relative significance to narrators. The study of these narratives provides us with the chance to evaluate what these narratives mean to story-tellers and to comprehend how these stories are constructed by these narrators' subjective understandings. Hence, the perspective of Subjective Constructivism is adopted in this paper to examine how causes of *Yuezibing* are subjectively constructed by these women's recollections of their past experiences.

Because of the necessity of analyzing women's narratives of *Yuezibing* in contexts of their life histories, I introduced historical perspective into this research. Although *Zuoyuezi* practices are very personal and private, female informants once lived in the collective years practiced their *Zuoyuezi* quite differently from women in other historical periods, and the difference has implicit but concrete relations with their experiences of *Yuezibing*. Modes of production, distribution systems, political campaigns and life standards serve as historical backgrounds of their women's experiences of *Zuoyuezi*. Thus, *Zuoyuezi* should be treated as historical experiences of these women. As was put by Judith Farquhar, the body is the sediment of history (Farquhar 2002). As a result, the study of the collective years may enrich our understandings of how lives and bodies are shaped by history.

Nevertheless, history should not be circumscribed to written records. It was embodied in these women's practices, lived experiences, living circumstances and memories. Hence, history is no longer an external presence, but ways of being of these women. Inspired by *The Gender of Memory* written by Gail Hershatter, this paper examines the plasticity of memories (Hershatter 2011). Their

inconsistent but enduring memories are rearranged into meaningful stories, with *Yuezibing* being the core of their historical narratives. Through the study of these women's retrospective narratives of their lives in the collective period, we may have a clear understanding of how the past is perceived by these women.

This research was conducted within the framework of research ethics, following requirements such as "informed consent", "equality and respect" and "no damage". Real names of my subjects will not be presented in this paper (Pan Suiming and Huang Yingying 2009).

## **2. *Yuezibing* and the "Body of *Zuoyuezi*"**

### **2-1. Their Experiences of Illnesses**

Instead of answering the question "What is *Yuezibing*", I'm going to explore how *Yuezibing* is experienced and understood by Sun Yanlian (74 years old) and Zhang Shufen (64 years old), two of my informants. Sun complained about her urinary incontinence and pains in head, legs and waist, while Zhang's joint pains, headache and tearing against wind harassed her a lot. Both of my informants reported that *Yuezibing* came to them in their old ages, and "seeds of their *Yuezibing* were planted" when they were practicing *Zuoyuezi* during the collective period.

As was reported by Sun and Zhang, *Yuezibing* is firstly related to age: it did not become apparent until they were old. In the second place, Sun and Zhang's *Yuezibing* came from their *Zuoyuezi* experiences in Maoist Era. However, *Yuezibing* is not scientifically defined. In fact, symptoms of *Yuezibing* are similar to those of rheumatism and arthritis, and Sun and Zhang did not have their *Yuezibing* diagnosed. Why do they call their illnesses *Yuezibing*?

### **2-2. Subjective Conception of "Body of *Zuoyuezi*"**

That "seeds of their *Yuezibing* were planted" when they were practicing *Zuoyuezi* suggests not only that *Yuezibing* is related to their *Zuoyuezi* experiences in the past, but also that the "body of *Zuoyuezi*" is unique in their life courses. Specialties of "body of *Zuoyuezi*" can be traced back to traditional Chinese Medical cannons such as *Huangdi neijing* and *Nanjing*. However, I'm not going to introduce the "body of *Zuoyuezi*" from a theoretical perspective, though any analysis of it which failed to mention traditional Chinese Medical theories would be clearly incomplete. The body is not merely an object of knowledge, but also perceptual reality of these women and is subjectively narrated in special historical contexts. How the "body of *Zuoyuezi*" is perceived by Sun and Zhang has a great deal to do with their understanding of *Yuezibing*. What are the specialties of the "body of *Zuoyuezi*"?

As was put by Sun Yanlian, there are 240 gaps of bones (joints, or *gufeng*) in human body, and these gaps will expand after delivery. The expansion of bone gaps may facilitate the entrance of wind and water (*feng* and *shui*), which are hard to distract from the body. Eight pieces of gaps will heal per day for thirty days, and if wind and water are left in the body after the closure of bone gaps, women will be attacked by *Yuezibing* in their old age. Thus, women are forbidden from touching cold water or facing the wind for the fear of *Yuezibing* in the future. Likewise, Zhang Shufen mentioned gaps of bones: *Those gaps (of bones) were still open... if you touch cold water at this time, you'll get sick afterwards.* Aside from this, they also told me that the body should not be overused during the period of *Zuoyuezi*. For Sun, women should not work for a month after delivery, while

crying is dangerous for women, according to Zhang, since this may lead to eye illnesses.

But these specialties of “body of *Zuoyuezi*” should not be viewed as consequences of medical knowledge. As Csordas reminds us, “the body should be understood as the existential ground of culture—not as an object...but as a subject” (Csordas 1993). For instance, concepts such as wind and water originate from traditional Chinese Medical knowledge, however the anatomic image of number (though inaccurate) of bone gaps is definitely western medical. In addition, according to traditional Chinese Medical classics, women are subjected to “deficiency of wind and blood” (*qixue liangxu*) after delivery. Though the term of “wind” appeared in interviews of all my subjects, “blood” disappeared from reports of Sun and Zhang. These suggest that the “body of *Zuoyuezi*” was highly crafted in their stories. In fact, the construction of “body of *Zuoyuezi*” cannot be separated from their experiences of illnesses. For instance, they both reported that women should be protected from wind and water. This is correlated with their contact with these dangerous forces during the period of *Zuoyuezi* and their embodied experiences of *Yuezibing*, while Zhang’s emphasis on harmful effects of crying came in the same context of the description of her eye illness. The specialty of “body of *Zuoyuezi*” is intentionally expressed by Sun and Zhang to explain why they got sick.

Why did they connect their illnesses to their historical experiences in the collective period? Obviously, we should dig into this question by examining their experiences in the collectivist era in the first place.

### **3. *Zuoyuezi* and *Yuezibing* in the Collective Period**

#### **3-1. Brief Introduction of *Yuezibing* Sufferers’ Life History**

Sun Yanlian, a seventy-four year-old rural woman who is now suffering from *Yuezibing*, married her husband and moved to the X village in southwest of Shandong in 1956. The Movement of Collectivization of Agriculture was launched here in the dawn of 1950s, from Lower Producer’s Co-op, Advanced Producers’ Co-op to the People’s Commune in 1958. “Work point” became the standing distribution system of the brigade for the next two decades, and, after the annual state purchase of surplus grains, the rest of grains would be allocated to members of the brigade according to the amount of work points they earned each year. Individual work points were calculated through the multiplication of two factors: worth of a day’s labor in work points and attendance. Typically, male members of a brigade earned ten work points for a day’s work, while women’s were 2-4 less than men’s. During the period of collectivism, Sun gave birth to four children.

Zhang Shufen, the fourth child in her once wealthy family, was born in 1950 in Tangshan City. Her family declined after the implementation of “Joint State-Private Enterprise” policy, when her fathers’ grocery was confiscated by the state. At the age of 12, Zhang dropped out of school and sold ice creams to make a living. In 1966, the Tangshan government stipulated that each family should send an educated youth to rural areas or construction corps; as compensations, the government promised to provide jobs in work units to other siblings. Zhang chose to be sent down and lost her urban residency, or *hukou*, leaving opportunities to her brothers. Poor living conditions in village made her yearning for return. In order to come back to Tangshan, she refused the proposal of the brigade secretary’s son and married a male educated youth in 1971, which ruined her first opportunity to return to Tangshan two months later. In 1978, she regained her urban *hukou* and was employed by a kindergarten in Tangshan. Zhang gave birth to two children, one in Tangshan and

another in the village where she was sent down.

### 3-2. Experiences of *Zuoyuezi* in the Context of Collective Moment

#### 3-2.1. Sun Yanlian's *Zuoyuezi* Experience

Sun Yanlian earned 8 work points per day in the brigade during the collectivist time. Her memory of those days was penetrated with hunger.

Sun: *No grains were leftover! We female earned fewer work points! We have more family members to support, and food was always not enough. We had children. Who were willing to see their children starving? No! We had to borrow food from others. Sometimes, we had to dig wild herbs... Families with better labors [that means, more male labors] could get 400 jin of grains. In those days, we consumed more than now, because there was no oil in meals. We had to seize work points. Those farm works broke my back.*

In this narrative, Sun had to “seize work points” to feed her family. On one hand, she highlighted the shortage of grains, and the shortage was further underscored by stating that people in socialist China consumed more grains than today. On the other hand, she stressed her contribution to her family by emphasizing that she not only had to earn work points but also take care of her children and do housework. To support her family, Sun said, she had no choice but to increase her attendance and this was vividly expressed as “seizing work points”.

Sun: *What should we eat if we were not “seizing work points”? Our living conditions were so poor that we [women] dared not to waste a whole month for rest [after delivery]. There was a ballad at that time, “father works with plough while mother works with harrow, and passers-by should not mock. We are living in Advanced Agricultural Co-op, but we are left no other choices but suffering this sorrow”.*

Besides the shortage of food, the major characteristic of the period of collectivization was the prolonged time of farming. Because of the pressure to feed the whole household, Sun had to undertake collective labor even in the period of *Zuoyuezi*. Therefore, *Zuoyuezi* in collectivist era had economic significance to Sun Yanlian. This is due to the poor living condition at that time, but it also signifies Sun's sacrifice to her family: “seizing work points”, taking care of children and doing housework.

Sun: *Who would take care of me when I was practicing *Zuoyuezi*? No one! I had to look after myself! My husband and other relatives were all busy in the field, who would take care of me? ... I even had to wash dishes and do laundry! If I didn't do it, who else?*

Sun insisted that she should have been taken care of when she was in *Zuoyuezi*, but, in reality, she not only had to rely on her own but also undertake all sorts of labors, including organized agricultural production, housework and taking care of children. She even believed the poor condition at that time was not enough for her to experience a *Zuoyuezi*.

#### 3-2.2. Zhang Shufen's *Zuoyuezi* Experience

Zhang: *Our [educated youths'] workloads were equal to local Commune members', but our work points were disproportionately less than theirs. I earned 3.2 work points for a day's work [compared to 10 for locale male members and 8 for local female]. How could it be enough?*

When asked whether they were enthusiastic at performing agricultural production at that time, Zhang replied:

Zhang: *I was exhausted to death! How could I be enthusiastic? I could hardly have enough to eat! ... Later, the Large Canteen was canceled, and we educated youths didn't have kitchens for meal! Those [educated youths] who came from wealthy family return to the city, while I was left in the horrible village.*

Zhang's experience of "Down to the Countryside" was painful: heavy labor, meagre work points and hungry belly. The chasm between living conditions of urban and rural areas was presented in her story, which constituted her burning desire to return to Tangshan. However, it was impossible for her to get employed by urban working units for the sake of losing urban *hukou*, or permanent residency in Tangshan. She had to wait for the chance.

Zhang: *The secretary of the brigade bothered me continuously by imploring me to marry his son. If I had said yes at that time, I would not have been able to come back after the marriage and having children, I'm afraid of. I was so out of mind that I cursorily decided to get married with Old Qian in September 1971.*

Accepting the proposal of the son of secretary might have significantly improved her living standards, since cadres in the brigade were in charge of the allocation of work points and welfares. However, Zhang's rejection suggests that returning to Tangshan meant more to her at that time. Her "cursory" marriage with Old Qian indicates that, from her own perspective, Old Qian was inferior to the son of the secretary. In fact, as was reported by Zhang, Old Qian was ugly as well as ill-tempered. The only reason for Zhang's acceptance of the unsatisfactory marriage was her hankering for her return. Two months after Zhang's marriage, the first silver lining came: sent-down youths could return to and be employed in cities. Ironically, it was ruined by Zhang's marriage.

Zhang: *I got married in September, and sent-down youths were allowed to come back [to cities] in November 1971 for the first time. However, the only restriction was that you should not be married. ...I was shocked! I was too afraid of losing my face to divorce with Old Qian!*

According to Zhang, the unhappy marriage was the origin of her life-long bitterness, and she looked down on Old Qian for a whole life. The crush of her dream also brought painful *Zuoyuezi* experiences to her.

Zhang: *What I ate during my Zuoyuezi was only dough drop soup [a kind of course food]... I rested for only a week before I had to cook meals, make fire and wash clothes for other members in my mother-in-law's family [bitter laugh]. Who took care of whom? What a grieved month. I cried one night. However, my mother-in-law yelled at me, "We are not responsible if your crying ails you".*

Zhang said that her *Zuoyuezi* should have been served by her mother-in-law, but this did not happen. On the contrary, she had to do laboring housework during the period. For her, her unhappy *Zuoyuezi* experience was the result of her unsuccessful marriage. Although Zhang could return to Tangshan and give birth in the hospital, and she could eat enough though inferior food during this period, she still felt that her first *Zuoyuezi* experience was unsatisfactory, compared to her second *Zuoyuezi* which was served by her own mother after she had a home birth in the brigade three years later.

Sun and Zhang's narratives of their bitter lives in the collective period serve as settings of

their unhappy *Zuoyuezi* experiences. Their personal stories of *Zuoyuezi* were deeply embedded into the historical context: although *Zuoyuezi* was too trivial to be prescribed by the party-state in those days, the collectivist period had an obvious domination over class, identity and gender, which in turn left indirect but remarkable traces on *Zuoyuezi* through collective agricultural production, distribution system, Mass Movements (the Great Leap, or the Movement of “Go to the Mountainous Areas and Countryside”), social gender and status, concepts of marriage and familial relationships.

### 3-3. Causes of *Yuezibing*

Sun Yanlian believed that her *Yuezibing* originated from collective labor and housework she did during the period of *Zuoyuezi*.

Sun: *We had to do farm work immediately after delivery. If you get sick because of this, it is impossible to be treated. Everyone had to go to the field to “seize work points”, or there would be nothing left to eat! My backache, leg numbness and headache all came from this. I had to wash clothes, make fire and cook dinner. No one would help and look after me.*

In the story of Zhang Shufen, she touched cold water and cried several times while practicing her first *Zuoyuezi*. These, according to her, contributed to her *Yuezibing*.

Zhang: *Several years ago, I had serious pain in my joints, and this should be ascribed to my touching cold water when I was practicing Zuoyuezi. I knew that I should not do housework at that time, but who else would help me? Yuezibing came to me in my old age. I'm now afraid of facing the wind. My tear will run down in the wind. While I was practicing Zuoyuezi, I felt aggrieved and I cried.*

Unlike women in modern time, Sun had to participate in collective labors and do housework after delivery while Zhang had to serve members of her mother-in-law's family and cried during the period of *Zuoyuezi*. These practices conflicted with requirements of “body of *Zuoyuezi*” by exposing them to the threat of wind and water and exhausted their bodies. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that, according to Sun and Zhang's narratives, their *Yuezibing* should be attributed to these *Zuoyuezi* experiences during the collective period.

Therefore, *Yuezibing* should not be circumscribed to a physical disease, but also embodied historical experiences of Sun and Zhang: effects of their practices decades ago are experiences by them at present. However, it is too cursory to believe that their narratives of the past are factual. Their stories are based on their memories which have significant relations with their experiences of *Yuezibing*. If Sun is not suffering from pains in her body, is it possible for her experiences of participating in collective productions after delivery to be presented vividly in her narratives? Or if Zhang is not tormented by her eye illness, would the story of her crying during the period of *Zuoyuezi* narrated in the same way? As a matter of fact, the relationship between the causes of *Yuezibing* and the experience of the illness is constructed in the process of their recollection of the history of their illnesses.

Hence, rather than historical facts, Sun and Zhang's narratives of *Zuoyuezi* experiences during the Maoist Era should be understood as interpretation of their life history. How the past is perceived by these women? How did these women pinpoint causes of *Yuezibing* with vague clues and decades of interval between their *Zuoyuezi* experiences and their awareness of *Yuezibing*?

## 4. Narratives of *Zuoyuezi* and *Yuezibing* in Different Historical Contexts

### 4-1. *Zuoyuezi* in Different Historical Contexts

The study of Sun and Zhang's *Zuoyuezi* experiences in the Maoist Era unravels how their bodies and lives were constructed by history. However, they are not only products of history, but also narrators and interpreters of their past experiences. How were their experiences of *Zuoyuezi* narrated by them?

#### 4-1.1. Sun's Narratives of *Zuoyuezi*

Sun: *[When working in the field] I wore a scarf and covered my legs with cloth to prevent my body from wind attack. In those days, how could we stay in bed for a whole month like women now? Young wives these days are so picky! They ask for special Zuoyuezi clothes and have old people and moon-matrons taking care of them. While I was practicing Zuoyuezi, no one took care of me ... I gave birth to my first son in 1963, three years after the great famine. In the old society, what could we eat for Zuoyuezi? Nothing! No dry food! Only salty grainsoups. It was a time of hardship. Eggs were extravagant in those days. Once, I ate three eggs, and I vomited badly. Who will eat eggs for Zuoyuezi now? They are no longer good food in the new society. Young wives have chicken soups, fish soups, turtle soups, milk and sausages for their Zuoyuezi.*

“Those days” and the “old society” refer to poor circumstances in the collective period Sun once lived in, while terms such as “these days” and the “new society” refer to the happy life after the advent of economic reforms savored by young people. The misuse of the term “old society”, which was clearly defined by Chinese official voice as the period before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, indicates that Sun's memory of her experiences in the collective period is her interpretation of the past.

Sun's narratives of her *Zuoyuezi* experiences in the “old society” did not come alone. Twisted with witness of happy *Zuoyuezi* experiences of young women, her *Zuoyuezi* experiences were expressed in a negative tone. She lamented for her pitiful life in the collective moment: the shortage of food, clothes and onerous collective labors and housework. Even though she had three eggs while practicing *Zuoyuezi*, this brought about not happiness but serious vomit to her. The underlying meaning of her narratives is that she could not savor the wellbeing that is common in modern time. Her life in Maoist Era was indulged in bitterness.

#### 4-1.2. Zhang's Narratives of *Zuoyuezi*

Zhang: *At first, I felt lucky to come back to Tangshan to practice my Zuoyuezi. I gave birth to my first son in Tangshan Workers' Hospital. However, my mother-in-law was so mean. I took sixty jin of rice with me, but I ate none of it, let alone meat. I ate nothing but dough drop soup every day. Having my mother-in-law to serve my Zuoyuezi is no more than a daydream. I had to wash clothes, diapers and dishes for them with cold water. She was even not willing to give me wood to make hot water! How pitiful I was [bitter laughter]! I had no breast milk for my son and his weight was barely three jin two liang [1.6 kilograms]. I had conflict with my mother-in-law, so three years later, when my daughter was born, I decided not to return to Tangshan and practice my Zuoyuezi in the brigade. My mom came to the brigade and serve Zuoyuezi for me. I felt much better, because she is*



*my own mother and concerned with my health. She said, "Don't move. Stay in bed. Cover your body with quilt. Rest more". My breast milk was much better, and my daughter weighted five jin six liang [2.8 kilograms].*

Like Sun, Zhang Shufen's narratives of her experiences are also not purely based on facts. The chasm between her first *Zuoyuezi* in her mother-in-law's family and her second *Zuoyuezi* in the brigade implies her moral judgment on her mother-in-law: her mean mother-in-law was indifferent to her health and happiness. Although she could give birth to her son in urban hospital, this could not offset her intrinsic repugnance to her mother-in-law. She felt much better when she practiced *Zuoyuezi* in the brigade, not because of better living conditions, but because it was served by her mother. She did not have to undertake laboring housework and could have enough rest after she gave birth to her daughter. As is to be illustrated below, it is held by Zhang that her *Yuezibing* derives only from her first *Zuoyuezi* experiences.

The reason why Zhang mentioned her breast feeding and weights of her son and daughter is that these facts serve as evaluation criteria for the judgment of what is a good *Zuoyuezi*. Zhang ascribed her failure in breast nursing her underweight son to her unfortunate *Zuoyuezi* experiences in her mother-in-law's family. Though these facts have no direct relations with Zhang's *Zuoyuezi* experiences, they reveal how moral values are attached to Zhang's memories of her life in the collective period.

#### **4-2. *Yuezibing* in Different Historical Contexts**

For Sun and Zhang, *Yuezibing* was caused by their *Zuoyuezi* experiences in the collective period. However, as was said before, "body of *Zuoyuezi*" and their *Zuoyuezi* practices were intentionally expressed in their narratives, and causes of their *Yuezibing* were constructed to illustrate why they got sick from their past experiences. Therefore, *Yuezibing* is Sun and Zhang's meaningful historical experiences. How is *Yuezibing* understood by Sun and Zhang? What are they going to express through narratives of their *Yuezibing*?

##### **4-2.1. Sun's Narratives of *Yuezibing***

When asked whether she served *Zuoyuezi* for her daughter-in-law, Sun answered: *She has everything. That is unnecessary.* Sun's narratives sound inconsistent. The lack of care once caused her *Yuezibing*. Nonetheless, from Sun's perspective, serving *Zuoyuezi* becomes an unnecessary practice in modern context. What is her explanation?

Sun: *Have you ever heard of any young women suffering from Yuezibing? None! They can give birth in hospitals and eat delicious food. How can they get sick? In those days, we were forced into the field immediately after delivery, hence planted the seed of Yuezibing. It is impossible to be treated. Nowadays, hospitals are filled with scientists. Even the most serious disease can be treated. This is called "New society, New idea". In the past, we dared not to face the wind during Zuoyuezi. Now, young women may even turn on air-conditioners when it is hot! How happy they are!*

In the past, exposing women to the threat of wind during the period of *Zuoyuezi* is dangerous, which disobeys the requirements of the "body of *Zuoyuezi*". However, the "New idea" is that, even facing the wind blown by air-conditioners is not problematic. Why? The answer is: young women are living in the "New society". In the context of the collective period, the "body of *Zuoyuezi*" is

constructed by Sun only to justify her *Yuezibing*. When it turns to the modern society, this body construction is no more applicable for *Yuezibing* interpretation. In fact, according to Sun, *Yuezibing* becomes irrelevant to women in this new era: even untreatable diseases can be cured by “scientists”.

Consequently, the aim of Sun’s narratives of her *Yuezibing* is not only to find out the exact cause of her illness, but also to endow her experiences in the collective period with the meaning of “origins of sufferings”. These sufferings have been eliminated by the improvement of living conditions, but they are still preserved in Sun’s memory and experienced within her body.

#### 4-2.2. Zhang’s Narratives of *Yuezibing*

As was stated previously, it is argued by Zhang that her *Yuezibing* stemmed from her mother-in-law’s indifference to her health and happiness during her first *Zuoyuezi*. Is this the only reasonable explanation to her *Yuezibing*? Zhang’s narratives of how she served her daughter-in-law’s *Zuoyuezi* provide us with more information.

Zhang: *When my daughter-in-law was in her Zuoyuezi, I didn’t permit her to go around the house for the fear of illnesses in the future. I ordered, “Don’t get out of bed! Don’t do anything but rest”. Meals and soups were cooked and sent to her room. Everything was prepared by me! What did I have while I was practicing Zuoyuezi? Nothing! My daughter-in-law loves reading, and I forbade her by saying, “Don’t read! This may ruin your eyes”! Who gave instructions to me in those days? Nobody! I also prepared hot water for my daughter-in-law to wash face and feet. I only had cold water in those days. This is the difference between the heaven and the earth.*

Different from Sun Yanlian, Zhang described how she served her daughter-in-law’s *Zuoyuezi* in details, and these descriptions are one-to-one correspondent to her own *Zuoyuezi* experiences: rest, food, housework and the use of water. Paradoxically, in this story, she even prepared hot water for her daughter-in-law, which is contradictory to requirements of “body of *Zuoyuezi*” that women should be prevented from touching water. Apparently, Zhang Shufen concerned more about the temperature of the water, rather than water itself: a responsible mother-in-law should offer hot water to her daughter-in-law.

It seems unlikely for Zhang’s daughter-in-law to be harassed by *Yuezibing* in the future, since Zhang has prepared everything for her daughter-in-law: meals and soups, advices on *Zuoyuezi*, and hot water. In the past, the absence of these preparations caused Zhang’s *Yuezibing*; at present, the possibility of *Yuezibing* has been ruled out by Zhang’s meticulous care and services to her daughter-in-law’s *Zuoyuezi*. Again, Zhang’s narratives of this story is not simply based on facts, but endowed with moral significance: her daughter-in-law enjoyed *Zuoyuezi* in the “heaven” while Zhang suffered her own *Zuoyuezi* on the “earth”.

#### 4-3. Narratives of Life History

At the end of interview, Zhang Shufen told me: *You are so kind to be willing to listen to me. When I told my son about these stories, he replied impatiently, “Mom, why are you still talking about these clichés?”* There is no doubt that life stories of these aging women have been recounted once and once again, to their children, friends, neighbors and researchers. Why?

When asked how she feels about her *Zuoyuezi*, Sun Yanlian sighed: *Hardships! How could I*

*enjoy it? It's too miserable to talk about it... You see, I'm now troubled by illnesses and they will bother me for the rest of my life... Young men in your age cannot understand the flavor of bitterness.* During the interview, Sun kept on emphasizing that she knew that conducting collective labor and housework might ruin her body. But she had to do these for her family. *We had children. We had a whole family to support.* Whether Sun was actually aware of the requirements of “body of *Zuoyuezi*” cannot be substantiated by information I collected through oral history, but it is true that her narratives mean more than merely historical facts. What she did during her period of *Zuoyuezi* signifies her voluntary sacrifices for her family in the toughest time, the collective era, leaving painful experiences in her body and memory. She has tasted the flavor of bitterness for her whole life, and now she is calling for her sacrifices to be appreciated.

Is the history of collectivist China the only origin of Sun and Zhang's sufferings? No. At least, their sufferings also come from their memories. For Zhang Shufen, she chose to be sent down for her brother, accepted the unsuccessful marriage and tolerated the aggrieved *Zuoyuezi* for her family and children. These hardships she endured denote her contributions to her family, while her *Yuezibing* represent that all her sufferings originated from the past. However, she felt upset when she realized that her wretched experiences could hardly be appreciated by her son, which denied meanings of all her sufferings. It seems to Zhang that her son is enjoying the fruit of her contribution to the family without recognizing its costs, her sufferings.

The collective period has become history, replaced by the Reform Era. Sun and Zhang appreciate the prosperity brought about by the economic reforms and feel sorry for their awful lives in the collective era. However, they do not refuse the recollection of the past. These aging women narrated their life stories from the vantage point of the present, profoundly affected by their experiences of illnesses, encounters with new life and ever-changing understanding of their personal history. Their vivid accounts shuttled back and forth between the past and the present, weaving their experiences into exquisitely constructed narratives of *Yuezibing*. These stories harbor their personal grievances, individual sacrifices and dissatisfactions they've felt for many years. They related their sufferings with their personal virtues: thrifty, the ability to “eat bitterness”, tolerance, kindness to family members and competence in working. There is no wonder that their narratives of *Zuoyuezi* and *Yuezibing* are endowed with their personal understandings of their own lives. The study of these narratives may reveal how these women embodied the history through their lived experiences, and how the past is memorized by them.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper is funded by the project of "Change and Reconstruction of Primary Life Circle in China's Urban Areas" (11JJD840011), from the Ministry of Education of Humanities and Social Science.