

Trauma and Chinese Traditional Culture: Essays of Tai Chinese Writer Mengli: “Escape from the Wolf Den (Taoli Langxue)” and “A Tiny Heart (Cun Cao Xin)”

Fang Liu^{1,2}, Wenqing Xu¹

¹School of Foreign Languages, Guilin University of Electronic Technology, Guilin, China

²College of Education and Human Development, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, USA

Email: fang.liu.1@ndus.edu, wq983794490@outlook.com

How to cite this paper: Liu, F., & Xu, W. Q. (2025). Trauma and Chinese Traditional Culture: Essays of Tai Chinese Writer Mengli: “Escape from the Wolf Den (Taoli Langxue)” and “A Tiny Heart (Cun Cao Xin)”. *Advances in Literary Study*, 13, 153-161. <https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2025.133012>

Received: May 19, 2025

Accepted: June 30, 2025

Published: July 3, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Tai Chinese writer Mengli transformed her trauma experienced in early life into creative literary works, crafting vivid and compelling characters through unique artistic forms of essay writing. Characters not only deeply evoking powerful emotional responses through their strikingly lifelike portrayals but also reflect Chinese traditional culture and virtues. In appreciating and analyzing these figures, we engage in a form of dialogue—with the text, the characters, and ultimately the authors themselves and understand more about the practice of filial piety (xiao). This allows us to explore strong emotions the work brought and to uncover the mystery of how literature can so profoundly affect us.

Keywords

Trauma, Tai Chinese, Essay, Chinese Culture

1. Introduction

Tai Chinese writer Mengli (梦莉), originally named Aizhen Xu, is from Changle County, Shantou, Guangdong Province, China. She was born in Thailand and returned to China at the age of three. She has lived in China for over a decade and later settled in Bangkok, Thailand. Before the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Thailand, she took risks to introduce Chinese mechanical products to Thailand and has been making contributions to the economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Currently, she is the president of a

shipping company. She is also the president of the Association of Thai Chinese Writers, the deputy secretary-general of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Thailand etc.

Apart from her successful business, Mengli has published works such as “More Sorrow in the Smoke Lake 《烟湖更添一段愁》”, “Building a Small Pagoda Under the Moonlight 《在月光下砌座小塔》”, “People in the Faraway Land 《人在天涯》”, “Shining Flashes of the Sunset and Small Boats 《片片晚霞点点帆》”, “Sacrifice of the Heart 《心祭》”, “Encountering Like in a Dream 《相逢犹如在梦中》”, “Mengli’s Collection of Works 《梦莉文集》”, “By the Water’s Edge 《在水之滨》”, etc. Her works have won multiple awards in China.

The writer herself and her literary works are all deeply intertwined with trauma. The writing and portrayal of her genuine and unforgettable life experiences in her works have aroused strong resonance among readers and created a shocking impact, evoking pity for her tumultuous childhood. It can be said that the inevitable fate and destiny she cannot avoid projected in her literary works are also an attractive part of her essay works.

Mengli’s writings are best understood as semi-autobiographical essays, a hybrid literary form that blends personal experience with fictionalized narration. Although her works are not structured as formal memoirs, they reflect a high degree of autobiographical truth rooted in her lived trauma and cultural background (Cao, 1994). The narratives are presented in the first person, focusing on emotionally charged episodes of childhood suffering and filial devotion. Mengli once frankly admitted that she “writes in pain”, and expressing the pain of the soul has become the source of the writer’s creative writing. However, this self-pitying journey is also an embodiment of the author’s struggle with reality. What is revealed in her writing is complex and profound, telling the author’s feelings.

Trauma Theory is a critical approach in literary studies that examines how literature represents and processes psychological trauma. Originating from psychoanalytic foundations, this theoretical framework has been significantly shaped by the work of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, who argues that trauma “is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival” (Caruth, 2016).

Trauma in Mengli’s works has educational benefits for young readers in addition to its literary beauty. Readers can be guided into the war-torn era described by the author, allowing them to experience the various hardships described by the author. It is a good textbook on trauma and Chinese traditional value. This suffering textbook not only enumerates the various life hardships of the early days of the Thai Chinese immigrants but also writes about the redeeming effect of traditional Chinese filial piety.

This paper adopts Trauma Theory as its central analytical lens to explore how Mengli’s semi-autobiographical essays process and represent personal and collective suffering. In particular, it focuses on how trauma intersects with traditional Chinese values of filial piety, often reinforcing or challenging cultural norms. The

analysis is structured around three interrelated perspectives: 1) How filial behavior is constructed under traumatic conditions; 2) Criticisms of the oppressive dimensions of Confucian family ethics; and 3) How the author's narratives subtly challenge dominant cultural frameworks. Through this tripartite approach, the study aims to reveal how Mengli's writing not only documents trauma but also becomes a site of emotional resistance and cultural negotiation.

2. Trauma and the Value Transmission of Traditional Chinese Filial Piety Culture

The concept of "filiality" (*xiao*) in its mature formulation serves to define the ideal relationship between parent and child, which helps to secure the place of the family at the center of the Chinese ethical worldview (Chan & Tan, 2004). In Eastern culture and daily life, it is considered perfectly normal for parents to "discipline" their children according to the tradition of "bu da ma, bu cheng qi" which emphasized physical punishment of children in parental education. The saying "No beating, no good child" precisely reflects this principle. According to Yan (2020), parental control over children extended to their labor, bodies, and futures, reinforcing the implicit belief that children were, in practice if not in law, treated as parental property. In such a system, physical punishment was not regarded as abuse but as an acceptable expression of parental responsibility. This normalization of violence in familial settings becomes a fertile ground for trauma, particularly when children's voices are silenced under the guise of filial obedience. In the minds of most Chinese people, children are born and raised by parents themselves, so children are parents' own property and parent can educate children according to their own will. If a child is disobedient, hitting them a couple of times is no big deal, and this is also considered as a normal and common family matter.

In "Escape from the Wolf Den", Mengli grew up without father, she lost her father in her early years, and her mother, under difficult circumstances, suffered from severe mental weakness and often beat her children. However, Mengli was a very sensible girl. Their neighbors nearby often blamed Mengli's mother "excessively harsh", disliked her habit of frequently scolding and beating her children, while others defended Mengli and felt deep sorry for her. Mengli expressed little resentment and felt that her mother beating her was due to her emotional instability, not out of intention. Although she was only eight years old, she could understand her mother and "not only had no resentment towards her mother but also had an overwhelming sympathy for her". She believed that her mother's deteriorating health and mental instability were the result of long-term discrimination and bullying in the harsh family environment. Therefore, she "accepted adversity and never dared to disobey anything". Mengli, like other writers who were raised up by single mother during the childhood appeared to be more in "writing in pains", because she couldn't vent her anger on her own mother, the protest was even more hoarse and plaintive in the essays.

Granny Wu (Wu Po) insincerely helped Mengli's family's life, proposing to sell Mengli as a foster daughter to the Shen family in exchange for some economic resources, so that the younger brother and her mother could temporarily avoid hunger. Mengli, although reluctant to leave her mother, had no choice. Thinking that she could feed her mother herself and that the Shen family was not far away, she could also give her mother some leftovers to maintain a decent life, she reluctantly managed to leave home and came to live in Shen Family as a foster daughter. According to the concept of "reverent care" (gongyang), it is the showcase of filial piety that sons who suffered varying degrees of deprivation to furnish their parents with food and clothing. Mengli, as the first child in the family, though she was a girl, she still needed to share the burden of the family by exchanging some food to care for her mother and her younger brother. This essay conveyed the message that sons should subordinate their welfare to that of their parents and further the family's interest rather than their own.

After discovering the conspiracy of Shen family which engaged in human trafficking business, and planning to sell the Mengli to a family in another province, Mengli tried to escape, hiding in the grass pile near a neighboring family's door during the escape, and thus managed to escape.

Apart from "Escape from the Wolf Den", which depicted Mengli's early experiences of being sold as a child bride and being sold as a foster daughter and her thrilling escape, her other prose works also mentioned these experiences. This non-fiction historical narrative reveals Mengli's life experiences, especially her childhood suffering, one by one. In one of Mengli's semi-autobiographical essays, she recounts her traumatic childhood experience of being trafficked. This narrative is not merely historical but deeply personal, combining factual recounting with emotional introspection. Through a first-person perspective and evocative description, Mengli conveys the pain of separation, the fear of captivity, and the emotional weight of filial responsibility. It can be said that trauma in childhood often influenced her lifelong emotions and feelings. The characters and events in her works also have a sad and plaintive quality. Mengli herself believes that she was able to escape from being trafficking because "filial piety moved heaven and earth, and filial piety saved me". This is because, by asking for a chance to leave the Shen family for a visit home, she told them that she needed to go home to feed her family because she did not want her mother and younger brother to suffer from hunger, this filial piety moved the vigilant guards of the official residence. However, after being let through, Mengli's anxious purposely escape was noticed, and someone was quickly chasing after her. But Mengli's quick thinking allowed her to hide in the grass pile and escape successfully. Kneeling before her mother, she kept pleading, asking, "Even if I freeze to death or starve to death, I would still be willing to stay with my mother".

Apart from the experiences of being sold as a child bride and being sold as a foster daughter mentioned in "Escape from the Wolf Den", her other prose works also mentioned these experiences. This non-fiction historical narrative reveals

Mengli's life experiences, especially her childhood suffering, one by one. It can be said that suffering experiences often influence her lifelong emotions and feelings. The people and events in Meng Li's works also have a sad and plaintive quality. Mengli's suffering writing seems to bring people into the situation, adding more understanding and empathy for the fate of the characters. For the traditional Chinese filial piety culture presented in the work, it also reflects a bit.

Filial obligation, as deeply rooted in Confucian ethics, has historically shaped intergenerational relationships in Chinese society. The well-known maxim that "filial devotion is the root of virtue" (*xiao wei de zhi ben*) underscores its centrality (Yeh & Bedford, 2003). However, in Mengli's autobiographical essays, the practice of this moral ideal appears in a complex, often painful light. Rather than uncritically celebrating this tradition, her writing embodies a tension between reverence and restraint, acceptance and personal cost. For example, Mengli's decision to be sold to the Shen family as a foster daughter was not merely an act of moral self-sacrifice, but also a reflection of the socially imposed duty to prioritize family survival over personal agency. This contradiction reveals the dual nature of such moral systems: emotionally sustaining yet potentially oppressive.

Instead of portraying Confucian family ethics as unilaterally virtuous, Mengli's essays present a nuanced critique. Her narratives exemplify what Bedford and Yeh (2019) describe as "reciprocal filiality", where the child's loyalty is both culturally prescribed and emotionally conflicted.

Mengli's work does not simply praise or condemn the traditional ideal of *xiao*; it interrogates its consequences through lived experience, artistic reflection, and subtle resistance.

Mengli truly inherited this concept and did not abandon the traditional Chinese concept of filial piety even during her wandering life overseas. During times of economic hardship, when her father joined the cultural resistance and left his wife and children to return to the motherland, the family without the father lived in Thailand, struggling to make a living, lacking food and happiness, and filled with various painful separations.

In the midst of the special social background and family environment at that time, she was innocent and not resentful towards her mother but rather sympathized with her and did not disobey her. This is the manifestation of the value of kinship in filial piety. Mengli was twice "sold" without choice, once as a child bride and once as a foster daughter, causing the separation. However, despite lacking food and happiness and being filled with various hardships and separations, Mengli, who could provide for herself, managed to escape and flee, despite being pursued and pressured by the buyers. Mengli still wanted to stay by her mother's side and live a life of not having enough food and being unstable, which is the most previous value of kinship in traditional filial piety. This is the showcase of filial piety, "a filial son reveres parents in daily life, makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death and he sacrifices to them with solemnity" (Yeh & Bedford, 2003).

Mengli's story contrasts with the privileged and spoiled children in modern families who are overprotected by their parents. The new generation of children lacking hardship in education find it difficult to understand what "filial piety" means. To understand Mengli's filial piety, it is necessary to understand that "traditional filial piety culture contains both moral values based on gratitude and the unshakable value of kinship". In the essay *A Tiny Heart* (cun cao xin), the traditional virtue of filial piety is also reflected.

Reading Mengli's essays, one cannot help but think that in the changing social economy, "traditional family ethics in Chinese families have become disordered", and "it is necessary to explore how to rebuild reasonable and reasonable new family ethical norms in the context of the new era" (Ge, 2021) in family life and education of gratitude towards parents (Yu, 2021). Mengli's filial piety also provides a reference for the new generation of teenagers.

3. Reflection on Chinese Filial Piety Culture and Family Hegemony Culture

As Mengli's father participated in the revolutionary work in China, the Thai government ordered their family to leave Thailand. The family returned to the motherland to live with the extended family of grandparents. Mengli's father was the youngest child of Mengli's grandparents, and the grandparents loved Mengli very much and they took care of the family of the Mengli's father who returned from Thailand. Mengli also wrote in her essays that she loved and was very attached to the lotus pond, private school, and traditional Chinese literature at her grandparents' home. Later, due to the significant disparity in conditions between her mother's and father's families, the death of the grandparents, and the father's departure to join the cultural resistance, they were gradually excluded, discriminated against, and schemed by the extended family, and moved to a temple in the mountainous area. Life after the overlapping of family difficulties and national difficulties was almost on the verge of collapse.

In "A Tiny Heart (cun cao xin)", Mengli wrote about the experience of her family's house being occupied by a patriarchal selfish relative within the family. This occurred during a turbulent and unstable period and was also the period when Mengli could best feel the warmth and coldness of the world. This trauma could not be forgotten by Mengli, and thus, the writing in the literary work was very natural and sorrowful.

The relative who occupied the house was from the same extended family. Mengli's cousin was older than her father by a few years. He controlled the economy and financial decision of the extended family. He schemed step by step, planning to say that Mengli's mother would have to sell the house and remarry someone else in the future. He was the leader of the extended family, and he gradually kicked Mengli's family out. There were several idle halls in the Mengli's home, so he first had his friend who was an official's acquaintance move in. Her cousin played cards every night until very late, then he cut off food supplies, and con-

stantly came to insult and bully Mengli's family. He was brutal and arrogant. Then he destroyed the precious furniture with force and kept exerting pressure. Finally, he forced Mengli's younger brother to sign a mortgage deed. Mengli's mother was extremely grief-stricken and wanted to commit suicide by jumping into the river, but was persuaded by her two children, and finally returned home with the help of religious beliefs. Under the great mental pressure, Mengli's mother broke down and was saved from mental distress with the help of religious beliefs. Mengli's mother often knelt alone before the Buddha statue, praying silently. Mengli followed suit. Her mother prayed for her father's return, but Mengli prayed for her mother to stop having nightmares and not wake up from the nightmares. Mengli wrote, "Due to my sincerity and filial piety, I am sure that the Buddha will be moved and my mother's poor health condition will recover sooner". Here, the word "filial piety" once again melts the hearts of readers. It was because of filial piety, Mengli found an excuse to escape from the Shen family, and she wrote proudly in the essay after her mother went through all the difficulties, "My mother is now over 70 years old and is still healthy". The essay is titled "A Tiny Heart", perhaps it is about Mengli's own filial piety and love to her mother. This is precisely the traditional culture of respecting the elderly and caring for the elderly that needs to be adhered to.

4. Resistance to the Strict Hierarchical System and Family Centralized Culture of the Feudal Big Family

In traditional filial piety, apart from the value of family affection, there are two that have an absolutely overwhelming effect, which are the authority and political value in traditional filial piety. In the end, the core of the family system is based on the inheritance of bloodline for continuation and reproduction. In traditional society, parents have absolute authority over their children, so Mengli wrote with a bitter tone, "Struggling to survive in a situation with no choice". It can be said that according to traditional filial piety, parents have the authority to arrange the fate of their children, including marriage, etc., and selling their children or arranging their daughters to be child brides for other families is also a natural and logical thing. While Mengli does not overtly frame her writing as a form of resistance to family or cultural authority, we can see her narrative as implicitly conveying both emotional resistance and a sense of powerlessness in the face of patriarchal control. For instance, her repeated use of emotionally charged language and fragmented narration patterns may be read as a way of processing trauma and subtly challenging the legitimacy of the authority figures in her life. As Caruth (2016) argues, trauma often surfaces through indirect and disruptive narrative forms, suggesting that what is not said can be just as revealing as explicit declarations. Her repeated escapes from the buyer family were both an action confrontation with the suffering and a conscious "struggle for survival" against the arranged authority. From this perspective, Mengli demonstrated the inheritance of the family affection value of traditional filial piety, but also the opposition and resistance

against the authority value in the filial piety culture.

Mengli's mother's resistance was greatly limited. In the essay, what Mengli's mother always do was "kept silent and shed silent tears" and had no counterattack power against the bullying of the younger generation of the big family, Mengli's cousin, and the forced seizure and plundering of the family property by them. One reason was her weak and delicate personality, and the other was deeply poisoned and imprisoned by the traditional concepts of "the three cardinal principles and five constants" and "a wife is more valuable than a husband", causing women to have a very humble position in the family, submitting to the strict hierarchical system and family centralized culture of the feudal big family, without any legal equality rights. Mengli's mother had no unshakable disposal rights over the family property and was subjected to mental abuse and humiliation by the members of the big family. All these were the reasons for Mengli's mother's endless pain.

At first, little Mengli had imitated and borrowed from her mother's patience and passive acceptance, but with the passage of time, Mengli turned to using her pen to release her bottom heart feelings, express emotions, and vent suppressed emotions, using her mother's experiences and suffering stories to accuse "the vulgarity, falsehood, and utilitarianism of the world". Mengli wrote at the end: "Previously, I, like my mother, locked my experiences in memory. Now, with my pen, I unlock the lock and gradually reveal some of my inner thoughts". These "inner thoughts" are also the inner struggles that Mengli's mother did not express, the evil spirit in the world of suffering. As long as these are expressed, they are equivalent to being shared, and then people will naturally feel relieved and at ease. This also shows that, as a representative of the Thai Chinese community, Mengli uses a tenacious attitude towards life to respond to the suffering in life, and also hides a deep humanistic concern for life.

As Pengzi (2011) pointed out, we must examine how overseas Chinese-language writers transform their life experiences into creative literary works, crafting vivid and compelling characters through unique artistic forms. These characters deeply move us, often evoking powerful emotional responses through their strikingly lifelike portrayals. In appreciating and analyzing these figures, we engage in a form of dialogue—with the text, the characters, and ultimately the authors themselves. This process allows us to explore why the work elicits such strong emotions and to uncover the mystery of how literature can so profoundly affect us.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, essays by Mengli not only enrich the academic perspective of literary creation, but also provide profound theoretical insights and useful practical guidance for understanding Chinese virtue within the perspective historical and social changes.

Funding

This work was supported by the Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project

of Guangxi, China (Project No. 20FGJ009).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Bedford, O., & Yeh, K. (2019). The History and the Future of the Psychology of Filial Piety: Chinese Norms to Contextualized Personality Construct. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, Article 100. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00100>
- Cao, H. M. (1994). The Prism under the Moonlight: The Multiple Binary Meanings and Significance of Mengli's Prose. *Review and Research on Chinese Literature in Taiwan Region, Hong Kong and Overseas, No. 2*, 38-41. (In Chinese)
- Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.56021/9781421421650>
- Chan, A., & Tan, S. (2004). *Filial Piety in Chinese Thought and History* (p. 154). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203413883>
- Ge, S. Y. (2021). Humanistic Reflection on Rebuilding Traditional Filial Piety. *Exploration and Free Thinking, No. 8*, 160-166, 180-181. (In Chinese)
- Pengzi, R. (2011). The Overseas Chinese Language Literature in a Global Context. *Revue de littérature comparée, 337*, 106-112. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rlc.337.0106>
- Yan, Y. (2020). *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003135623>
- Yeh, K., & Bedford, O. (2003). A Test of the Dual Filial Piety Model. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 6*, 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-839x.2003.00122.x>
- Yu, W. W. (2021). From Learning Filial Piety to Learning to Love: Family Gratitude Education in the Era of Traditional Family Ethics Deviation. *Educational Research and Science, No. 7*, 30-35. (In Chinese)