

Female Vitality in Chinese and Japanese Literature: A Comparative Study of Dazai Osamu's Villon's Wife and Yu Hua's To Live

Muchen Cui

Beijing Normal University, 100000, Beijing, China

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gender Sociology, Social Change Theory, Female Vitality

Abstract: In Dazai Osamu's *Villon's Wife*, the meaning of "living" can be symbolically expressed through the phrase, "No matter what others do, we just need to live." Similarly, in Yu Hua's *To Live*, the characters embody an existence where they live "just for the sake of living, not for any other purpose." This study adopts a sociological perspective to examine the portrayal of women in *Villon's Wife* (set in postwar Japan in the 20th century) and *To Live* (set in China from the 1940s to the 1970s, a period of social turmoil). Through textual analysis, this paper explores how women demonstrate resilience and endurance under severe oppression and hardship while addressing the relationship between social change and gender issues. Despite differences in historical and cultural backgrounds, both works revolve around the central theme of "living" and depict the unwavering vitality of women. This study employs the perspectives of ecofeminism, gender sociology, and social change theory while utilizing intertextual analysis to examine how women reconstruct their social roles and values. Furthermore, this paper emphasizes the significance of incorporating literary analysis into sociological research, as these works vividly reveal gender structures and social expectations rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts, offering new interpretations of multilayered social phenomena.

1. Introduction

In recent years, research on Dazai Osamu's *Villon's Wife* has steadily increased, with scholars exploring its female characters, themes of life and survival, and social background from various perspectives. Most studies focus on the protagonist Sachi (the wife of Otani), analyzing her endurance and will to survive in postwar Japanese society, affirming her resilience and self-redemptive capacity in adversity (Maeda, 2006; Zhang, 2020). Additionally, some scholars have applied an ecofeminist lens to highlight the deep connection between women and nature, revealing how women endure social pressure and express reverence for life (Shi, 2020). Other studies have examined the film adaptation *Villon's Wife: Cherry and Dandelion*, where Sachi's perseverance amid hardship is likened to a dandelion's tenacious survival, while "cherry" symbolizes the vulnerable and love-dependent husband (Wei, 2022).

However, existing research has certain limitations. First, some studies have a narrow theoretical scope, lacking an in-depth analysis of the socio-historical background. Second, few studies have

adopted a sociological approach to literature, which could provide a multidimensional interpretation of literary works. Third, while the integration of ecofeminism and the dandelion imagery holds significant analytical value, research in this area remains insufficient. Therefore, reassessing Villon's Wife within a sociological framework is necessary to expand our understanding of the work.

On the other hand, Yu Hua's *To Live* has also garnered extensive academic attention. The novel profoundly portrays individual struggles at the edge of life and death while reflecting on the meaning of human survival during China's periods of social transformation. Existing research primarily focuses on the male protagonist, Fugui, analyzing his life values, relationship with traditional culture, and experiences of suffering (Lin, 2021). These studies examine the nature of life from perspectives of traditional philosophy and cultural background, offering macro-to-micro level interpretations. However, *To Live* scholarship still presents gaps. While Fugui's survival and suffering have been extensively analyzed, the role of women—particularly Jiazhen—remains underexplored. Despite Jiazhen's critical role in embodying life consciousness and redemption, few studies have analyzed her in relation to the themes of "life and death." Moreover, research from a sociological perspective on gender structures and societal expectations within the novel remains limited, particularly regarding the connection between female characters and social transformation.

Based on this analysis, a comparative study of Villon's Wife and *To Live* through the lens of ecofeminism, gender sociology, and social change theory provides new insights into the resilience of women and their redefined social roles.

2. Overview and Intertextuality of Villon's Wife and To Live

Villon's Wife, published in 1947, is a short story narrated from the first-person perspective of the protagonist's wife, Sachi. It depicts the struggles of women in postwar Japan and the challenges within their family structures. In contrast, *To Live*, published in 1992, follows the male protagonist, Fugui, as he narrates his experiences, capturing the historical transitions from modern China to contemporary times and their impact on family fate. Although these two works differ significantly in character portrayal, narrative conflict, and style, they share common themes of life's meaning, female destiny, value reconstruction, and self-redemption. This paper employs intertextuality theory to analyze their connections.

Intertextuality, first proposed by French semiotician and feminist literary critic Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, explores the relationships between texts (Kristeva, 1986). The theory encompasses direct textual references (intertextuality) and the broader diffusion of meaning through memory, repetition, and modification. Kristeva argues that all texts are constructed through the absorption and transformation of other texts, evolving within shared cultural and historical contexts. From a postmodern and semiotic perspective, literary works are not isolated creations but exist through interrelations with past and future texts, shaping cultural values.

In Villon's Wife, Sachi endures her husband's moral decay and their family's hardships, demonstrating remarkable resilience and will to survive. She ultimately chooses independence by working as a barmaid to support the family, symbolizing women's self-identification and self-redemption within a patriarchal society. This also aligns with ecofeminist views on the resilience between women and nature. Similarly, in *To Live*, Jiazhen displays extraordinary endurance and compassion despite familial misfortune and her husband's decline. She provides both material and emotional support to her family, embodying both traditional feminine roles and adaptive survival strategies. Although Jiazhen remains within the patriarchal structure, she redefines family values in times of turmoil. This highlights the complexities of female roles in traditional societies and their transformation under social change.

3. Female Vitality from an Ecofeminist Perspective

Ecofeminism, first proposed by French philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, emphasizes the intrinsic connection between women and nature, arguing that both suffer under patriarchal systems that exploit and control them (D'Eaubonne, 1974). Ecofeminists assert that just as nature possesses self-regenerative abilities despite human destruction, women exhibit resilience and adaptive strategies even in oppressive environments (Shiva, 1989). This section examines how Villon's *Wife and To Live* depict female characters who, despite existing within patriarchal and socioeconomically restrictive structures, demonstrate a vitality akin to nature's regenerative force.

3.1 The Parallels between Women and Nature in Villon's *Wife*

In Villon's *Wife*, Sachi's survival amid adversity mirrors the resilience of nature, particularly the dandelion—a plant that thrives even in harsh conditions. This parallel aligns with ecofeminist perspectives, which emphasize the interconnectedness between women and nature under patriarchal and exploitative structures (Shiva, 1989). The dandelion, often overlooked and dismissed as a mere weed, endures trampling, regenerates rapidly, and spreads widely, much like Sachi, who, despite societal oppression, finds ways to survive and sustain herself.

Sachi's life is shaped by external forces beyond her control—her husband's debts, societal expectations, and economic hardship—yet she adapts rather than succumbs. When Otani, her irresponsible and alcoholic husband, abandons his financial obligations, Sachi takes up work at the bar, a decision that, while initially forced upon her, becomes a means of economic self-sufficiency. In ecofeminist discourse, this adaptability is akin to how nature persists despite human exploitation; rather than resisting destruction outright, it finds new ways to regenerate (Warren, 1990). Sachi's choice to work, despite the stigma attached to it, illustrates a form of agency that aligns with ecofeminism's argument that women, much like nature, do not merely endure oppression but actively reshape their existence within constraints (Merchant, 1980).

Furthermore, Sachi's role as a nurturer reflects the ecofeminist notion that women, like the earth, are expected to provide, sustain, and endure without acknowledgment. She bears the burden of her husband's failures, ensuring their survival while Otani indulges in self-destruction. This dynamic mirrors the historical exploitation of nature and women under patriarchal capitalism, where both are treated as resources to be consumed without consideration for their well-being (Plumwood, 1993). Despite this, Sachi's quiet resilience suggests that, like the regenerative power of nature, women possess an intrinsic vitality that enables them to persist even when they are treated as expendable.

The novel's final scene further reinforces this connection between Sachi and nature. As she declares, "I suppose I do have a bit of the disposition of a criminal's wife. But I intend to go on living." (Dazai, 1947), she affirms her determination to continue despite societal condemnation. This mirrors the self-renewing cycle of nature—constantly facing destruction yet continually regenerating. Ecofeminist scholars argue that this resilience is not merely about survival but about the ongoing process of renewal and adaptation (Gaard, 1997). Sachi does not seek escape or revenge; instead, she embodies the quiet yet unyielding persistence of life itself.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, Sachi's story in Villon's *Wife* is not merely one of victimhood but of an enduring vitality akin to nature's regenerative force. Her ability to adapt, sustain, and persist despite the forces that seek to diminish her highlights the ecofeminist argument that both women and nature, though exploited and overlooked, possess an undeniable power to continue and redefine their existence.

3.2 The Resilience of Jiazhen in *To Live*

In *To Live*, Fugui's daughter, Fengxia, embodies an unyielding life force despite enduring multiple layers of suffering. Her resilience parallels the ecofeminist idea that women, much like nature, persist and regenerate even when subjected to oppression and exploitation (Shiva, 1989). Fengxia, though born into a turbulent era marked by war, famine, and political upheaval, maintains an innate vitality, demonstrating that life continues to flourish despite adversity.

Fengxia's muteness serves as both a literal and symbolic representation of the silencing of women under patriarchal and sociopolitical structures. In ecofeminist discourse, silence is often imposed upon both women and nature, rendering them voiceless while still expecting them to sustain life (Warren, 1990). Despite this, Fengxia communicates through actions rather than words, embodying a silent yet potent force of resilience. Even after being deprived of formal education and opportunities due to her disability, she remains a source of warmth and emotional support for her family, akin to nature's quiet yet indispensable role in sustaining human life.

Her suffering intensifies during childbirth, where she ultimately dies due to inadequate medical care—a fate shared by many women in patriarchal societies where their bodily autonomy and well-being are neglected (Plumwood, 1993). This moment starkly reflects the ecofeminist critique of how systems of power treat both women and nature as expendable resources. Just as industrialization and war exploit the land without regard for its renewal, Fengxia's life is sacrificed under a system that prioritizes ideology over individual well-being. However, her death does not signify defeat; rather, it underscores the cyclical nature of life and the ongoing struggle of women who continue to give, nurture, and sustain others even at great personal cost.

Despite her tragic fate, Fengxia's presence in the novel embodies the fundamental principle of survival. Her son becomes a continuation of her existence, symbolizing the enduring force of life that persists beyond individual suffering. Ecofeminist scholars argue that this regenerative aspect of women's experiences—where even in loss, new life and meaning emerge—mirrors the resilience of nature, which continues to grow even after devastation (Merchant, 1980). Fengxia's legacy, carried on through her child and the emotional transformations she inspires in her family, illustrates how women's strength is not merely in endurance but in their ability to sustain life in the face of destruction.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, *To Live* presents a vision of women's resilience as an extension of nature's regenerative power. Fengxia, though silenced and ultimately sacrificed, embodies an undeniable force of life—one that, much like the natural world, continues to sustain and transform even when subjected to suffering. Her story reaffirms the ecofeminist argument that both women and nature, though often exploited and overlooked, hold an intrinsic vitality that cannot be extinguished.

3.3 Comparative Analysis and Theoretical Implications

Both *Villon's Wife* and *To Live* depict female protagonists who exemplify ecofeminist ideals through different yet interconnected survival strategies. While the unnamed wife in *Villon's Wife* actively seeks economic independence within the confines of patriarchy, Jiazhen in *To Live* embodies resilience through her quiet, unwavering commitment to her family. Their differing approaches to survival highlight the multifaceted ways in which women navigate systemic oppression, reflecting the broader socio-historical forces that shape gender roles and agency. By analyzing these characters through the lens of ecofeminism and sociological theory, we gain deeper insights into the intricate relationship between gender, nature, and survival.

3.3.1 Gender, Social Structures, and Economic Agency

From a sociological perspective, both novels reveal how gender roles are constructed by historical and social structures. The unnamed wife in Villon's *Wife* represents the shifting gender expectations in postwar Japan. As a woman in a patriarchal society, she is initially bound by traditional domestic roles. However, her husband's alcoholism and financial irresponsibility force her into the public sphere, where she takes on the responsibility of managing a tavern to repay his debts. While her entry into the workforce is framed as a necessity rather than a personal ambition, it nonetheless challenges conventional notions of female dependency. This shift reflects broader socio-economic trends in postwar Japan, where economic instability led to increased female labor participation. Women, particularly those from lower-class backgrounds, were compelled to enter the workforce to support their families, gradually reshaping societal perceptions of female economic agency (Molony, 2000).

In contrast, Jiazhen in *To Live* exemplifies a different form of agency—one rooted in endurance rather than overt resistance. Unlike the unnamed wife, Jiazhen does not actively seek financial independence or challenge the existing gender order. Instead, her strength lies in her ability to persist through suffering, ensuring the survival of her family across decades of political and social upheaval. Her story is deeply intertwined with the collectivist ideals promoted during China's revolutionary era. Under the socialist framework, women's labor was not framed as a means of personal emancipation but rather as a contribution to national stability (Hershatler, 2007). Jiazhen's unwavering dedication to her family aligns with the Maoist vision of the ideal woman—self-sacrificing, resilient, and committed to the collective good. Yet, her form of agency should not be dismissed as passive endurance; rather, it represents an alternative model of survival, one that prioritizes relational strength and emotional fortitude over economic self-sufficiency.

By comparing these two characters, we see how economic agency is shaped by historical context. While both women navigate patriarchal constraints, their means of survival are conditioned by their respective socio-political environments. The unnamed wife's ability to support herself financially reflects the gradual transformation of women's roles in postwar Japan, whereas Jiazhen's endurance embodies the socialist-era expectation that women contribute to family and society through self-sacrifice rather than individual empowerment.

3.3.2 Ecofeminism and the Symbolism of Women's Resilience

Ecofeminism provides a crucial framework for analyzing how these female characters embody survival and resistance. Traditionally, feminist narratives often focus on direct rebellion against patriarchal oppression, emphasizing acts of defiance and political activism. However, Villon's *Wife* and *To Live* challenge this conventional framework by presenting survival as an act of adaptation and resilience rather than outright confrontation.

The unnamed wife does not challenge her husband's authority directly, nor does she attempt to escape her circumstances. Instead, she navigates her oppression by embracing economic pragmatism, utilizing the very system that marginalizes her to carve out a space for autonomy. This survival strategy mirrors ecofeminist critiques of patriarchal domination over both women and nature. Just as nature adapts and persists despite human exploitation, the unnamed wife reclaims agency within an oppressive structure without directly opposing it. Her ability to endure, sustain life, and find ways to thrive despite systemic constraints aligns with the ecofeminist concept of interconnectedness—where women's survival is intricately linked to broader social and environmental forces (Warren, 1990).

Similarly, Jiazhen's resilience is deeply tied to the natural world. *To Live* portrays the cycles of life and death through the lens of familial survival, emphasizing the endurance of the land and the

human spirit. Jiazhen, much like the earth, withstands relentless suffering without resistance. Her quiet strength is akin to the endurance of nature, which continues to sustain life despite exploitation. This thematic parallel reinforces the ecofeminist perspective that women, like the environment, are expected to absorb and withstand harm without seeking direct retribution. Yet, this very endurance becomes a form of defiance—by surviving, Jiazhen subverts the notion that women must succumb to suffering.

Both Dazai Osamu and Yu Hua employ natural metaphors to highlight the resilience of their female protagonists. In *Villon's Wife*, the unnamed wife's life is marked by cycles of suffering and recovery, evoking the regenerative forces of nature. She does not break under the weight of her husband's failures but rather adapts, much like a tree bending in the wind yet remaining firmly rooted. In *To Live*, Jiazhen's endurance mirrors the cyclical nature of the land. The passing of seasons, the deaths and births within her family, and the ever-changing socio-political landscape all emphasize the continuity of life, even in the face of destruction. These natural metaphors reinforce the ecofeminist critique of patriarchal exploitation, positioning women's survival as both a burden and a form of quiet resistance.

3.3.3 Redefining Female Agency and Survival

The comparative analysis of *Villon's Wife* and *To Live* challenges traditional narratives of female resistance. In many feminist discourses, agency is often equated with rebellion—women who challenge societal norms, reject domestic roles, or seek individual empowerment are viewed as the primary figures of feminist resistance. However, these two works suggest that survival itself can be a powerful form of agency. The ability to endure, to sustain life, and to navigate oppressive structures without breaking is just as significant as overt defiance.

The unnamed wife's decision to manage the tavern is not framed as an act of feminist rebellion, yet it grants her a degree of control over her circumstances. Her pragmatic approach to survival blurs the lines between submission and agency, illustrating how women often operate within oppressive systems to carve out spaces of autonomy. Likewise, Jiazhen's endurance does not fit the conventional model of feminist resistance, yet her quiet resilience ensures the survival of her family through decades of hardship. Her strength is not in rejecting her role but in transforming it—she becomes the pillar of stability in an unstable world.

These narratives suggest that women's agency cannot be confined to a single definition. Both economic independence and emotional endurance serve as viable forms of survival, shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. The contrast between the unnamed wife's pragmatic survival and Jiazhen's quiet resilience underscores the diversity of women's experiences, challenging the notion that feminist agency must always take the form of direct resistance.

Ultimately, the analysis of *Villon's Wife* and *To Live* reveals a broader truth about gender, survival, and resistance. Women's lives are deeply intertwined with social structures, economic forces, and natural cycles. Their ability to persist—whether through economic agency or familial devotion—subverts traditional portrayals of passive suffering. By positioning these female characters within ecofeminist and sociological frameworks, both Dazai Osamu and Yu Hua contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender and survival, demonstrating that resilience, in all its forms, is a force of defiance in itself.

4. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of *Villon's Wife* and *To Live*, this paper demonstrates how women exhibit resilience and adaptive strategies in response to oppression. By employing ecofeminist theory, this study reveals the symbolic parallels between women and nature,

emphasizing their shared struggles and regenerative capacities. While Sachi and Jiazhen exist in different cultural and historical contexts, their endurance reflects a universal theme: the tenacity of female vitality.

This analysis also underscores the value of integrating literary studies with sociological perspectives. By examining gender roles within historical and economic frameworks, we gain a deeper understanding of how literature not only reflects social reality but also critiques and redefines it. Future research could expand on this intersection by exploring how contemporary literature continues to portray women's evolving survival strategies in response to global sociopolitical changes.

References

- [1] Yu Hua. *To Live*. Publisher, 1996: Preface.
- [2] Dazai Osamu. *Villon's Wife and Otome*. Iwanami Shoten, 1926
- [3] Yu Hua, Iizuka Yō. *To Live*. *Chūōkōron Shinsha*, 2019: 47.
- [4] Kristeva, Julia. *Language: The Unknown: An Initiation Into Linguistics*. Columbia University Press, 2025. ISBN 9780231216791.
- [5] Tong Xin. *Sociology of Gender*. Peking University Press, 2022. ISBN 978-7-301-33467-6.
- [6] Risman, B. J., Froyum, C. M., & Scarborough, W. J. (Eds.). *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*. Springer, Cham.
- [7] Durkheim, É. (1893). *Social Solidarity: The Division of Labor in Society*. Trans. by George Simpson. New York: Free Press.
- [8] Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Trans. by Gino Raymond & Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [9] Chen Weihua. "The Origins and Evolution of Ecofeminism: A Historical and Theoretical Perspective." *Forum on Chinese Culture*, 2016, (12): 145-150.
- [10] Wei Xiaoting. "An Analysis of Redemption and Regeneration in the Film *Villon's Wife: Cherry and Dandelion*." *Masterpieces Review*, 2022, (11): 159-161.
- [11] Lin Huayu. "The Ice Dancer in the Dark Night: An Interpretation of Female Characters in Yu Hua's Novels." *Research on Chinese Literature*, 2001, (04): 70-74.
- [12] Chen Weihua. "The Ecoism of 'She' and the Feminism of 'Ecology': An Ecofeminist Perspective on Ecological Civilization." *People's Tribune*, 2013, (26): 176-177+256.