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WOMEN AND THE *NIHIL*

THE SHADOW SUBJECT IN CHINESE LITERARY MODERNITY, 1915-1936

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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My dissertation examines how the feminine was invoked as a representational strategy to cope with the nihilism lying at the heart of Chinese modernity in the period from 1915 to 1936. As a revolution on both the individual level and the social level, Chinese modernity began with and continued in crisis. One imperative of Chinese modernity was to ceaselessly bring excitement and passion to the individual, urging and enticing the latter to join the nationalist project. However, this idealist endeavor demanded more power than the individual could summon within a coherent and rational consciousness. The individual was forced to confront decentering or shattering experiences of revolution, which were impossible to represent. Therefore, the *nihil* lied at the heart of modern Chinese subjectivity. In the West, nihilism emerged as a psychological effect to the decline of belief; but in May Fourth China, nihilism emerged a response to the belief in a heightened spirit that is incommensurate with any practical

goals. However, the very nihilistic experience had to be disguised or shielded to ensure the purity and sublimity of the revolution. The trope of woman was employed as a metonymy for the *nihil*, which gave birth to a “shadow subject” (an unconscious agency of the subject) that was different from the ideal masculine and rational one. On the one hand, the projection of *nihil* onto woman further alienated and mystified the feminine; on the other hand, it empowered the feminine and incorporated woman into the mainstream of revolutionary discourse. Therefore, not only male writers used the representation of woman to overcome the traumatic nihilistic experience in their subjectivity, some female writers also integrated the *nihil* in their self-representation as a strategy to empower themselves. In my dissertation, I engage myself in a re-reading of selective modern Chinese literary works. Combining the theoretical strength of post-structuralism, existentialism, and feminism, my dissertation aims to deconstruct and reconstruct subjectivity, narrative, and revolutionary discourse in modern China. The discovery of the relation between woman and *nihil* provides a new perspective to reexamine the construction of modern subjectivity, as well as the gender relations in Chinese modernity.

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Introduction: Woman and *Nihil*

The Shadow Subject of Chinese Literary Modernity

The history of modern China bears the conspicuous mark of colonial modernity. When Chinese reformers started to envision and discuss Chinese modernity at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, they did so within a set of borrowed terms from the West. The borrowed discourses of enlightenment, individualism, subjectivity, social equality, and nation-states, however, came into collision with the historical urgency of (national) survival in China. On the one hand, one common characteristic of the discourses of Western modernity is that they feature a unilinear mode of progress and development of the nation, society, and individual, aiming at a continuous ascending movement toward a luminous future. On the other hand, the national and social crisis demands a discontinuity in history, a revolution – rather than an evolution, as implied in the enlightenment discourse – of both the superstructure and the base, both the public and the private, both the political and the personal. This mission is heralded by a desire to undo existing institutions, to sever the past from the present, and to radically vacuum one's self before embracing the new.

Literary historians call the above contradiction the contradiction between enlightenment and national salvation (*qimeng he jiuwang*)¹. The two seemingly incommensurate missions, one continuous and one disruptive, worked together to

¹ See Li Zehou, "Qimeng yu jiuwang de shuangchong bianzou," 32-34.

produce the special conditions of Chinese modernity. More than anything else, they caused a crisis of representation. In this context, the question becomes not merely what to represent, but *who* represents and in which way?

Hegel located the core of modernity in the principle of “subjectivity” – a principle which carried with it mainly the connotations of individualism, critical-rational competence and autonomy of action (d'Entrèves & Benhabib, 61). But if revolution is on the agenda, then the subject of representation is simultaneously the object of revolution. The individual not only has to deal with an emerging new world which he feels powerless to represent, but also the rupture in his own self that deprives him of his power of representation. This model of subjectivity is obviously more complicated than the Hegelian rational and autonomous subjectivity. In fact, it is only within the dialectic of the possibility and impossibility of representation that the subjectification of the individual takes place.

The theme of my dissertation, “woman and *nihil*,” explores the central problem of subjectification qua representation. Both woman and the *nihil* mark the aporia of representation. The specter of nihilism entered the horizon of Chinese history almost at the same time as the dawning of Chinese modernity. The *nihil* indicates the negation of values and meanings; it constitutes a revolt against reason and enlightenment. In China, nihilism is not simply an indicator of the experience of disillusionment against the increasingly rationalized and instrumentalized world, as in the West; it is, rather, a grounding principle and a constitutive substance for the emergent modern Chinese

subjectivity. The experience of the *nihil*, as a matter of fact, played a decisive role in the formation of modern Chinese subjectivity.

The trope of the new woman, on the other hand, represents a radical otherness in history. Emerging in the 1910s, this trope embodies a double negation: she is the modern substitute for the traditional Chinese woman, in that she is not traditional; and she is a mesmerizing other to modern Chinese man. Therefore, the very radical otherness is its legitimacy. Although the trope of woman was initially invented by male reformers as an integral part of the nationalist agenda, it had never been completely in the control of the masculine discourse. Rather, the trope of woman frequently reminds the male writers of the limits of their power of representation as a form of domination.

In modern China, the *nihil* as fundamental subjective experience and woman as a prominent literary trope are not two isolated cultural phenomena. Not only are the two of them closely connected with each other, but they also are constitutive of the emerging modern subjectivity. As Andrew Heritt points out, the dialectic of subjectification takes place “both at the level of psyche and at the level of the individual’s relationship to the power of representation” (75). While the *nihil* represents the impossibility of representation, the trope of woman is created as an intermediate object between the possibility and impossibility of representation.

The formation of modern Chinese subjectivity necessarily leaves the subjectification open, both at the level of the psyche and at the level of the individual’s relationship to the power of representation. As the *nihil* cannot be absorbed as a

consistent experience of a unified self, the trope of the new woman cannot be dominated by the individual who represents. This aperture is crucial for modern subjectivity, as it mediates the two modes of history: the continuous and the disruptive, the evolutionary and the revolutionary. It is the aim of my dissertation to show how the formation of modern Chinese subjectivity can be viewed as a synthetic and dialectical exchange between the desire for and the impossibility of representation.

The Specter of the *Nihil*

One connecting thread between Chinese history and Western history is the experience of modernity as a state of continual crisis characterized by nihilism (Kelly 152). The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche projected nihilism as a sense of metaphysical terror reproducing itself in the modern world (Kelly 151), with which he challenged the thematic content of reason and enlightenment. When nihilism was translated into China, together with other Western social theories and philosophies, in the early twentieth century, it aroused responses drastically differing from each other.

Wang Guowei, for example, was the first Chinese to read and analyze Nietzsche and to quote him in his own writings around 1910 (Shao 16). However, Wang was deeply worried about the destructive power advocated by Nietzsche's doctrines, because it threatened the Confucian tradition, which was the backbone of Chinese intellectual life. The contact with Nietzsche's theories somehow traumatized Wang Guowei, whereupon

he took more than a hundred copies of his *Jing An Collection*² from his trunk and burned them all. Wang gave up philosophy and literature from that time (Luo 7019-7022; Shao 24).

While Wang Guowei is a representative of conservative Chinese scholars, the younger generation of May Fourth iconoclasts, especially the leftist activists, embraced Nietzsche's nihilism with enthusiasm. For example, Zhou Yang (1908-1989), who was a leader of the leftist literary association *Zuolian* in the 1930s, claimed that Nietzsche's theory had exerted the greatest influence on him. Zhou recalled in 1943:

Nietzsche's thought used to have a great impact on my life. I must say, it was the impact of revolution – he taught me to disavow all convention, tradition, and authority; he cleaned out my head. Without this clean-out, I would not have accepted Marxism so purely and straightforwardly (“Wode zizhuan”).

From the above two examples, one can see that nihilism played an important role in the overthrowing of old ideological institutions, as well as in the reception of new thoughts and ideas. It is ironic that Nietzsche used nihilism to attack modernity, and the Chinese used nihilism to welcome modernity. For the May Fourth iconoclasts and leftist activists, nihilism was not merely a paralyzing tendency toward negativity, but also a magnetic vacuum generating and attracting modern and revolutionary ideas. In his discussion of Nietzsche's nihilism, Martin Heidegger differentiates an incomplete nihilism from a completed nihilism. According to Heidegger, incomplete nihilism is a

² *Jing An collection* 静庵文集 collected Wang Guowei's essays on philosophy and aesthetics. Jing'an was Wang's style name.

simple “no-saying,” completed nihilism, by contrast, is not simply a devaluing of the highest values hitherto recognized, but is, at the same time, a revaluation, a counter-movement to devaluing (Heidegger 67-68). Completed nihilism, therefore, is not merely a replacement of old values by new ones, but a complete restructuring of the nature and manner of valuation itself, including the representation of value itself. If the incomplete nihilism calls for a total rejection of the modern world, completed nihilism, Heidegger believes, is the replacement of a (lifeless) supersensory world with a (life-full) sensory world (Darby et al. 3). This means that completed nihilism frees the individual from contemplation or rationalization, and allows him/her to engage in real political experience and revolutionary action.

It is for this reason that nihilism had a strong appeal among modern Chinese reformers. As Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-fan Lee observe, as early as in the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese radical reformers became fascinated with Western anarchist and terrorist acts and viewed them as “instruments of progress.” The Chinese radicals thus resorted to the nihilistic form of revolutionary violence, and it was regarded as the only response strong enough to outmatch the heavy oppression of autocracy (69). According to Lee and Goldman, revolutionary nihilists advocated a boundless self pervaded by an expanding psyche:

In demanding absolute ‘sincerity’ of the revolutionary, the nihilists put to new uses the neo-Confucian concept that the sage’s power must be linked to the flow of ‘sincere mind’ pervading the self unimpeded. If ‘sincerity’ both sharpened the

assassin's knife and validated its use, the best proof of this in practice would be the spontaneous ego-abandonment of one whose risk of life is total (69).

If "sincerity" can be understood as intense and fiery passion and will, then the image of the ideal revolutionary is one who must give up the unified notion of a self to follow the insurgency of the "sincere mind."

In their selective reception and translation of Western theories, Chinese intellectuals placed an emphasis on the freedom and power of the psyche on both the individual and collective levels. Benjamin Schwartz has noticed that Yan Fu's reading of Social Darwinism reveals Yan's interest in "the Faustian-Promethean exaltation of energy and power both over non-human nature and within human society" (Schwartz, 46). Propelled by the historical tide of national strengthening and salvation, the reformers envisioned a self pervaded with zealous desires and heroic passions as the ideal personality of the new era.

There is an "apparent lack of separation between the two realms of the conscious and the unconscious" (Lee, "Modernity and Its Discontents" 168) in the emerging personality in modern China. Leo Ou-ran Lee suggests that this probably "reflects a holistic frame of thinking derived from the largely holistic tradition of Chinese philosophy, a conception that sees the world as a 'whole' in which boundaries between external and internal reality are intentionally or unintentionally blurred" ("Modernity and Its Discontents" 168) From another perspective, however, this holistic conception supports the symbiosis of the subject and the *nihil* – it is acquiescent to the fact that the

self contains opaque, or even representable elements.

In late 1917 and early 1918, the young Mao Zedong, under the influence of western ideas of democracy and science, completed an important transition in his life. Mao wrote in one of his reading notes: “I was an advocate of the no-self theory (*wu wo lun*). I thought there is only the universe and no the self. Now I know it was not right. It is because the self is the universe” (R. Li 133)³ Although Mao shifted from a disbeliever into a believer in the self (*wo*), his conceptualization of the self still contains the seed of no-self. By conflating the self with the universe, Mao is actually abolishing the boundaries of the self. While claiming that “the self is the universe,” Mao formed his theory of “valuing the self” (*gui wo lun*). In psychoanalysis, such a self is regarded as the pre-oedipal bundle of life that is characterized by a narcissistic drive. The pre-oedipal self recognizes no boundary between I and the world and it misrecognizes the world as itself.

In the poetry of another May Fourth leading reformer, Guo Moruo, the narcissistic self is transformed into the giant *I*. In his poem “Celestial Dog” (*tiangou*, 1920), the poet bursts out in passionate outcries: “I am the sum of the universe’s energy” (43). Guo’s ideal self was one which “burns like the flame,” “roars like the sea,” “runs like electricity” (44). While the symbols of flame, sea, and electricity exhibit the power of vehemence, vastness and speed, they are also objects without a definite form. The self which is like flame, sea and electricity thus is one that constantly exceeds the limits of itself. Guo’s superman self, which convenes the energy of the universe, goes hand in hand

³ The statement was taken from Mao Zedong’s reading comments to G.E.Moore’s *Principia Ethica*.

with Mao's self-as-universe.

It is an often-quoted statement by the May Fourth romantic writer Yu Dafu that "The greatest success of the May Fourth Movement lay, first of all, in the discovery of individual personality" (qtd. in L. Lee, *Romantic Generation* 263) May Fourth iconoclasts took enlightenment as their first task. Chen Duxiu called for "the awakening of full selfhood" (*quan renge de juexing*) by arguing that the national and societal interests were in fact based on the consolidation of individual interests. The liberal, egalitarian, and romantic tones in the slogans of the New Culture iconoclasts presupposed a positive subjectivity that is both a wholesome and an enlightened body and soul.

However, with the deepening of the national crisis, the pursuit of a unified individual subjectivity was never completed. It became an intentionally unfinished project, which was later intentionally aborted. The revolutionary imperative of national salvation eclipsed the demands for enlightenment. The intellectuals "were engulfed and 'conquered' by the collective objective of national salvation" (L. Lee, "Modernity and Its Discontents" 173) From the ideal subjectivities that Yan Fu, Mao Zedong and Guo Moruo advocated, one can see that revolutionary nihilism prevailed. The new subjectivity lacks a definite contour, and it contains certain unrepresentable content, which is normally regarded as a threat to the formation of the subject.

One important notion that is correlated with nihilism – the unconscious – was introduced to China around 1920 by the first Chinese psychologist, Wang Jingxi (1893-1968). Although the discovery of the unconscious was a dramatic challenge to the

rational model of enlightenment, many modern Chinese writers, such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu, Zhou Zuoren, and Shi Zhecun, were fascinated by the mysterious notion of the unconscious. On the one hand, Chinese writers' interest in the unconscious was subordinate to their goal to reform current ideologies and moral standards (N. Wang, "Freudianism" 13); on the other hand, the psychological affinity with the unconscious reveals the secret subjective constitution of modern Chinese individuals – the nihilistic presence in the formation of the subject.

Woman and *Nihil*

For the intellectuals of the New Culture Movement, the problem was how to translate revolutionary nihilism, as a founding principle of Chinese modernity, into the Chinese context without doing much damage to the equally important mission of enlightenment. I argue that the assimilation and institutionalization of the *nihil* is closely associated with the creation and representation of the trope of woman, in the same period. The trope of woman was invented based on the imported Western knowledge on biological sex and the Western conceptualization of woman. Chinese intellectuals intentionally imported this knowledge and these concepts to construct the trope of the female gender, a gender which embodies double otherness in itself: she is the *other* of traditional woman, as well as the *other* of modern men. Through their imagination and representation of woman as the embodiment of the amoral, temporal, and self-shattering nihilistic power, the male subjects also transform themselves: the subject of

representation dissolves in the process of representation and absorbs the radical otherness that it represents. The modern subjectification, therefore, is contingent upon the representation of woman and the *nihil*.

As Rita Felski asserts, the account of modernity typically achieves some kind of formal coherence by “dramatizing and personifying historical processes” through employing gender symbols and metaphors (1). The gendered symbols and metaphors of masculinity and femininity pervading the narrative of modernity are not just part and parcel of historical knowledge, but also “the philosophical assumptions underlying our interpretations of the nature and meaning of social processes” (1). Based on similar reasons, “the unique alchemy of gender and modernity in early twentieth-century China” (Feng 5) deserves more attention. In fact, the modern Chinese revolution can be comprehended as a gender revolution: through the vicissitudes of gendered discourse and gendered representations, we can achieve a deeper understanding not only of modernity as a re-structuration of gender, but also of how this gender revolution reveals the fundamental re-structuration of subjectivity in the modern period.

In the traditional period, Chinese woman was regarded either as having no agency/will under the subjugation of the patriarchal system, or as having a form of spurious agency which nonetheless reflected the demands and values of the patriarchal system (e.g., good mother, virtuous wife). The cultural trope of woman in the traditional period was contained in an encompassing Confucian framework.

Around the mid 1910s, the woman’s issue emerged at the center of heated cultural

debates. Prevalent scholarship all maintains that the woman's issue gained unprecedented attention because the New Culture reformers realized that it was impossible to liberate a nation when half of the nation's citizens – women – were not liberated. Thus, they set about to liberate women, as an endeavor of national survival and nation-building. Under the names of “the mother of the nation” and “female citizens,” Chinese women gained supreme power and a responsibility for the nation-state (Liu & Tang 11). Therefore, Tani Barlow points out that the term for woman in modern China – *nü* – was imbued with “nationalist universality in a masculinist discourse” (“Theorizing Woman” 265) Barlow has demonstrated that the very term *nü* evolved as a tool for the construction and transformation of a gendered, male-dominated nation-state. However, she has not elucidated the dynamic relation between this trope of woman (*nü*) and the very masculinist discourse that promoted its representation: while she shows the transformative power of the trope of woman in the nationalist project, she thinks that the trope of woman, and the transformative power it possessed, are always and already contained in a “larger, masculinist frame” of discourse (“Theorizing Woman” 265). According to this configuration, which nonetheless resembles the traditional model of woman and the patriarchal system, the trope of woman only represented what already existed in the masculine discourse; it still had no agency of its own.

Barlow's configuration of the trope of woman neither addresses the ambivalence and fissures in the masculine discourse nor does it answer these questions: is the transformative power embodied in the trope of woman also applicable to the masculine

discourse which was responsible for its emergence? Is the transformative power a new form of power source to the masculine discourse, or is it an inherent power to the masculine discourse? Is the containment of the trope of woman able to fundamentally alter the masculine discourse by bringing in a radical otherness?

The masculine discourse appropriated female psychology and sexuality in the representations of modernity precisely because the female psychic and sexual implications were perceived as radically different from those embodied in the masculine discourse. In other words, in the modern period, Chinese woman had gained a different modality, an excess, which exceeded masculine supervision. In the fin-de-siècle Western world, femininity was often associated with nature and the primal forces of the unconscious, which represented the dangers and promises of the modern age (Felski, 4). In the early twentieth century, Chinese New Culture iconoclasts used the imported knowledge of biological sex and conceptualizations of the female gender to construct the trope of woman, a trope that, for them, represents an unknown agency (the unconscious) and an unknown identity (modern subject). As a radical other both to the traditional Chinese woman and to Chinese man, the trope of woman actually referred to an imaginary agency prior to its gendered, cultural and social constructions. It represented what was unrepresentable, within the accustomed language system of Confucianism, in which the masculine discourse was both an acquiescent beneficiary and an active contributor. The trope of woman in modern China thus was simultaneously gendered (as it was constructed against men) and ungendered (as it seemed to precede the gendered

distinctions). Being such an object of unspeakable nature, woman in modern China became a living embodiment of the specter of *nihil*.

The New Culture reformers not only produced an unprecedented number of literary representations of the new woman, but also manifested “a particularly restless and troubled tone in those representations” (Feng 4). Mao Dun (1896-1981), for example, was known for his representation of female characters in his literary works. In Mao Dun’s trilogy *Eclipse* (*shi*, 1927-28) and novel *Rainbow* (*hong*, 1929), the writer portrayed several female revolutionaries – Zhang Jing, Sun Wuyang, Zhang Qiuliu, Mei Xingsu – as the embodiment of the disillusionment of the Chinese revolutions. Mao Dun employed the female characters to record the male reformers’ pervasive feeling of despair and pessimism. The characters in his stories cannot escape the tragedy of life; they either degenerate into self-pity or take refuge in sensuality; paralyzed by their own individual consciousness, they are unable to act. On the one hand, those female revolutionaries represent passion and radicalism of revolution; on the other hand, they are the representation of the disintegration of such the passion and radicalism, through which the author saw “nothing but dissolution and death” (Průšek 265).

However, as Jaroslav Průšek observes, as a realist writer, Mao Dun was preoccupied with “topical reality” and wanted to record “immediate experience,” in its present tense, “at once and directly” (121-122). As a result, Mao Dun withheld his private emotions and subjective experiences to achieve a strictly objective representation of reality in his writing. His literary works are permeated with a rational authorial voice, but

they lack a kind of self-reflection from the ground level of subjectivity. As a writer who was obsessed with objectivity, Mao Dun did not go further to search for what is beyond the image of woman and disillusionment in his encompassing representation.

While Mao Dun's writing offers a typical case of the representation of woman and the *nihil* from the external point of view, the several writers I work on in this dissertation shared a different authorial point of view. They assumed an authorial voice which was constantly transforming, shifting, and intermingling with the *other*. Their writings thus challenged the notion of a unified self or a pre-determined gender identity. The disillusionment they experienced and exhibited in their literary works, I argue, is both the effect and the cause of the crisis of the individual self and identity. The representation of woman, therefore, in a way acts out, rather than displays, the authorial subjectivity. As the subject of representation, the authorial subject is filled with fractures, ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions, because it is not separated from the object of representation – woman qua the *nihil*. As the subject endeavors to approach the object through representation, he is disillusioned by the limit of his power of representation and thrilled by the excessive power that he gains bit by bit through such representation. This secret mechanism of self-empowerment is based on the consumption of the other by the subject of representation. Woman as the embodiment of the nihilistic power thus helps the male intellectual to complete the self-banishment from his habitual subjective position, precisely by incorporating the nihilistic power into his self – a process we recognize today as the modernization of the self.

However, this does not mean that the representation of woman has a teleology from the start. To say this is to fall into the trap of masculine control again. In fact, for the subject of representation, the *nihil* evokes not only an epistemological terror, but also an ontological one. The experience of *nihil* induces a self-shattering trauma which no one would consciously choose to confront. The figure of woman is not merely a vehicle for the transference of masculine despair and disillusionment, it represents a tremendous unconscious power which is beyond the realm of intelligence. No one can purposely claim access to this power; the power only appears when one's self is in crisis – the very power *is* the crisis.

The Shadow Subject of Chinese Modernity

In this sense, in modern China, woman was taken up not only as a projection of the subject of representation, but also as the projection of the non-subject, of what is intuited as hazardous to the subject.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung used the term “shadow” to refer to the unconscious ego of the individual. According to Jung, to own one's shadow is a painful and potentially terrifying experience (A. Stevens 16). Normally, the individual will deny the existence of his shadow and project it onto others without awareness. However, Jung believed that although the shadow is an abyss of darkness in the individual, it is also the reservoir of creativity. Jung asserts that the process of individuation is a psychological process of integrating the conscious with the unconscious while still maintaining

conscious autonomy: “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (265) Jung’s statement reveals the paradoxical constitution of modern subjectivity: to become modern is simultaneously to be anti-modern – to incorporate the contents that resist any temporal definition.

The May Fourth Chinese intellectuals acclaimed “the discovery of the individual,” yet this movement of enlightenment and individuation also brought about a “painful and potentially terrifying experience” for the individual. The May Fourth reformers regarded rationality and knowledge as their tenets and cherished the ideal of an enlightened individual as the new national subject. However, their ideal could not be accomplished without effectively negating and subverting the very tenets underlying it. As Ching-Kiu Stephen Chan points out, the process of the formation of the subject in modern China must be realized as a kind of “misrecognition” (“Split China” 70). The subject must be able to psychologically convert negation into affirmation, nothingness into fullness, and meaningless into meaningful. This formation of the subject thus connects the two worlds: the symbolic one and the real one. The very subjective agency, in fact, lies in the radical imagination it embodies.

According to the Greek-born French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, the radical imagination “intervenes between the real and the symbolic as a potentially inexhaustible source of new meanings.” The radical imagination operates as a stream of representations; it “consists in a largely self-generated stream of unconscious representations of images which are ‘not subject to determinacy’, that is, not subject to

time and contradiction” (274). These representations can be injected and incorporated into new historical innovations, and form “new figures of the thinkable” (d'Entrèves & Benhabib, 175-176). In this way, the historical process can be interpreted as translating the emerging irrecoverable otherness into the socially recognized, named, and instituted discourse.

The trope of woman, as the embodiment of the *nihil*, reveals the activity of radical imagination in the narrative works of these Chinese writers. According to psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, the imaginary activity of fantasy is not an activity of an already formed and stable subject, but rather the *constitutive and contingent* staging of the subject in the unconscious:

In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it (hence, the danger, in treatment of interpretations that claim to do so). As a result, the subject, though always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question (17).

Therefore, if we consider the literary tropes and characters as the representations of the radical imagination, the act of narrating is not merely a demonstration of the subject's power – it actually is a performative act constituting the very subject. The narrative subject, in the traditional sense, should thus be replaced with the *subject-as-narrative*.

The subject-as-narrative always has a voice of suffering, because it does not possess the knowledge of either the object of its representation or himself. Bewildered and disempowered, it gropes for the impossible form of representation, at the risk of self-

destruction. The subject-as-narrative can never become a subject in the daylight; it remains in the shadow, half-seen, distant.

I regard the subject-as-narrative as the very agency which embodies the socio-historical unconscious, and whose compulsive repetition of the radical imagination connects the real with the symbolic. This narrative subject itself is drastically different from the traditional narrative subject, including those in Mao Dun's literary works, whose narrative act is ruled by a consistent conscious teleology.

The subject-as-narrative abounded in the Chinese literature in the 1920s and early 1930s, when the individual selfhood (*ziwo*) became the preoccupation of the intellectual reformers. Undoubtedly, writing about the self both discovers and creates the self. Although the Chinese attempted to construct the model of the self based on the Western masculine ideal, the very power of construction – and probably deconstruction, inasmuch as the residue of tradition was so powerful – drove the self to the opposite pole of its ideal. It is at this point that the ghost image of woman emerged at the center of the very masculine subject. Leo Ou-fan Lee notes, that in writing about the self, modern Chinese intellectuals seem unable to gain a sense of inner tranquility and strength and are deprived of spiritual sustenance. He discerns that in the May Fourth self, there was “a spiritual void under the veneer of radical antitraditionalism” (*Lu Xun and His Legacy*, 294). The only thing seems to be active is the organic, amoral, atemporal, and self-shattering force of the *nihil*, which finds its way to forming a viable subject via a detour of the trope of woman.

The literature under discussion is the narrative and critical literary output of a group of Chinese writers in the two decades after the May Fourth Movement. These writers include both man and woman, and the works selected can be either canonical or marginal. The chapters follow a thematic, instead of a chronological, organization. While each chapter focuses on one or two major writers, I intend to capture the elusive narrative-as-subject both through an in-depth reading of their narrative and a reexamination of the dialogue between the socio-historical discourse and this narrative subject. In this way, I avoid reinstating modern Chinese literary and cultural history in the traditional linear, monolithic chronology.

Chapter One focuses on the “Chinese Nietzsche,” Lu Xun. Ever since the mid 1920s, Lu Xun (1881-1936) had been grappling with nihilism as nothingness or emptiness in his literary writings. Lu Xun’s “Regrets for the Past” (*shangshi*, 1924), a story of the sublimation, derogation and eventually disappearance of a female body, can be read as an allegory of the aesthetic journey taken by a revolutionary modern individual. The woman Zijun embodies the unexorcisable specter of despair and nothingness that frequently visits the writer; her metamorphosis demonstrates the limits of representation and the writer’s traumatic encounter with the *nihil* in his own subjectivity. Lu Xun’s disillusionment about revolution is concomitant with his heightened combative revolutionary spirit.

Chapter Two examines the early writings of the two more prominent members of the Creation Society, Yu Dafu (1896-1945) and Zhang Ziping (1893-1959). Their writings reveal the narrative subject’s preoccupation with the imperative of constructing a national

identity. Since the national identity has to serve for the empowerment of the individual, Yu Dafu fails to build a powerful masculine national identity via the sympathetic identification with the nation. Zhang Ziping has bypassed the mandate of the masculine subject by creating a feminine national subject whose relation to the nation is purely affective. I argue that the construction of national identity has to make a place for the imperative of individual empowerment, because, ironically, only the empowered individual is looked upon as the ideal national subject. Modern Chinese nationalism, therefore, is ultimately a form of nihilism.

Chapter Three discusses the fiction of two Neo-Sensationalist (*xin ganjue pai*) writers. In 1930s Shanghai, the fiction of Liu Na'ou (1905-1940) and Mu Shiyong (1912-1940) presents the urban-based modern woman, who is pleasure-seeking, promiscuous, and narcissistic, and whose representation cannot be contained in any existing discourse. I argue that Liu and Mu's fiction both adopts and subverts the prevalent views on the New Woman by displacing the narrating masculine voice from the habitual subjective position. The sexual bodies of the modern woman thus become the "raw materials" with which the masculine subject sets out to forge a modern subjectivity. The cosmopolitan subject in Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong's fiction is a nihilistic subject who has unburdened itself of the institutionalized value and meaning, and thus is capable of embracing any new changes.

In the last chapter, I discuss Bai Wei (1894-1987) as a representative of Chinese woman writers who manage to change their status quo by embracing the traumatic *nihil*, which deprives woman of her truth. Bai Wei's personal experience as a woman victimized

by the patriarchal society composes her “primal story,” which is repeatedly enacted in her literary works. However, the recounting of her personal history does not aim at the reorganization of her self or the creation of meaning; rather, it serves as a kind of “prenarrative,” which displays the “logical properties of the drive” (Kristeva, *Melanie Klein* 144). In Bai Wei’s writings, the experience of a fragmented feminine self is directly translated into a tremendous power that transcends the self, and that subsequently affirms and empowers the self, albeit in its absence.

Chapter One: Traversing the Sublime

The Metamorphosis of the Female Body in Lu Xun's "Regrets for the Past"

Despair is like hope, in that both are vanity. 绝望之于虚妄，正与希望相同。

— Lu Xun, quoting a verse of Sándor Petőfi, *QJ* 1, 483

Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh.

— Lacan, *Seminar*, v7, 322

"The Thing of Nothingness"

In "Such a Fighter" (*zheyang de zhanshi*, 1925), one of the prose-poems in *Wild Grass* (*yecao*), Lu Xun portrayed a lonely fighter in a highly sympathetic tone:

He walked into the array of nothingness where all that met him nodded to him in the same manner. He knew the nodding was the enemy's weapon, a weapon that kills without showing blood. Many fighters had perished here... Eventually he aged and died in the array of nothingness. Eventually he was not a fighter, and the thing of nothingness was the victor (525-526).

The twenty-four prose-poems (including the later-written "Epigraph") collected in *Wild Grass*, which proved to be the most oblique and symbolic pieces in Lu Xun's oeuvre, were mainly written between September 1924 and April 1926.⁴ This was a period when the May Fourth reformists' enthusiasm had started to cool down, and cruel reality

⁴ "Epigraph" was written in 1927.

recaptured the spotlight in the throes of the social tumults. Lu Xun, unexceptionally, experienced “a rather trying period of his life” (L. Lee, *Voices* 89) During the high tide of the May Fourth movement, Lu Xun had composed a series of combative literary works,⁵ like spears and daggers thrown at his adversaries: Confucianism, superstition, familial despotism, and so on. However, by the time Lu Xun wrote *Wild Grass*, his combative spirit had begun to wear thin; he had started to reflect on the ongoing Chinese revolution and his own role in this historical movement.

According to Lu Xun himself, he wrote “Such a Fighter” in response to the bleak reality that “some literati and scholars were helping the warlords.”⁶ The story of the fighter is rather simple: the quixotic fighter wages a desperate battle against the array of nothingness, only to be defeated by the absence of his enemy. Lu Xun’s cryptic notion of “the array of nothingness” (*wuwu zhizhen*) has spawned great hermeneutic interest among scholars. Orthodox Chinese scholars tend to use a socio-political approach to decipher the meaning of Lu Xun’s literary image, more often regarding “the array of nothingness” as a reference to the social, political, and historical reality that exasperated Lu Xun and forced him into the position of a lonely fighter, who fights against the whole society in despair. As Qian Liqun points out: “Certainly one is surrounded by adversary forces, yet one cannot find a specific enemy...One runs into various ‘walls’ all the time, yet those walls

5 From 1918 to 1924, Lu Xun wrote more than twenty stories, including “A Madman’s Diary” (*kuangren riji*, 1918), “Kong Yiji” (*kongyiji*, 1919), “Medicine” (*yao*, 1919), “The Story of Hair” (*toufa de gushi*, 1920), “Hometown” (*guxiang*, 1921), “The True of Ah Q” (*A Q zhengzhuan*, 1921), and “New Year Sacrifice” (*zhufu*, 1924).

⁶ The statement is from the preface to the English translation of *Wild Grass*. Lu Xun wrote the preface for the in November, 1931.

are ‘formless’ – this is ‘the array of nothingness’” (123).

Western-trained Chinese scholars, on the other hand, find that the prose-poems in *Wild Grass* are highly personalized, emotional, and philosophical. Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests reading *Wild Grass* as Lu Xun’s “surrealistic world of the subconscious” (*Voices* 89). Refuting the orthodox approach, which arbitrarily draws a connection between personal expression and socio-political reality, Lee argues that “the ‘muddled’ phrasing serves to bring out not merely his [Lu Xun’s] dissatisfaction with the social environment but also, more importantly, certain configurations of his inner tensions which certainly go beyond the realistic confines of politics and political ideology” (*Voices* 91). Lee’s contention has been echoed by Wang Xiaoming, a Chinese scholar, who reads *Wild Grass* as a reflection of Lu Xun’s “deep psychology” which embodies his entire system of philosophy – as “the stakes that support his public social stance, and as “the nursery for his unique thoughts and sentiments” (X. Wang 112). The significance of emphasizing the “deep psychology” lies in the understanding that the “deep” subconscious is not a direct translation from the socio-political reality, nor is it dissociated from reality.

In this chapter I will resume the endeavor to decipher the meaning of “the array of nothingness” in Lu Xun’s philosophical system. I take the array of nothingness as an aesthetic image that occupies a prominent position in Lu Xun’s aesthetic map, a map that reveals much of the writer’s unconscious. Furthermore, I will trace the occurrences of the nothingness and its related aesthetic representations in Lu Xun’s narrative work, with the assistance of psychoanalytical theory, in order to reveal the fundamental conundrum of

the modern writer.

The Sublime and Nothingness

The haunting image of nothingness appears at least fifteen times in *Wild Grass*, excluding the affiliated literary images such as death, night, and loneliness. Moreover, those images of nothingness tend to appear consistently in a fixed pattern – that is, they tend to occur in the company of another literary image, which is the image of the sublime.

In *The Sublime Figure of History*, Ban Wang sets out to reveal the closely intertwined relationship between politics in modern China and the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Incorporating the definition of the Kantian sublime, as an awe-striking aesthetic quality, into the domains of culture, politics, and everyday life, Wang proposes to see the sublime as:

...a process of cultural edification and elevation, a vigorous striving for the lofty heights of personal and political perfection, a psychic defense mechanism designed to ward off dangers and threats, a constantly renewable heroic figure for popular emulations; a grand image of the body, or a crushing and uplifting experience ranging from the lowest depression to the highest rapture (2).

The lonely fighter in “Such a Fighter,” with his quixotic but heroic battle, invokes the sublime figure; surrounding him is the vast array of nothingness. In “Hope” (*xiwang*, 1924), another prose-poem collected in *Wild Grass*, Lu Xun wrote: “My heart used to be filled with sanguinary singing, blood and iron, flame and poison, renewal and revenge...” (*QJ* 1, 481) However, all of those sublime images are defeated by the array of

nothingness, as they “disappear all of a sudden into emptiness.” Although the writer tried to fill emptiness with “despairing and self-deceiving hope,” he is nonetheless haunted by the nothingness behind hope: “Hope, hope, I use the shield of hope to guard against the invasion of the dark night in emptiness, though behind the shield there is the dark night in emptiness...” (*QJ* 1, 481)

If the sublime can be seen as an uplifting experience inspiring one to pursue personal or political perfection, then the notion of hope, with its inspiring keynote, can be regarded as a sublime figure. In Lu Xun’s writings, it is the juxtaposition of hope and emptiness that constitutes the writer’s imaginary vision of reality. A suspension of hope normally leads one to despair. For Lu Xun, however, the dilemma is not to choose between hope and despair, but to confront both of them. In his personal model of defense mechanism, hope becomes the last screen to ward off the invasion of emptiness, even though the fragile layer of the screen can barely disguise the latter’s immanent existence.

The very image of “wild grass,” which is the title of Lu Xun’s prose-poem collection, combines images of the sublime and nothingness. Lu Xun wrote in the “Epigraph” (*tici*, 1927) of *Wild Grass* that the wild grass would eventually be burned down by an underground fire: “The underground fire marches and rushes below; if the lava sprouts out, it will burn down all of the wild grass and trees; then there is nothing to be decomposed” (*QJ* 1, 464). Rooted in the surface of the earth and absorbing the “blood and carrion” of the dead, the growth of wild grass is itself a sublime struggle against all the odds of nature. The wild grass covers up the things underneath; however, the surging

of underground fire and lava would destroy all the coverings on the ground. The underground fire and lava are sublime images as well, and their burning down of the wild grass probably represents one of the most sublime moments the writer can ever envision. What is appalling in this prose-poem, however, is the rapid transformation from the sublime to nothingness, which highlights the self-destructive quality of the sublime forces.

Lu Xun had observed that the spectral image of nothingness nefariously haunted the grand discourse of revolution and modernization in China. In 1932 he wrote in the preface of his *Self-selected Collection* (*zixuan ji*, 1932): “I’d seen the [1911] Xinhai Revolution, I’d seen the [1923] Second Revolution, I’d seen Yuan Shikai becoming the Emperor, and I’d seen Zhang Xun restoring the monarchy. I kept watching until doubts grew, and then I was disappointed and dispirited.”⁷ In the same preface he quoted again a line of the famous Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi: “Despair is like hope, in that both are vanity.”⁸ The Hungarian poet and the Chinese writer resonated with each other as they both saw a very tenuous, if not false, distinction between the two seemingly contrasting images: the sublime (hope) and nothingness (despair, vanity).

Sublimation was an imperative during the revolutionary period in modern China. As Ban Wang asserts, in the grand narrative of modern Chinese history, “the spectator has been induced to endow the dominant actor with sublime qualities.”⁹ Lu Xun was one of

⁷ See the preface to *Self-selected Writing*, written in 1932. In *QJ* 5, p.177.

⁸ “绝望之为虚妄，正与希望相同。” Lu Xun quoted the same line in “Hope” (*xiwang*, 1925) in *Wild Grass*. *QJ* 1, 483.

⁹ Wang, 1997, p.1. Ban Wang’s *The Sublime Figure of History* is a monograph on the dynamics of a aesthetics and politics in modern Chinese history. In his book Wang devoted one chapter “Writing China: The Imaginary Body and Allegorical Wilderness” (pp.17-54) to Lu Xun, in which he offers the results of

the prominent actors who pursued the sublime figure vigorously, and he has been endowed with sublime qualities. He devoted his entire life to the process of cultural elevation and nation-building, as well as personal perfection. As the pioneer of modern Chinese literature, the heroic figure of Lu Xun as an uncompromising fighter keeps inspiring and empowering people posthumously.¹⁰ However, the grim image of despair and nothingness became an unexorcisable specter in Lu Xun's writings ever since the mid-1920s; it circumvented, menaced, and encroached upon the sublime figure which was ardently cherished by the May Fourth reformers and iconoclasts.

In a letter to Xu Guangping, his student lover, in 1925, Lu Xun confessed that sometimes he felt that “only the darkness and nothingness is ‘substantial’” (Lu, *Shujian* 7). Wang Xiaoming comments on the above statement that Lu Xun's feeling of nothingness differs from the pessimism of a revolutionary: “[The feeling of nothingness] contains the pessimism in fighting the darkness, but at the same time it questions if there are other values beyond the darkness. If in the world only the darkness is ‘substantial,’ then the darkness would cease to be dark” (X. Wang 83). The substantial nothingness, and the elusive sublime, together raised a question more complicated than simply pointing at Lu Xun's often castigated skepticism about the Chinese revolution. The important question is to what extent, and in which way, the dialectic of the sublime and nothingness can be sufficiently addressed, deciphered, and translated into the discourse of

detailed research on the aesthetics of the sublime in Lu Xun's writings.

¹⁰ Lu Xun has been posthumously accorded the status of national hero and thus has become a sublime figure in the CCP's propaganda.

Chinese revolution in the early twentieth century.

However, it is impossible to answer this question without encountering the unfathomable obstacle faced by both Lu Xun and us – the lack of means of representation. In “Such a Fighter,” the lonely fighter loses the battle to “the array of nothingness.” Ironically, nothingness ends up being the victor precisely because it is not really *nothing*. Nothingness, as Lu Xun perceived, contains something “substantial;” yet it is impossible to represent the substance in nothingness due to the inherent lack of symbolic language. The failure of the fighter, therefore, consists in his inability to make visible the invisible enemies – that is, his inability to represent what is for him unrepresentable. The fighter’s aporia is also the writer’s, as both of them face an object that crouches outside “the intelligible range of meaning” (B. Wang 87).

Slavoj Žižek’s critique of the Kantian sublime, which combines Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis, will help to shed light on the theoretical conundrum behind the dialectic of the sublime and nothingness. I will use the Žižekian critique of the sublime as a hermeneutic tool to read Lu Xun’s novella “Regrets for the Past” (*shangshi*, 1925) as an allegorical work which foregrounds the representation of the aesthetic of the sublime and the aesthetic of despair, whose relationship needs to be reexamined against the backdrop of the Chinese revolution.

Revisiting the Kantian Sublime

According to Kant, the sublime, like the beautiful, is an object of our feeling of

pleasure or displeasure, so a judgment about the sublime is an aesthetic judgment. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines aesthetic judgment as the purely subjective representation of an object. Aesthetic judgment, which differs sharply from logical judgments, is concerned less with the object in real existence than with the aesthetic subject's emotional or affective response to the representation of the object. As an experience that is wholly grounded in subjective responses, aesthetic judgment actually constitutes one channel through which the representation of subjectivity is possible.

The sublime, however, is an anomaly in aesthetic categories. The sublime both prolongs and problematizes the project of generating a self-subsistent, whole, and harmonious subject. While the beautiful always pleases, the sublime marks the point of the breakdown of the beautiful, in that in the case of the sublime the pleasure is indirect and negative: it presupposes a displeasure. The sublime feeling is at first a result of the subject's failure to apprehend and represent the (sublime) object. The mind then resorts to reason to respond to the overwhelming excess either of greatness or power: "the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful" (Kant 91). For Kant, the sublime reflects first and foremost the consequence of understanding's failure to represent an object which is absolutely great. It is not until the intervention of reason, which makes a determination about the inadequacy of representation, that one can finally come to terms with the sublime object. The pleasure of the sublime feeling comes from the somatic subject's realization of the totalitarian

success of reason – that it can now represent even the unrepresentable. The uplifting experience involved in the sublime, therefore, is the great rational power that the subject convenes in order to cope with the failure of the representation of the real object.

Hence, the aporia of representation that creates “the array of nothingness” is also present in the sublime experience. The Kantian sublime is a paradoxical object which offers an instance of what is unrepresentable in the very field of representation. To accentuate the triumph of reason is equally to concede that the real object, the noumenal Thing that exists only beyond the field of phenomena, is inaccessible. As a consequence, in the structural position of the Thing in the field of representation, there is only a void, a blank, an absence.

The Kantian sublime, however, remains an insufficient way to read Lu Xun. The Kantian sublime treats human beings as solely rational animals. By emphasizing the totalistic power of reason, it refuses to acknowledge the irrational elements that could cause affective changes. Therefore the Kantian sublime is unable to reveal the unconscious world that is implied in Lu Xun’s writings. Because the Kantian sublime shuns the representation of the unrepresentable, it leaves the substantial “nothing” as mere nothing; it fails to explain why the presence of nothingness itself is perplexing or powerful without reason’s involvement. In Lu Xun’s writings, however, nothingness has a life and is “substantial.” Nothingness is an object that simultaneously swallows, lures, fights, and repels him. Such a “nothingness” should not be reduced to the nothing in the field of representation.

In his essay “Not Only as Substance, but Also as Subject,” Slavoj Žižek challenges the Kantian notion of the sublime with the help of Hegelian dialectics. He argues that Kant’s presupposition that there is a positively given entity beyond phenomenal representation is untenable. Hegel’s position is that “there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality” (*Sublime* 205). The mistake of Kant is that he thinks he is still dealing with a negative presentation of the Thing, while he is already “in the midst of the Thing-in-itself” (*Sublime* 205). What appears to be the Kantian sublime, therefore, is precisely the eclipse of the real sublime object.

In this Hegelian framework that Žižek sustains, the Kantian sublime, which suggests the approach of the positive Thing in its negative representation, should be replaced with the Thing in its radical negativity - the no-thing, the lack, the void of representation, since the very void, the very blank, the very absence of the representation of the Thing is in fact the Thing, which exists in radical negativity. The real Thing can be approached only “through purely negative presentation [...] the very inadequacy of the phenomenality to the Thing is the only appropriate way to present it” (*Sublime* 205). There is no mediation between the phenomena and the Thing-in-itself which masks their gap – the very gap *is* the negative experience of the Thing. The unrepresentable Kantian sublime object is precisely the Thing-in-itself in its radical negativity, the very negativity that characterizes the subject’s experience of the Thing.

In this way, the sublime is the face-to-face encounter with, instead of a bypassing

of, the Real. Žižek asserts that the Sublime “is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing” (*Sublime* 195). Therefore, the sublime is not the object indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing, but an object which occupies the position of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity.

Žižek then uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to anatomize nothingness as an inherent component of the sublime. He points out that Nothing as the embodiment of the Thing “is not simply nothing but a determinate nothing” (*Sublime* 195). Although “nothing” is unrepresentable in the field of phenomenology, it can produce certain affective effects and series of properties. The content of nothing, Žižek asserts, is the notorious *jouissance*, enjoyment-in-sense. *Jouissance* is nothing, because it “does not exist,” but it can produce certain traumatic effects that affect the formation of symbolic order (*Sublime* 164). *Jouissance* as extreme enjoyment is the hard core of being which “simultaneously attracts and repels us” (*Sublime* 180), a certain excess or remainder which inevitably resists all signifying operation.

As enjoyment, *jouissance* cannot be simply equated with sexual desire. Desire exists within the parameters of social law; as a product of the instinctual renunciation demanded by the social contract, desire finds its origin and its limits in the social order. The characteristic of *jouissance*, on the contrary, is excess: it is an expression of drive energy. *Jouissance* exceeds the brim of social restraints; it goes beyond the border of the subject, beyond the pleasure principle, even beyond the principle of self-preservation. For

Roland Barthes, *jouissance* is what is opposed to the *plaisir*, the comfortable, ego-assuring, and legitimate pleasure nurtured by culture. *Jouissance* possesses the power that is shocking, ego-disruptive, and in conflict with the canons of culture (51-53).

If the aesthetics of the sublime is ultimately the aesthetics of *jouissance*, then it is questionable whether the sublime can be elevating without corrupting, perfecting without undermining, defending without subverting, heroizing without belittling. The traumatic effects of *jouissance* certainly offer a different aesthetic experience from that of the Kantian sublime, as the reformulated sublime is by no means self-assuring, nor does it involve an intervention of reason. What the sublime image evokes is the terrifying, traumatic and self-shattering vitality that defies any representation. The representation of the sublime, therefore, is itself a contested field.

It is in this sense that the aesthetic discourse in modern China, which almost unanimously touted the grand image of the sublime, appears to be pathological. From Wang Guowei in the early twentieth century, to Zhu Guangqian and Liang Zongdai in the 1930s, the aesthetic of the sublime in modern China retained, if not reinforced, the self-assuring tone of Kantian aesthetics. For example, Wang Guowei attempted to promote the “sublime personality” (*zhuangmei renye*) as “a cure for an emotionally depressed and morally degenerate society” (B. Wang 25); Zhu Guangqian’s aesthetic theory, in turn, favors “action, power, grandeur, and adventure” (B. Wang 118). As a discursive practice, the aesthetic of the sublime in modern China had as one of its aims to *sublimate the sublime*. Since the calls for sublimation were egged on by the revolutionary discourses of

self-strengthening and national salvation, what was touted as sublime were overwhelmingly revolutionary passion, spiritual striving or heroic sacrifice, which served as an ideal for political and individual perfection.

Lu Xun himself also contributed to the aesthetics of the sublime in modern China by writing the essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (*moluo shili shuo*),¹¹ in which he eulogized the satanic and robust power of romantic literature. May Fourth writers treated the subject of love with great enthusiasm and dignity, loading it with ideological functions. The romantic generation of May Fourth writers believed that love, as a sublimated form of the life force, could bring about an impetus for the revolution and renewal of China. “Without the nature of a hero, one cannot fight for survival; without the nature of a lover, one cannot reproduce” (D. Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor* 164)

The association of love and the vigorous life force is sustained by the Japanese critic Kuriyagawa Hakuson (1880-1923), whose book *Kumon no shōchō* (*Symbols of Mental Anguish*) was translated by Lu Xun into Chinese around the same time as the latter wrote *Wild Grass*. Kuriyagawa’s work centers on the antagonism between the inner self and external society, arguing that “mental anguish” was the inescapable product of men as social and moral beings. Lu Xun was impressed by Kuriyagawa’s use of Freudian psychology, which seeks to locate the genesis of art and literature in the eruption of inner life, the bursting out of the suppressed libidinal energy.

Once an ardent believer in the power of the sublime himself, Lu Xun’s faith in the

¹¹ “On the Power of Mara Poetry” was written in 1907 when Lu Xun was in Japan.

grand sublime figure was transient. His later works, especially those written after the heyday of the May Fourth Movement, register his reflection on the aesthetic of the sublime. I will turn to the most “romantic” literary work of Lu Xun, the only love story in his oeuvre, “Regrets for the Past,” to explore, through the lens of the Zizekian reformulation, how Lu Xun's literary works challenged and subverted the prevailing discourse on the sublime.

“Regrets for the Past”

Two months before Lu Xun wrote “Such a Fighter,”¹² he finished “Regrets for the Past,” which was collected in *Wandering* (*panghuang*, 1926), his second short story collection. “Regrets for the Past” relates the failed love story of a young couple. Zijun, the tragic female protagonist, is galvanized by Juansheng’s love as much as she is mesmerized by the modern ideas advocated by him, leading her to leave her old-fashioned family and cohabit with Juansheng. After a brief moment of ecstasy, however, Juansheng’s love wears out in the trivialities of daily life; and Zijun ceases to appear as charming and sublime as she used to be. After Juansheng tells Zijun that he no longer loves her, she leaves, and soon dies.

Narrated solely as the recollection of the first-person male narrator, “Regrets for the Past” is permeated with subjective emotions and feelings as Juansheng narrates the story in “an excessively sentimental manner” (L. Lee, *Voices* 63) Leo Lee regards

¹² “Such a Fighter” was written in December, 1925. “Regrets for the Past” was written in October, 1925.

Juansheng as a “typical May Fourth romantic intellectual” and the text as a “typical May Fourth romantic story” (*Voices* 63). But “Regrets for the Past” is also a story about the typical aesthetic representation of a typical May Fourth revolutionary. Subtly yet faithfully, the vicissitudes of the aesthetic representations register the constitution and deconstruction of modern subjectivity. Throughout the story, Juansheng undergoes drastic emotional fluctuations which revolve around two palpable literary images: the sublime and nothingness.

The most sublime moment in the fiction is attained when Zijun decides to break away from her family to live with Juansheng by claiming “I’m my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me” (*QJ* 2, 278.) It is noteworthy that Juansheng has been spontaneously playing the role of an enlightener who bombards Zijun with modern ideas and holds romantic figures up to her as models. Ironically, when Juansheng’s preaching takes effect, he himself is somehow taken aback. The words and tone of Zijun sound like deafening thunder hitting his soul. The female body looms large in front of his eyes and becomes a promising harbinger, through which Juansheng sees the “resplendent dawn” of the future (*QJ* 2, 279). At that very moment, their roles are reversed. Zijun, who now embraces the sublime ideal with her own body, transcends the conceptual ideal that Juansheng has breathed into her; she is the loftier one. In contrast, Juansheng is outshone and he loses his superiority as an enlightener. Witnessing the woman being elevated to such a sublime height is almost a traumatic experience for him. Overwhelmed by ecstasy, he is left dumbfounded.

Juansheng's traumatic experience extends to the subsequent moment in the story, when he asks for Zijun's consent to have a sexual relationship. In this moment, not knowing how to express his fervent love to the goddess before his eyes, Juansheng involuntarily does what he has learned from films: holding Zijun's hand with tears in his eyes, he kneels down before her on one knee.

These two moments are both transitory and enduring. For Juansheng, the moments install themselves as the indelible past, marking his breakdown as an enlightener, begetting his silly behaviors as a frenzied lover, and denying him access to the utopian future. No sooner does he start to live with Zijun than he develops a different feeling for her. The body which was endowed with sublime beauty rapidly transforms into an repulsive bundle of life. When Zijun diligently plays the role of the housewife, she ceases to be the attractive woman in Juansheng's eyes. Her once innocent beauty is marred by the effects of labor: "Her face was sweat-soaked all day, short hair sticking to her forehead. Her hands grew rough" (*QJ* 2, 284). He detests the way she "went on munching away quite unconcerned" (*QJ* 2, 288). Her existence now represents nothing more than what he disdains and fears. Her existence constitutes "the array of nothingness," in which Juansheng loses the spirit of a fighter without being able to identify any enemy. He feels he is like a bird whose wings are paralyzed; he realizes that "the happiness and peace" can freeze him (*QJ* 2, 283).

It is in this phase that Juansheng traverses the sublime and suffers great disillusionment. Juansheng believes that the notion of love, as well as the notion of new

youth or modern subjectivity, is performative: “love must be constantly renewed, cultivated, created” (*QJ* 2, 283), whereas the traumatic encounter with the sublime has cast him into a world where temporal progress has been suspended. In this world, *nothing* really happens and he is repeatedly forced to live out *the* moment in which he knelt down on one knee, in tears.

The moment is no longer sublime; it now represents the fatuous and obscene nature of love. The meaning of Juansheng’s response at that moment is ambiguous; it can be seen both as a submission to the sublime ideal and as an imploration for sexual pleasure. For Juansheng, the moment of courtship proves to be a mistake, one which threatens to unsettle his subjectivity and destroy his ideals. In order to undo, or at least control the damage, he has to get rid of Zijun, who appears to be the material reminder, and remnant, of his own mistake. But even the physical death of Zijun cannot give him sufficient relief; at the end of the story, Juansheng is mourning Zijun’s death in deep regret and trying in vain to set out on the imaginary new avenues which are, in fact, no different from nothingness.

Reading “Regrets for the Past” as a text of aesthetic representation anchors it to the quest for modern Chinese subjectivity. What, if anything, constitutes the quintessential core of the revolutionary subjectivity in the turbulent era? Is there a defining moment or characteristic that qualifies either Juansheng or Zijun as a modern youth?

The dilemma of Juansheng and Zijun can be understood through Xiaobing Tang’s

idea of the heroic and the quotidian as two contradictory modes that characterize modern Chinese literature. Tang points out that the dialectical movement between the heroic passion for a utopian future and the quotidian longing to reclaim a fulfilling everyday life constitute an inescapable condition of Chinese modernity (4-5). Tang uses the dialectics of the heroic and the quotidian to launch a critique of the Chinese modern in its various representations. “Regrets for the Past” demonstrates the dialectics of the heroic and the quotidian through Juansheng’s preference for individual transcendence over the trivialities of everyday life. Xiaobing Tang argues that the typical dilemma faced by the modern subject is precisely contradictory impulses and impossible choices. So the heroic impulse and the quotidian impulse are both inherent in modern subjectivity, which is itself incoherent.

The dialectic of the heroic and the quotidian, which constructs two contrasting images – one of political and cultural transcendence, the other of the harmonious flow of life that runs deep – is not symmetrical to the dialectic of the sublime and nothingness. In fact, both the sublime and nothingness are experienced solely in terms of the heroic impulse, and together they represent the entirety of the heroic impulse. On the other hand, the quotidian, represented by stable everyday life, falls into the domain of beauty. If the dialectics of the heroic and the quotidian offers a survey of the Chinese modern in its secular representation, the dialectics of the sublime and nothingness anatomizes the heroic impulse that fuels the revolutionary discourse in modern China. Therefore, it is important to realize the fundamental difference between the two dialectics. In contrast to

the revolutionary heroic, the quotidian is reactionary in nature; yet the sublime and nothingness reveal the contradiction and complexity inherent in the revolutionary discourse of modern China. They are part and parcel of the revolutionary discourse and should be treated with special attention.

If “Regrets for the Past” is to be read as an aesthetic representation of the sublime and nothingness, then the proper question to ask is not whether Juansheng is revolutionary enough, but how his revolutionary subjectivity is constituted through aesthetic representations. Rather than treating the story as a narrative which allegorizes the failure of modernity (L. Liu 107), I regard the narrative of “Regrets for the Past” as a truthful representation through which the modern subjectivity can be grasped in its entirety.

The Metamorphosis of Zijun’s Body

“Regrets for the Past” therefore registers the metamorphosis of Zijun’s body in aesthetic terms. The story begins by representing the body as a pleasing object of feminine beauty; the body is enlightened and elevated as a sublime object, and then falls from that height and becomes a vulgar object. The drastic transformation of the body, or, more precisely, the drastic change in Juansheng’s aesthetic experience of it, tallies with Žižek’s description of the sublime object:

The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar

object – it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all (*Sublime* 170).

What Žižek means is that because the sublime object is the embodiment of the pure negativity or emptiness, the aesthetic experience of the sublime is nothing but a mirage created by the subject. Out of the desire to assure the self, a desire associated with the ego's libido, the aesthetic subject is propelled to the Kantian misrecognition – that is, the subject insists on *perceiving* a positive sublime object, one existing beyond his range of perception, when there is really *nothing* at all in the field of phenomena. Out of this compulsive desire to represent the positive thing through negative means, the subject unavoidably misrecognizes the nothing as something, the meaningless as meaningful, and the ordinary as exceptional. In fact, the so-called sublime object has no intrinsic sublime quality, nor does it exist in an extra-phenomenal field. The sublime object, as Žižek argues, using Lacan's definition of the sublime object, is “an object raised to the level of the (impossible-real) Thing” (*Sublime* 202-203).

In “Regrets for the Past,” the metamorphosis of Zijun's body starts when Juansheng is *too close to* her, his sublime object, to a point where the misrecognition can no longer hold. It is a misrecognition that he has been brewing, both consciously and unconsciously, from the outset. For Zijun and Juansheng, the intimate exchange of young lovers is completely replaced by the monologues of the man trying to infuse some sublime ideas into the woman's mind. As a silent listener, Zijun is not given a chance to

state to what extent she believes in these ideas, yet she does blush upon seeing Shelley's portrait, which in Juansheng's understanding only shows the residue of the bondage of old ideas. Juansheng preemptively believes that Zijun is being transformed by his ideas in the direction he expected, while he has no solid evidence whether those ideas have been successfully delivered. Next, when Zijun comes out with the proclamation "I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me" (*QJ* 2, 278), Juansheng immediately puts this in the context of woman's revolution and the future of modern China. He exaggerates the meaning of Zijun's proclamation and apparently misinterprets her intention. His mostly self-induced ecstasy, therefore, forms a poignant contrast to the clear, firm and grave tone of Zijun. Juansheng compulsively misreads Zijun's words and action as a modern woman's manifesto, a revolutionary gesture guided by reason, turning a blind eye to the truth that is right in front of him – that Zijun breaks away from her family out of her love for him.

Juansheng's misrecognition, or, in a way, self-deception, starts to degenerate when he is forced to face the truth: that he and Zijun are first of all lovers, and the passion of love is the actual groundwork for their previous "revolutionary" exchange. Without the evocation of love, it is less likely that Zijun would have come to listen to Juansheng's monologues, nor would she have had the courage to carry out the "revolutionary" ideas. Because of Juansheng's misrecognition, he is bewildered and suffers a sudden loss of language as well as behavior codes, when their relationship enters the stage of sex:

I cannot remember clearly how I expressed my true and fiery love to her at that time. Not only now, but soon after it happened, the memory became blurry. When I tried to recall it at night, there were only fragments. Even the fragments dissipated like a dream without a trace after a couple of months of living together. I only remember that I spent a dozen days studying carefully the manner of confession and the order of phrases, and the solution to handling a possible rejection. But at the moment they all seemed useless. In bewilderment, I could not help myself adopting the means that I learned from a film. I feel ashamed whenever I think of it. However, it is the only thing that forever hangs in my memory, like a solitary lamp in a dark room, illuminating me up - I was clasping her hand in tears, and knelt down on one knee... (*QJ 2*, 279)

In contrast to the preceding moment of the sublime, this later moment is a moment of shame in Juansheng's experience. When Juansheng is so close to Zijun, the newly-crowned sublime object, he is not only undermined in his linguistic ability, but also suffers a loss of memory, and eventually, a loss of selfhood. He cannot remember, cannot speak or act as he plans, and he ends up borrowing the gesture in a film to communicate with his woman. The loss of selfhood is intensified in the ensuing days. When Juansheng is able to read through Zijun's body and mind, he finds himself on the verge of his accustomed symbolic universe. Juansheng is forced to attest to the scandal of the sublime and to realize that "the humanist dream of fullness is itself a libidinal fantasy" (Eagleton, 263). The closer he gets to knowing Zijun, the more disoriented he becomes. The crisis of a shrinking symbolic world is reflected in the difficulty in finding a lodging place, the jeers and scorns from the passersby, and the loss of his job. When Juansheng links his life to that of Zijun, he has effectively trespassed the threshold that is necessary to maintain the misrecognition of the positive existence of a sublime object. What awaits him is a void, a hole, a thing of nothingness. Painfully he comes to this

realization: “all the ideas and the intelligent, fearless phrases she has learned are empty in the end” (*QJ* 2, 293). As the sublime quality fades, Zijun’s body resumes an ordinary, perhaps even takes on a more vulgar, modality. The metamorphosis of her body precisely verifies the sublime object seen from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, as Žižek elaborates.

One needs to ask whether Lu Xun deliberately separated the two moments, the moment of the sublime and the moment of shame, in “Regrets for the Past.” The dozen days in between the two moments show a disturbing deferral of real action; yet the intensive affective response continues. In the Žižekian reformulation of the aesthetics of the sublime, they would effectively be *one* moment that has been misrepresented as two moments in tandem. The first moment represents the Kantian misrecognition, whereas the second represents the real Thing. Juansheng, like Kant, is unaware that he is already “in the midst of the Thing-in-itself” when he is awestruck by the sublime beauty of Zijun.

The sublime object chisels a hole in Juansheng’s “meaningful” life, through which he only sees the thing of nothingness. Nothingness is what his vision compulsively allows him to see. Apparently, his symbolic universe is grounded in empowering reason and a progressive trajectory that he unfalteringly believes in, which is incompatible with the truth of nothingness, *jouissance*.

Jouissance as enjoyment is the atemporal, amoral and self-shattering flow of the organic life force, which shakes up ideological constructions and unsettles the formation of the subject. After the moment of the sublime, Zijun’s body eventually becomes the

materialization of the impossible *jouissance*. According to Juansheng, ever since they begin to live together Zijun had become “more lively,” yet she has dismissed the revolutionary ideas that he imparts to her and drifted into the world of nothingness. For Juansheng, life is constructed through meaning and the hope of a splendid future; a life without purpose is a life of emptiness. Zijun, nonetheless, becomes the living exhibition of the life of emptiness. Instead of loving flowers, which is romantic in Juansheng’s view, Zijun “has a liking for animals” and she begins to raise four chicks and one dog. Juansheng does not like the fact that Zijun spends a lot of time in cooking and feeding the chicks and the dog; he tells her that he does not care about eating at all – he’d rather starve than to see her busying herself like this (*QJ 2*, 284).

Zijun’s enthusiasm for everyday trivialities is meaningless in Juansheng’s eyes. He cannot understand why her body is getting plumper and her cheeks are becoming rosier (*QJ 2*, 282-283), while he at the same time languishes, struggling for a position in the symbolic world. Nevertheless, Juansheng can plainly perceive the unrepresentable enjoyment of Zijun, the *jouissance* that circulates in her vulgar body and boosts her material existence.

For Juansheng, the most excruciating reality is that the enjoyment repetitively beckons him. Zijun loves the little games of reviewing the past, in which she would question and examine him, or request Juansheng to retell every detail of his moment of shame with a contented smile on her face and blazing sparkles in her eyes. Juansheng abhors the enjoyment that Zijun embodies precisely because it inevitably reminds him of

his own enjoyment. The exhibition of Zijun's enjoyment is nothing less than a torture for Juansheng, as it reveals that his sublime ideal, which he cherished heart and soul, is far from ideal.

Juansheng later realizes that the courage of the revolutionary Zijun comes from love, instead of ideas; and he regrets having lost sight of "the essential meaning of life" because of "blind love" (*QJ* 2, 292). What Juansheng does not realize is that the lack of meaning is embodied in the representation of the sublime, and that the shameful nothingness is the very object that he laboriously pursues. In this sense, there is no way that Juansheng, as a modern revolutionary youth, can redeem himself from this fundamental regret. The truth of Juansheng's dilemma is cogently contained in Lacan's famous statement: "Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh" (*Seminar* 322). The metamorphic body of Zijun is therefore the pound of flesh that needs to be weighed by its owner, Juansheng. It mocks his self-sublimation with an abhorrent surge of *jouissance*, reminding him of the obscene force which undercuts the aesthetic of the grand sublime. Since the pound of flesh originally belongs to Juansheng, the repetitive insurgency of the unconscious *jouissance* would not die out even after Zijun's death. The dog Asui, which is raised by Zijun but later dumped by Juansheng, comes back at the end of the story like a phantom. Asui's return is startling; although the dog looks "thin, covered with dust, more dead than alive" (*QJ* 2, 302), it continues to unsettle Juansheng, to bewilder him and drive him out of the symbolic space.

In Judith Butler's words, the denial of one's body becomes "the condition of its emergence in alien form" (133). Both Zijun and the dog Asui are the alien forms attesting to the impossibility of Juansheng's disembodiment.

However, even without the dog's reappearance, it seems that the *nihil* has transformed into the fractures, ambiguities, contradictions, oblivions and emotional fluctuations in Juansheng's narrative. He is lost in his own story, unable to take the first step toward the start of a new future. At the beginning and the end of the story, the narrator Juansheng repeats the same sentence: "If I can, I want to write down my regrets and sorrow, for Zijun, for myself." Is it regrets for Zijun and sorrow for myself? Regrets for myself or sorrow for Zijun? Or regrets and sorrow for both Zijun and myself? Perhaps it doesn't matter. Because it is impossible to differentiate the woman and I at this point. The representation of the woman's metamorphosis has resulted in a metamorphosis in the narrative, and the metamorphosis has further affected the narrator, the I.

For Juansheng, to start a new life means that he has to overcome the memory of Zijun, who has come to represent the traumatic nothingness. Even the narrative of "Regrets for the Past" itself, in the form of his handwritten notes, is therapeutically "devoted to erasing and exorcising Zijun and casting her into the empty space between words" (L. Liu 165). Yet the contradictions and despair contained in the narrative also subvert the possibility of restoring an eloquent and rational subject. Behind the broken memory is a volatile subject who struggles to collect himself through writing. The regret Juansheng feels, toward the end of the story, "is more for the loss of his selfhood than for

hers” (Chan, “Despair” 25).

“Regrets for the Past” is an allegory of the modern Chinese revolution as it reveals “the instability, breaks, and self-deconstructive potentials” (B. Wang 72) inside and outside of its narrative. The narrative of “Regrets for the Past” challenges the notion of a unilinear concept of history. Juansheng, the subject of regret, experiences failure in the past, and he wants to redeem himself by repeating the past in memorializing it. However, the very act of regretting splits him. One part of him is standing on a new temporality opposite to the past: the present; the other part of him, as the failed lover, is caught in the past temporality, compelled to repeating what has failed. Juansheng is able to ride across the two modes of history and experience the two temporalities, through his failed representation of the woman Zijun.

The Aesthetics of Despair and the Crisis of Consciousness

Many scholars believe that the literary representation of “Regrets for the Past” renders the real woman as an empty bearer of meaning whose existence is insubstantial. The narrative of “Regrets for the Past” is dominated by the male, “no authentic discourse of the ‘other’ is represented” (Chan, “Despair” 20), the real woman is silenced and ostracized into “the empty space between words” (L. Liu 165). Ching-kiu Stephen Chan points out in his article “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the ‘New Women’ by May Fourth Writers” that Zijun was unfairly allocated the liability for Juansheng’s loss of selfhood, while in fact her position “is nothing but emptiness, the

empty existence the man is allowed to objectify and exchange for ‘truth’” (26). He maintains that the representation of woman’s despair actually reflected the male intellectuals’ despair – their crisis of consciousness in the post-May Fourth period. The crisis of consciousness of dominant masculine discourse consisted in men’s lack of means to represent a new mode of reality with their habitual set of discourses. While the modern intellectuals endeavored to represent themselves via the crisis of the other, the other was destined to be objectified as anamorphic and hopeless in such a representation. Zijun, as a Chinese Nora who was “openly betrayed by her share of the revolution” (25), joined the images of new women that emerged in specific cultural and historical “formations of despair.”

However, one needs to question if there is a certain relationship between the very emptiness of woman’s symbolic position and the despair she come to assume. The Žižekian formulation of the aesthetic of the sublime may help us to redefine the relationship between the subject, the other, and despair. If despair can be viewed as “the utter loss of the will to discourse, and the disbelief in actions and ideas of any positive value” (“Despair” 36), then it has to be performative in nature. There would be no subject of despair if there is no subject of representation in the first place. Despair manifests itself precisely in the performative act of repeatedly failed representation. Therefore, the locale of despair should be relocated from the subjective representation of woman to the very empty position that woman occupies in that representation. That is to say, what best characterizes despair is not the transference of the masculine despair to the female body;

the despair that causes the masculine anxiety lies in the very fact that he is unable to achieve any symbolic representation of the *real* woman. It is the crisis of representation that leads to the crisis of consciousness.

One can say that there would be no subject of despair if there were no subject of representation in the first place. While the ability of representation is doubtlessly a demonstration of subjective agency, this very agency faces a breakdown vis-à-vis the fissure of representation. The dilemma which man faces is that the more subjective integrity he achieves, the emptier the representation of woman becomes, which in turn retroactively questions his subjective validity. Therefore, the act of remembering or writing cannot redeem Juansheng from his despair, because the more he writes, the more he tends to forget or distort the past, and the emptier the image of Zijun becomes. The woman's body thus comes to embody the impossible domain of representation, a domain which was once ironically misrecognized by Juansheng as too meaningful to represent. Juansheng's ecstasy, trauma, disillusionment, and regret all result from his encounter with the unrepresentable other – the sublime object.

Moreover, the Žižekian formulation would deny the possibility of constructing any transcendental subject through representation. If representation can be regarded as an exhibition window of subjective agency, the representation of woman's despair casts doubts on the consistency of the representing subject. When the subjective representation stops short at the despair of woman, it is evident that the masculine subject cannot achieve a transcendental and integral self through the representation or transference of his

own crisis. Chan notices that the masculine subject's own ethical consistency "is often undermined by an aesthetic tendency in his language to mitigate, if not vulgarize, the articulation of any alternative voice of the woman" ("Despair" 32). Yet is there a way to represent the alternative voice of woman in a consistent and rational discourse? At several points of his article, Chan also pauses to ponder if there is any "alternative rationality" ("Despair" 30) when the subject is at the end of his wits. After quoting Herbert Marcuse's theory of "negative totality" (Marcuse, 159), Chan comes to the conclusion that "any possible transcendence of self is to be achieved in its very negativity" ("Despair" 23).

This notion of a transcendental self in its negativity, which presupposes the existence of a positive, unifying subject, is quite Kantian; thus, it contains the same Kantian "error." One needs to challenge the very notion of a transcendental subject in the first place with the Hegelian dialectic: why does one look for a transcendental subject when he is already facing the truth of the subject? When Chan talks about the self in its negativity, he is already "in the midst of" the formation of the self. The truth of the subject lies in its non-transcendental nature – it has to embrace the unrepresentable despair, because it is this very negativity that constructs its own existence. In other words, the crisis of consciousness, or the existential dilemma, is not something that the (masculine) modern subject can overcome or transcend, but something he has to live with, something that defines him as he is. For the May Fourth iconoclasts and revolutionaries at that particular juncture in history, "where contradictions were lived as part of everyday

reality” (Chan, “Despair” 23), their subjectivity had to be formed in radical negativity, if they were to implement the “impossible” mission to subvert the same ground that they stood on. It was a mission that required so much passion and momentum that it was impossible to gather them from any integral realm of being or established hierarchy of consciousness. Therefore, as much as the past and Zijun fetter Juansheng’s progressive move, he cannot move on if he does not have a past to regret and a woman to forsake. Zijun is not an object for the “justification of one’s own assertion of self-integrity, one’s own transcendence of a painful crisis of identity” (Chan “Despair” 25); nor is she the cause of Juansheng’s despair. Juansheng’s despair, ironically, is caused by his own relentless pursuit of a revolutionary subjectivity.

Despair functions both as the representation and the disruption of such representation, exhibiting a tension between the self and a radical otherness, as well as “the self’s symbiotic containment of the other” (Chan, “Despair” 30). Negative as it is in regard to subjective representation, despair can become a positive condition for the course of revolution. One can certainly find the phantom of *jouissance* in Chan’s expression of the power of despair: “Once repressed, the language of despair – despair as the root of existence, despair as the cause of life –now erupted through layers of institutional and ideological dominance to appear in the formation of a new ethic and a new culture. It gave rise to an alternative discourse that might have contributed to woman’s new entry into history” (Chan, “Despair” 22). Despair, as *jouissance*, is the radical other which both empowers and frightens a revolutionary. In its fathomless

precipice of hopelessness, despair confers on the self the most formidable power, the power of death, which, ironically, is the biggest crisis for the subject. Only when caught in despair can the self meet the traumatic nothingness which lies at the starting point of any subjective formation; there, the self conjures for itself again the devastating power between death and birth. Chan extols despair “as the only remaining powerhouse in the twilight of history” (“Despair” 22). Indeed, one is too feeble to fight for revolution if one has not fought the fierce battle against despair, a sublime battle over one’s own existence.

The Sublime Woman

In December, 1923, Lu Xun gave a talk entitled “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home” (*nuola zouhou zenyang*)¹³ at the Peking Women’s Normal College, in which he tried to display the realistic scenarios that might happen to Nora after she leaves her husband and family. In all of the scenarios Nora is doomed: she could become a prostitute, starve to death, or simply give up her newly acquired identity by returning to her family. Therefore he called Nora’s action of leaving the family a gesture of sacrifice, and a gesture only meaningful as a sacrifice. As a subject of sacrifice, the fate of the new woman is objectified as a spectacle for the dominant subject of discourse. The vicissitudes of her fate were there to be viewed, judged, and represented by the masculine subject, who in turn tried to speak on her behalf.

¹³ See *QJ* 1, 143-151.

In “Regrets for the Past,” the only time Zijun becomes a subject of enunciation is when she speaks in the language of Juansheng: “I’m my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me.” Apart from this borrowed discourse, she seems to have no means to express herself. On the other hand, Juansheng’s effort to define Zijun as what she says proves to be a mistake, and his own language and memory fall short of her representation. In the end, it is as if the narrator has to sentence the woman to death, thereby dispatching her into the bottomless gulf in the discourse that seeks to represent her.

Therefore, behind the jubilation over the liberation of woman in the May Fourth era, there lies the insuppressible doubt: where is she to be found? The anxiety has a reasonable base, as Shuei-may Chang asserts: “if women remain silent, they will forever be outside the process of history” (191). Many other new women, like Zijun, were the unrepresentable objects in this particular historical and cultural circumstance. Lu Xun himself was a cynical spectator of this process of his-story, as opposed to her-story. In “Gendered Spectacles: Lu Xun on Gazing at Women,” Eileen Cheng sets out to examine “the intimate link between women and spectacles” (4) in Lu Xun’s writings. The gendered spectacles she discovers include Qiu Jin (1875-1907)¹⁴, Zijun, Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935), Liu Hezhen (1904-1926)¹⁵, and the Chinese Nora, Zijun. Although Lu Xun

¹⁴ Qiu Jin was known as an early Chinese female revolutionary and writer. She was executed after a failed uprising by the Qing government.

¹⁵ Liu Hezhen was a revolutionary female student who died in the March 18th Incident in 1926, at the age of 18. Lu Xun eulogized Liu Hezhen in an essay “In memory of Liu Hezhen” (*jinian Liuhezhen jun*) in 1926. See *QJ* 3, pp.256-262.

himself was critical of turning women into spectacles, which, as he believed, cater to the baser instincts of human nature (4), he was apparently mesmerised by the spectacles of these women, or, to be more accurate, the spectacles of dead women. For instance, as Cheng discovers, Qiu Jin represents “everything he is not and refuses to become” and was an object for his criticism when she was alive. Yet, after her voluntary sacrifice in 1907, Lu Xun suddenly became sympathetic toward her, as he participated in several memorials commemorating Qiu Jin and paid tribute to her in his short story “Medicine” (yao, 1919). In other writings, Lu Xun continued to focus on the spectacles of dead women: he expressed his sympathy and indignation over the death of his student, Liu Hezhen, in 1926; he defended the death of the actress Ruan Lingyu because he thought her choice of committing suicide was “not so easy” (*zawen quanji* 901).

One may wonder if the only way for woman to have a symbolic life is to embrace death. Qiu Jin’s choice of death had made her the first sublime female figure in modern Chinese history; Ruan Lingyu’s suicide absolved her of any moral sin and saved her a position in the symbolic world. These spectacles of dead women were sublime for their viewers precisely because of their special structural position in respect to life and death. Žižek says: “In a way, everybody must die twice.” One is “the natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of nature’s continual transformation;” and the other is “absolute death – the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*” (*Sublime* 134). In other words, the difference

between the two deaths is the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization. The sublime object, Žižek asserts, is located precisely in the interspace between the two deaths.

The women who sacrifice their physical bodies in return for the symbolic life, therefore, are always imbued with sublime beauty. In Zijun's case, however, her symbolic death precedes her biological death. In Juansheng's eyes, her life is devoid of meaning long before her actual death; the vulgar body of Zijun, which becomes the embodiment of emptiness, exists completely in biological drives. However, it is precisely the symbolic death of Zijun, the ceasing of her meaningful, progressive, revolutionary life that cast her into the interspace between the two deaths and transformed her into the unrepresentable sublime object.

Zijun loses her symbolic life, as did thousands of new women who believed in free love and marriage. In a way, "Regrets for the Past" represents the prevailing post-May Fourth sentiment that the new women, over time, would lose their newly-acquired subjectivity; "bound and exhausted," they would continue to lose "their understanding of the world, their identity, and their ability to reason" (qtd. in Lan & Fong 154, 156).¹⁶ If the new woman project is fundamentally a project of despair, Chinese woman's enthusiastic response to the call of new ideas appears out of touch with reality, and her Nora-like act cannot be justified on the basis of reason.

¹⁶ Ye Shengtao, "The Question of Women's Character" (*nüzi renga wenti*). Originally published in *New Tide*, vol.1, no.2, February 1919.

What might be equally irrational is the masculine interest in this half-seen, unrepresentable spectacle of the new woman. Lu Xun wrote in his correspondence that Qiu Jin is “clapped to death;” thereby he must have been aware of the intersubjective exchange between the gendered spectacle and he must have thought of Qiu Jin’s sacrifice more or less as a concerted performance between her and the viewers. Interestingly, Eileen Cheng has noted that, in “Regrets for the Past,” Juansheng is apparently attracted to performative gestures, particularly “Zijun’s Nora-like words and gestures” (“Gendered Spectacles” 13).

The drastic change in Juansheng’s aesthetic experience seems to remind us of the chasm between discourse and action. As the mentor and enlightener of Zijun, Juansheng is the one who knows and talks better. However, in the real moment of realization – the moment to perform modern ideas and to fully embrace the revolutionary zeal body and soul, Juansheng’s absolute rhetorical advantage pales in the face of Zijun’s real action. Zijun, the woman who comes from a reactionary family and always listens silently to Juansheng, is better prepared for the realization of revolutionary ideas. In Juansheng’s understanding, the moment of revolution would naturally come when ideas are ripe. It does not occur to him that revolution is initiated through bodily impulses and carried out corporeally. Zijun’s action, which is largely motivated by sexual love, deviates from Juansheng’s rational scheme from the outset. She carries out the revolutionary moment without a reality check and without any concern for the future; her sacrifice is something Juansheng is incapable of. Therefore, this moment excites the male subject as much as it

dwarfs him, since it is the woman who has the power to fulfill the promises in the abstract ideas he delivers.

In *Emerging from the Horizon of History*, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua assert that the only moment the dominant ideology of May Fourth culture retains for (new) women like Zijun, in which she is visible, is the moment of Nora (37). Zijun, like other Chinese Noras, answers man's idea of revolution through her bodily dispositions and action; yet man, who gives her the promise of the future, betrays her right away. Man is unable to carve out a future for woman, as he has promised, nor is he ready to accept her as a subject equal to himself. Consequently, the new woman is caught in the moment of sacrifice, without the ability to move on with the man, without the will to live up to his new promises. Therefore, just like Qiu Jin, who was clapped to (biological) death, Zijun is wooed to her (symbolic) death. Between the two deaths the two women both become the sublime object, which exists in the fissure of representation of a history that is written in masculine discourse. This lacuna cannot be assimilated into history, although it is retroactively produced by the symbolization of his-story itself.

However, one needs to redefine history as the symbiosis of a rational, teleological discourse and *jouissance* embodied in the performative bodies of woman. As Stephen Chan points out: "the introjection of otherness onto selfhood also makes it possible for the alterity of a non-being – woman – to intrude into the integral realm of being and disturb the established hierarchy of consciousness" ("Despair" 30). History, as well as the masculine subject, cannot transcend its negativity. This is why Lacan actually identifies

the pleasure principle with the symbolic order in his late seminars. Woman is able to insert herself into history as the sublime object, or nothingness, due to her innate connection to the mystical *jouissance*, the “intense, rapturous pleasure which women know and men fear” (Marks & Courtivron 95, fn 6). The May Fourth new culture never stopped to search for a strong, violent, crude force; this force was looked upon as a general rule which has a fixed form – the masculine, positive sublime. However, *jouissance* as the unrepresentable Thing is beyond any principle or fixed form, so that even the masculine sublime, as the biggest fantasy of May Fourth culture, needed to derive its force from the feminine sublime, which embodies the irrational, disruptive, and anamorphic nothingness that man is afraid to confront.

The Metamorphosis of Lu Xun

As an allegory of the modern Chinese revolution, “Regrets for the Past” reveals the secret relationship between the May Fourth reformer’s internal crisis and women’s liberation: the creation of the new woman produces the illusion of the subject’s fullness, while the collapse of this ideal feminine image exposes the emptiness at the heart of modern subjectivity. Woman not only disguises the crisis, but also embodies it. Male reformer who wants to move on, he has to embrace the very feminine image he helped to create. Just as Zijun persists in Juansheng’s memory, there is an anamorphic woman in every revolutionary’s heart. In fact, Lu Xun himself also experienced a similar metamorphosis in his life.

After China was defeated by Japan in the Sino-Japanese War (*Jiawu*, 1894-1895), many Chinese young people went to Japan to study their advanced modern sciences. Lu Xun was among them. In 1906, when Lu Xun was a medical student in Japan, he watched a slide of the beheading of a Chinese spy by Japanese soldiers in front of a crowd of apathetic Chinese onlookers. Sixteen years later, Lu Xun recorded the incident in the preface of “Call to Arms” (*nahan*) as the incentive for his conversion from medicine to literature:

I feel medicine is not that important. The people of a weak and backward country, no matter how strong and healthy they may be, can only serve as subject matter or onlookers of meaningless spectacles; their illness or death is of little consequence. The most important thing is to change their spirit, and at the time I believed that literature was the best means to that end, so I wanted to promote a literary movement (*QJ* 1, 271).

This moment is sometimes mentioned as the “primal scene” (Chow, *Primitive Passions* 6) in Lu Xun’s literary life. The conversion from medicine to literature also indicates a self-propelled sublimation: from body to spirit. Filled with ambitions and aspirations, Lu Xun decided to take on a “meaningful” path of life, trying to enlighten the Chinese people with the weapon of literature.

In the years he spent in Japan, Lu Xun was an enthusiastic young man with an ebullient heart brimming with schemes such as enlightening the people and strengthening the nation. He spent tremendous effort in translating western works and writing literary works. His sublime mind was vividly materialized in two essays he composed in 1907, “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (*moluo shili shuo*) and “On Cultural Aberration”

(*wenhua pianzhi lun*), both of which advocated his optimistic hope for the future of China.

During this period, Lu Xun was also an ardent advocate of an inflated self. In 1918 he wrote in an essay which was collected in *Hot Wind (refeng)*: “The Chinese has been arrogant – regrettably there is no ‘arrogance of the individual,’ but the ‘arrogance of the group and patriotism.’ This is the reason why [China] cannot wake up and improve after its failure at cultural competition” (*QJ* 2, 30). The ego-mania Lu Xun promoted conjures the kind of individual who exists beyond the confines of social order and norms. Through his irrepressible “arrogant” demands, which bring about more vigor, vitality, and aggressivity, the individual would eventually benefit the progress and welfare of the whole society. Lu Xun’s “Diary of Madman” (*kuangren riji*, 1918) is extolled by critics as the manifesto of the birth of modern subjectivity.¹⁷ The strength of the madman consists precisely in his symptom – madness. Xiaobing Tang points out that the madman’s ecstatic madness “indicates a return of that which has been suppressed or erased from the horizon of allowed or conceivable experience” (59). Madness is the dark abyss for “normal” people, the vanity in the light of reason. In the figure of madness, one can identify the intense, rapturous, destructive *jouissance*. If sublimation, as Lacan points out, means the loss of the pound of flesh, the madman seems to have undergone the reverse of sublimation, as he is now reduced to the pound of edible flesh.

However, during the decade following his return to China, from 1909 to 1918, Lu

¹⁷ Xiaobing Tang suggests reading “Diary of a Madman” as a “manifesto of the birth of modern subjectivity as well as of a modernist politics.” *Chinese Modern*, p.57.

Xun was rather depressed, or lost, for a time and did not produce any significant literary works (L. Lee, *Voices* 25-26). Lu Xun was in such a pessimistic mood that he was reluctant to join the May Fourth movement. It was not until the peak period of the May Fourth movement that Lu Xun renewed his enthusiasm and created some of his most famous literary works, including “Diary of Madman” (*kuangren riji*, April 1918), “Kong Yi Ji” (March 1919), “Medicine” (*yao*, April 1919), “Homecoming” (*guxiang*, January 1921), and “The True Story of Ah Q” (December 1921), all of which were collected in *Call to Arms*. Yet optimism and self-confidence eluded him, instead; a mood of “self-inspection and self-condemnation” began to spread in his works (X. Wang 91). In “Diary of a Madman,” Lu Xun let the author announce that the Madman was cured of his madness; in “Medicine,” he had a wreath of red and white flowers placed on the grave of Xiao Shuan. It seems that the “double-play of optimism and pessimism” (L. Lee, *Voices* 57) had become a characteristic underlying Lu Xun’s creative work.

Then, like the lonely soldier in “Such a Fighter,” the combative spirit of Lu Xun began to wear out. Disillusionment and depression seized him again in the mid-1920s. *Wild Grass* represents the impasse between hope and despair that Lu Xun faced in this period. It is evident that “vacillations between faith and disbelief, between hope and despair, seem to characterize his writing in several genres throughout the 1920s” (L. Lee, *Voices* 88). The undertone of hope in *Call to Arms* had gradually changed into a despairing note in his second collection of short stories, *Wandering* (*panghuang*, 1926).

It is in this period that Lu Xun completed his transformation from a “hopeful,

idealist translator to a lonely, apathetic intellectual (Cheng 2006, 8). Aside from the literary images that he frequently adopted, his transformation can be tangibly felt in the transformation of literary genre. The two literary genres Lu Xun took on during this period are prose-poetry and the satirical essay (*zawen*). Ban Wang insightfully points out that the allegorical language Lu Xun used in *Wild Grass* created a literary form that “undercuts the symbolic language” (*Sublime* 60). Following Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory, Wang asserts that “this concept of allegory represents a general trend in contemporary criticism to focus on instability, breaks, and self-deconstructive potentials inherent in language and other signifying processes (*Sublime* 71-72). Therefore, in terms of language, *Wild Grass* truthfully recorded Lu Xun’s shift from a believer in the “symbolic notion of language to a more self-critical awareness of its limits” (*Sublime* 72). The challenge to the symbolic notion of language is simultaneously a challenge to the philosophical system which sustains the Kantian sublime. It denies the notion of a consistent and totalistic existence of a symbolic world by inserting the specter of nothingness into it.

Nothingness replaced the meaningful to become the cornerstone of the writer’s self-perception. Painfully, Lu Xun created a subject with a vacuous core and a tortured soul. In “The Shadow’s Farewell” (*ying de gaobie*), one of the prose-poems in *Wild Grass*, Lu Xun writes: “I am only a shadow, bidding farewell to you and merging into the darkness. Sometimes the darkness will swallow me up, sometimes the light will make me vanish. But I’m not willing to wander between the darkness and light, I’d rather merge

into the darkness” (*QJ* 1, 469). In “An Ode to the Night” (*ye song*), Lu Xun claimed that he was a man in love with the night. Albeit he was clearly aware of the immanence of nothingness in the shadow of his consciousness, Lu Xun himself had difficulty in articulating nothingness within the revolutionary discourse. His inability to represent nothingness impelled him to juxtapose the specter of nothingness and the cause of revolution. In this representation of the traumatic confrontation with nothingness, Lu Xun evolved a modern subjectivity which is rooted in both the consciousness and the unconscious, in both the future and the past, in both reason and irrationality. It is a problematic self which is always “in a state of crisis over its own identity” (Feuerwerker 167).

This specter of nothingness is also present in another genre adopted by Lu Xun – the satirical essay. After the 1920s, Lu Xun wrote extensively in the genre of the satirical essay, in which he delivered his profound and implacable social criticism. The author of the satirical essays is a subject who disrupts himself constantly. When talking about the satirists of the English Renaissance, Alvin Kernan thinks they had “a diseased hatred of the world” (53). The deep-rooted hatred and disappointment of the satirical author tends to direct him to speak from the standpoint of the other, as he is “by custom a sick and disappointed man, who...looks at the world askew” (250). In Alvin Kernan’s eyes, the writing of satirical texts itself is posed as an abnormal activity in respect to the well-ordered symbolic world. The writing of satire, as well as the subject of satire, are full of “instability, incoherence, wildness, uncertainty, contradiction” (116). The subject of satire,

therefore, is one who cannot “control his passions by reason” (93). Such a subject, who contains in itself the *other* of the non-subject, is a subject in its radical negativity, a sublime subject.

As Marston Anderson notes, while Lu Xun in 1935 defended the role of satire in “calling attention to ‘irrational, ridiculous, disgusting, or even detestable’ truths that are commonplace but frequently passed over,” in a “cynical afterthought” he took a “less-than-sanguine view of the actual capacity of satirical literature to effect change: ‘By the time a satirist appears in a group, that group is already doomed’ (67-68). Behind the writer’s disappointment over the meaningless reality, however, one can still sense “a humanistic compulsion to find meaning” (498). As Leo Ou-fan Lee points out, Lu Xun’s entire outlook hinges on “an unresolved tension between his unequivocal support of all the enlightened ‘modern’ causes of the May Fourth Movement and the incessant pessimism that haunts his private psyche with regard to the ultimate meaning of life” (“Modernity and Its Discontents” 170-171).

The meaning of a person’s life can be adequately grasped only in a narrative or story-like framework (Kerby 33). The shift in literary genre from fiction and novella to poetic prose and satirical essays registers Lu Xun’s disbelief in meaning, as well as his skepticism in regard to a unified self. Lu Xun gave up the narrative framework after that, except that in his last years he rewrote some classical Chinese stories or legends in a postmodern fashion. In rewriting these stories Lu Xun mocked not only the traditional values, but also the very values that were cherished by the New Culture Movement, such

as love, freedom, and subjective autonomy. It seems that his system of valuation had been completely restructured.

“Regrets for the Past,” the only love story Lu Xun wrote during his literary life, remains as the faithful fictional embodiment of Lu Xun’s metamorphosis. It is necessary to mention a particular episode in Lu Xun’s private life that presumably inspired the creation of the love story. In the summer of 1925, shortly before Lu Xun wrote “Regrets for the Past,” he fell in love with one of his female students, Xu Guangping. He was forty-four years old and married; she was only twenty-seven. Their relationship lasted till Lu’s death in 1936. However, Lu Xun had confessed several times that he did not believe in love. “Regrets for the Past” definitely is not a story glorifying love; love, as the allegory of the grander trope of revolution, is only to be deconstructed.

Chapter Two: The Object of Absence

The Nationalist Identification in Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping's Early Stories

Patriotism is mostly the product of the affective. There's only a small portion of reason in it; sometimes, there's no reason at all...

— Chen Duxiu, *Duxiu wencun*, 430

(The gaze) is this object lost and suddenly refound in the conflagration of shame, by the introduction of the other. Up to this point, what is the subject trying to see? What he is trying to see, make no mistake, is the object as absence.

—Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, 182

It is a well-known assertion of Benedict Anderson that the nation is an imagined political community, which exerts its appeal through a kind of fraternal affective bond (5). However, this concept of the nation holds little sway in the scholarship on Chinese nationalism. The prevalent sentiment on Chinese nationalism, as John Fitzgerald observes, is that Chinese nationalism presents a rational strategy for bringing the imagined nation into being (84). The nation is awakened by the self-conscious citizens “possessing an intense sense of purpose, a keen commitment to the dictates of reason, and a formidable capacity for political organization and discipline” (Fitzgerald 3).

Such a concept of Chinese nationalism, however, would inevitably rationalize, and thus undermine the imaginary elements of nationalism, consequently weakening the

nationalist appeal. This rational model of nationalism is based on the assumption that the elements holding the members in a national community together can be reduced to conscious awareness or pure reasoning; in other words, it suggests a kind of “castrated” nationalism which lacks the substantial power to motivate people. It is necessary to explore whether, beyond the rational scheme, there was a kind of spontaneous or unconscious identification with the nation that was in tune with the so-called “obsession with China” (Hsia & Wang 533-554)?

My proposition is that Chinese nationalism, as a mobilizing political discourse, necessarily contains the imaginary elements, which appeal to the individual’s unconscious. The identification with the nation, therefore, is not only rational, but also, and more importantly, affective. Nationalism has the greatest appeal only if the individual spontaneously assumes the national identity, sometimes out of the unconscious desire. Thus, the nationalist discourse is not a rational and normative one that relentlessly represses individual desires and needs; on the contrary, the nationalist discourse creates a locus of freedom that accommodates and indulges individual fantasies and whimsies. The alliance of nationalism and the individual psyche in a way questions the proclaimed progressive and rational nature of both.

In this chapter, I will first examine the exemplary rational models of nationalism in the early twentieth century, which show the attempt to construct a national identity based on reason; then, using the early romantic fiction of Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping as a textual ground, I will demonstrate how individuals can challenge and subvert the rational

model of nationalism with an affective model of nationalism. The literary works of Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping are among the early works which recorded the birth of affective nationalism in China – a kind of nationalism that features the nation as an affective and consumable object of modern individuals. Through a close reading of Yu and Zhang’s early romantic fiction, in which the nation is imagined in a sexualized and gendered manner, I will show how the individual enters into a dialogue with the nationalist discourse and how the nation is psychologically invoked as a redeeming object of the modern individual through a kind of fantasmatic identification, an identification in which fantasy and ideology are conflated. Finally, I also argue that the fantasmatic identification with the nation opens up possibilities for transcending not only nationalism but also the gender dualism on which the former was based. It creates a channel through which the construction of a feminine national subject becomes possible.

Nation and Individual

As John Fitzgerald cogently points out, individual and national awakenings came as a pair in China (vii). Modern Chinese nationalism began in the late nineteenth century with the awakening of a handful of Chinese intellectuals to the Western vision of a new order of “one world” of progress and enlightenment, which led to the envisioning of China as “one nation.” The nascent nationalism in turn propelled the discovery of the individual self among youths and intellectuals, as self-awakening “had been conceived as the consciousness of the relationship between the self and the nation” (339). As

Fitzgerald puts it:

...the liberation of the individual from ‘feudalism’ – was bound up with a collective struggle – the liberation of the nation from ‘imperialism’ – and hence the attainment of individual freedom was a collective enterprise. In time, self and nation were both thought to be chained by the same alliance of forces in feudalism and imperialism. Hence from May Fourth, in 1919, a particular national identity was imprinted on the awakened self, that of an individual and a people in chains (93-94).

The national identity, which was immediately imprinted on the modern self, can be regarded as one prototype of modern subjectivity in China. It is necessary, therefore, to look at the co-construction of modern subjectivity and the prominent modern political institution, the nation-state.

In his seminal work *On the New Citizen* (*Xinmin Shuo*), Liang Qichao (1873-1929) argues that “an independent spirit” (*duli zhi jingshen*) is the fountain of any nationalist sentiments (8). In the traditional period, the Chinese imperial court deemed itself the center of the world and saw no rival around; the Chinese people, on the other hand, devoted all their loyalty and attached their entire belongingness to a certain emperor or dynasty. This model of “primal unity” effectively foreclosed the birth of an independent consciousness at both the individual and the collective level.

It was the formidable power of the Western cannons and warships that forcefully awakened China and Chinese people from their long slumber. China was awakened to find that the gulf between itself and the modernized *other* – the Western countries – was already frighteningly large. Now that the old narcissistic bondage between the political

unity and the people was broken, the “freed” individual had to reconstruct his relationship with the emerging nation-state. Undoubtedly, in the process, the “clan people” of the past had to turn into modern “nationals,” because only the “awakened” self could possibly become a modern patriotic citizen. Therefore, a problem immediately arose: how to reconstruct the relation between the newly-discovered nation and the newly-discovered individual?

Unlike that in Western countries, Chinese nationalism was not the natural fruit of a nation’s industrialization and modernization; it epitomized, on the contrary, the negative reality of it. Against a background of national crisis, Chinese nationalist discourse was not looked upon first of all as an impediment to individual development or as an obstacle in individual life; rather, it was regarded as a liberating and messianic discourse by the Chinese people. For the Chinese reformers, nationalism, whose goal was to “strive for survival in a group (*jituan er jing shengcun*)” (S. Yang 99) prevailed over the concern of individual interests and rights, because the former was also a striving for the individual’s survival, a matter of life and death. Many Chinese intellectuals and reformers worked diligently to downplay the perceived contradiction between nationalism and individualism and instead to stress their compatibility.

Therefore, the “obsession with China” begets an obsession with independent consciousness in the nationalist discourse. Consequently, a hegemonic and rationalist discourse of nationalism prevailed. For Liang Qichao, losing oneself in sheer attachment or submission is “the worst thing in the world” for a national subject (*wenxuan* 92).

Losing oneself means to regress into the slumber prior to the emergence of a conscious self. However, as an imaginary object, the nation exerts its appeal precisely through the possibility that each individual will lose himself by restoring the unity which disregards the boundary of the self and the other. Chinese intellectuals were worried that if the self lost the independent spirit, there would be no agent to carry out the nationalist project. Therefore, Liang Qichao advocated partial submission as the prerequisite to forming a group, as a compromise between the individual unconscious desire and political urgency.

Liang Qichao was one of the modern intellectuals who tried to build a more reciprocal model between the individual and the nation; his invention of the “new citizen” was portrayed in a way that “functionally” related to the nation-state (Lin 24). In “On the New Citizen,” Liang compared the defense of the individual’s rights to the defense of one’s body: “If one’s kidney, or liver, or finger, or toe, feels pain, one will spring up and look for a cure. If one’s rights are invaded, one will feel the same pain as if his body has been invaded; he should do everything he can to restore his rights” (44-45). Liang called upon every Chinese to stand up and defend his rights. “Where do rights come from? They come from power” (43). When one’s body is invaded, the defensive mechanism is turned on by a surge of instincts. The instinctual power the individual possesses upon external stimulation is most powerful and thus constitutes the most effective defensive mechanism. By comparing the defense of one’s body to the defense of one’s rights, and then to the defense of one’s nation, Liang actually tried to evoke the irrational, instinctual force that lies in each individual’s body as the principal force in

national salvation. “It is for this reason that to love one’s nation is actually to love oneself” (*wenxuan* 88-89). In Liang Qichao’s scheme, every individual should stand up and explore himself to the utmost extent; if each individual can express his thoughts and feelings and do whatever he wants to do, the nation will gain vibrant power from its subjects. “The subjects of a nation are the aggregation of individuals; and the rights of a nation are the aggregation of the individuals’ rights. Therefore it is impossible to explore the national subjects’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without exploring the individuals’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors”(Xinmin Shuo, 53). Liang actually endeavored to re-channel the individual’s bodily power in the service of national survival by imploring the individual to seek identification with the nation. However, Liang Qichao’s model of national identification presents a logical problem – the identification between the individual and the nation can only be made in one way: it is appropriate for a weak nation to identify with an empowered individual, but not appropriate for an empowered individual to identify with a weak nation.

Another leading reformer, Chen Duxiu, also tried to suppress the irrational components in nationalism under the rubric of self-consciousness. In “Patriotism and Self-consciousness” (*aiguo yu zijuexin*, 1915), Chen Duxiu linked patriotism to emotion and irrational action, while he extolled self-consciousness as a state of mind based on knowledge and reasoning about particular problems. Chen believed that patriotism was beneficial to Westerners, who viewed the state as promoting the people’s rights and welfare, but harmful in the Chinese context, where it led to enslavement and ritualized

relations of dependence. To make patriotism a positive force, Chen argued, the Chinese needed to develop self-consciousness (Meisner 21-22).

For these intellectual reformers, the individuals must be yoked to the demand of the larger national project; the individual values had to be “in line with nationalism” (Lin 25). Even the most individual problems, such as sexual love, had to gain their legitimacy through their association with nationalism. For example, in the “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” (*yuanyang hudie*) fiction of the late Qing and early Republican era, the individual’s sexual love was portrayed as secondary to the nationalist commitment. The protagonists in Zhou Shoujuan (1894-1968)’s fiction “True and False Love” (*zhenjia aiqing*) and Li Hanqiu (1873-1923)’s novel *The Tides of Yangzhou* (*guanglin chao*) both sacrificed sexual love to defend their nation. Other “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” writers proposed viewing sexual love as a kind of variation on national love. Xu Zhenya (1889-1937) writes in his novel *The Soul of Jade Pear Flowers* (*yuli hun*): “One who shed blood for love between two sexes is surely able to shed blood for the nation.” Similarly, Chen Zhiqun (1889-1962) wrote that “amorous men and women hold the same relationship toward the nation as they do toward each other.”

Both Liang Qichao and Chen Duxiu’s conceptualization of the individual and the nation and the “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” fiction remain eminently rational and teleological. All of them tried to achieve a kind of empathy between the individual and the nation-state through arbitrarily drawing a connection between them. The analogies of sexual love and love for the nation, or bodily defense and national defense, are built on

the indoctrination of pure ideas; only in this way could Chinese individualism “(perform) effective functions for the realization of nationalistic goals” (Lin 25). Such individualism, Yü-sheng Lin argues, was “precarious,” because the “individualist values did not become deeply rooted in the consciousness of the May Fourth intelligentsia;” “they were primarily associated with nationalism and iconoclasm” (25). The focus on the individual and individual rights functioned as an alibi for the deployment of power (Knight 6).

Is there any connection between the individual and the nation other than those conscious associations? What, indeed, bound individualism and nationalism together in modern China? What was the invisible force that combined the two discourses to produce a distinctive Chinese nationalist subject? Was the need to commune with the nation an urgent call external to the self, or was it inherent in the modern selfhood?

Affective nationalism

In *Da Tongshu (One World Philosophy)*, Kang Youwei wrote of himself, “Master K’ang ...was grieved and distressed, sighing and sobbing for days and months, ceaselessly.” These involuntary bodily reactions of Kang Youwei prompted him to explore the relation between his solitary figure and the world: “I myself am a body. Another body suffers; it has no connection with me, and yet I sympathise very minutely” (73) Kang Youwei attributed his feeling of sympathy with other people to his having a “compassionate mind” (64).

Kang Youwei’s reasoning represents one of the earliest attempts to bind the

individual and a certain community in affective terms. Sympathy as an interpersonal feeling exists when the feelings or emotions of others can be deeply felt by the self. John Fitzgerald observes that the notion of sympathy extricated the self from the traditional relations with the clan and family and poised the self directly vis-à-vis the universe as the most ideal community (82). Following Kang's fashion, Liang Qichao later redefined the ideal community as a nation-state by proposing "the elimination of parochialism and particularism within the national territory" (Fitzgerald 82). In the aforementioned "On the New Citizen," Liang Qichao sought the elimination of all prior claims on the identity of the self, in order to put forward a model of the new citizens as awakened individuals freed of the bonds of locality, family, and occupation, and who would relate directly to the nation-state without any intermediaries (Fitzgerald 85).

Although both Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao endeavored to liberate individuals from traditional bonds, Liang still treated the nation-states as a rational community. For Liang Qichao, the nation-state emerges as a collective enterprise of self-defense (*Xinmin Shuo* 23); he thus understood the development of national consciousness in a Hobbesian fashion, as something determined by the mechanical response to gain or loss. Liang therefore overlooked one prominent facet of the modern nation-state and the national subject: its affective interiority. As Haiyan Lee points out, "the modern subject is first and foremost a sentimental subject (...), the modern nation is first and foremost a community of sympathy" (7). Kang Youwei's notion of compassionate love entails a significant step in the development of Chinese nationalist discourse in that it tied up the individual and

the national community on the basis of affection. The ethical obligations of the past were to be replaced by intensive, and relatively free, affective feelings which resided in the autonomous heart of the subject.

Although sympathy can be invoked as an emotional mechanism affectively bridging the individual and the national community, the national subject grounded in sympathetic feeling appears somewhat limited. It is true that the endangered nation needs to be saved “in much the same way that a shattered masculine identity attempts to survive” (Tsu 283). However, as Shu-mei Shih points out, China’s national weakness led to “a symbolic castration of the Chinese male” (*Lure of the Modern* 116). If the national identification is merely a kind of empathy between individual suffering and national suffering, then the imaginations of the modern nation-state, as well as the modern identity, are only capable of inducing displeasure. So how would such a national identification be sustainable?

In their essay “Fantasy and the Origin of Sexuality,” psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and J. –B. Pontalis use the notion the fantasmatic (*une fantasmatique*) to refer to the work of fantasy, as it connects to a fundamental activity of identity-positioning. According to them, the fantasmatic blurs the boundary between the dreamer and the dreamed; it negotiates the real and the unreal, the conscious and the unconscious. It is the fantasmatic that enables identification (qtd. in A. Cheng 119-120). I assume, therefore, that there is a level of affective national identification other than the sympathetic one – a kind of fantasmatic identification. By fantasmatic identification I mean that the subject

can seek national identification through taking the nation as an imaginary object, which he consumes and enjoys in fantasy.

In his article “Enjoy Your Nation as Yourself,” Slavoj Žižek points out that the elements holding together a given community cannot be reduced to an idea or a pure discursive structure. The bond linking together the community’s members always implies a shared relationship toward the Thing – the irrational, extradiscursive core of the incarnated Enjoyment, the materialized form of *jouissance*. “National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing” (201). Nationalism is ultimately “nothing but the way subjects of a given ethnic community organize their enjoyment” (202).

If the sympathetic national identification supplies a model of identification based on synchronic association, the fantasmatic identification is established on a diachronic dimension. One of the paradoxes of the modern nation, writes Benedict Anderson, concerns “the objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists” (5). Those who have a sense of the nation find its sources not in the historical processes of the last two hundred or so years but in the far distant past:

The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness ... (Few) things were (are) suited to this end better than the idea of nation. If nation states are widely considered to be “new” and “historical,” the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and, still more important, glide into a limitless future (11).

Therefore, nationalism presents “a privileged domain of the eruption of enjoyment into the social field” (“Enjoy your Nation” 202). If one can “defend your nation as yourself,” as Liang Qichao suggested, one should be able to “enjoy your nation as yourself” as well. Nationalism also presents a privileged domain where the individual can find a way to deal with the trauma of individuation and reclaim his lost enjoyment. In this sense, nationalism is not a good ally of enlightenment and progress,¹⁸ because even in the most backward and regressive elements, one is able to find the particular substance to organize enjoyment and to cohere a nation-state. These “regressive” or “reactionary” sentiments become legitimized if they themselves dwell in the syntax of the nationalist discourse and if they supply themselves with the rhetoric, narratives, sentiments and imageries of the nation and nationalism.

The discovery of China as a nation-state and the discovery of the individual in China were both figuratively portrayed as the awakening from a long slumber; however, an awakening can bring traumatic experiences to the individual. As the discovery of the individual implies a process of “separation” from the primal unity, the ecstatic self-discovery is immediately superseded by an excruciating sense of loss. Behind this separation, there is always an innate need to reclaim the lost enjoyment, a kind of nostalgia for the previous unity, and a painful struggle to cope with the newly acquired selfhood and to discover new forms of sociality. The awakening of the self “came as a

¹⁸ As the strongest ally of the May Fourth iconoclasts in their struggle against the patriarchal family and in their quest for free love, nationalism is widely known as a progressive and revolutionary force.

shock as well as a revelation as the discovery of the self coincided with a woeful melancholia in the literary imagination” (Fitzgerald 92).

Kirk Denton has astutely pointed out that May Fourth romanticism “was still at least partially grounded in desires to maintain a cosmological wholeness in which the expression of self would find deeper connections with the external world, some creative life force, society, and/or the collective” (*Modern Chinese Literary Thought* 42). This kind of romanticism can be quite sublime and inspiring, like Guo Moruo’s notion of self-transcendence to the point of “absence of self” (*wuwo*); yet it can also yield somewhat “disappointing” results, as represented by the excessive portrayal of decadence and sexual frustration in Yu Dafu’s fiction, or of rampant sexual desires in Zhang Ziping’s literary works. These elements were often considered as “regressive” sentiments representing the downfallen genteel class and a distorted form of individualism, and were not fully sanctioned by the dominant May Fourth ideology, which touted progress and enlightenment. They were often represented as an excessive individual whimsy, a perverse tendency against history, an obscene force disturbing the new social order.

Probably these “regressive” or “reactionary” sentiments cannot find a better shelter than in the fantasmatic identification with the nation. The imaginary nation can serve as a recuperative object for individuation, in which the modern individual finds a temporary haven from the feeling of loneliness and suffering. It offers a figure of a big, important China, onto which the protagonist can “displace his frustrations” (Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 165). This unconscious desire of the modern individual

to reclaim the lost enjoyment, therefore, can be reified as a longing for the nation as a fantasmatic object, thus contributing to the nationalist discourse.

Therefore, the nationalist discourse contains contradictions in itself: on the one hand, nationalism helps to facilitate individuation/alienation by extricating the individual from the traditional ties; on the other hand, it compensates for this individuation by offering the modern individual a fantasmatic object which is at odds with the modern ideals of progress and autonomy. This innate contradiction of nationalism is best highlighted in the literary works of the May Fourth romantic writers.

Romantic Writers: Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping

The subject of the fantasmatic identification is a psychoanalytical subject who is capable of desiring and pleasure-seeking. The birth of this desiring psychoanalytical subject did not happen in China until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Haiyan Lee observes, while the individual was liberated as the basic and irreducible unit of moral choice and action, the Confucian structure of feeling was destroyed; the traditional ethical-cosmological definition of emotion (*qing*) was replaced by romantic and psychoanalytic psychic activities:

While the romantic discourse of free love spearheaded the iconoclastic revolt against Confucian patriarchy, the psychoanalytic discourse gave *qing* a biological materialist grounding as the expression of natural impulses that society unjustly repressed. Both, moreover, were bound up with the nationalist celebration of an intimate community in which *qing* was the universal currency (95).

Therefore, the vibrant love in modern Chinese romantic fiction can be regarded as a substitute for the old form of sociality, as well as a new way of organizing the national community. In fact, the construction of the romantic individual provides an inspirational source for modern Chinese nationalism. John Fitzgerald contends that patriotism was not born in public debates about the political obligations between citizens and the state, but in “self-awakenings chronicled in romantic fiction” (95). Once the individual psyche has gained more freedom in the modern period, the nationalist discourse also gets nurtured by the newly acquired psychic intensity and variety: “The extensive, varied, and finely nuanced treatment of romantic love in fiction” helped to “craft and popularize a model of the relationship between self and community that supplied a model for love of nation, or patriotism” (95).

It is noteworthy, however, that the psychoanalytical love in romantic fiction does not uniformly lead to the creation of a national community of sympathy; sometimes love paradoxically secures and fortifies the individual’s alienation from the community in reality. The individual will instead build a strong connection with the imagined community, as a fantasmatic object always in absence. In this way, the identification with the nation can become very private, yet still pleasurable. In the incipient stage of Chinese nationalism, the fantastic identification with the nation ran parallel to the sympathetic identification with the nation, helping to produce a nationalist discourse that is both motivating and sustainable. In the following pages, I will use Yu Dafu and Zhang

Ziping's early romantic fiction to illustrate this point.

After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Chinese had witnessed the superior power of Western modernization and were immediately pressed by the urgency of national survival. The "tiny island" Japan's success smashed the last residue of the mirage of an encompassing "central kingdom" of the Chinese people. Both shocked and humiliated by the gulf between China and the modernized countries, the Chinese were fully awakened and forced to take action to narrow the gulf between China and the other modernized countries. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a large number of Chinese youth left China to study in Japanese schools and universities, among them Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu, Zhang Ziping, Tian Han, Cheng Fangwu, Zheng Boqi, Zhou Zuoren, Chen Duxiu, and Li Dazhao, all of whom later became leading figures in the New Culture Movement. For many of them, Japan was the place of enlightenment and the starting point of a literary career – Lu Xun abandoned medicine to become a writer in Japan; Tian Han started to write plays in Japan; Yu Dafu, Zhang Ziping, and Cheng Fangwu started their literary careers in Japan. It was in Japan that those young students explored the meaning of their lives and the truth of the world with mixed feelings. Yu Dafu recalled his life in Japan in an essay in 1936:

It was in Japan that I came to see China's position in the world's arena of competition; it was in Japan that I started to understand the greatness and depth of modern science – be it metaphysical or physical; it was in Japan that I realized China's fate in the future, as well as the purgatory process that the four hundred and fifty million people have to suffer ("Xuye" 58).

For those Chinese youth who studied abroad in a country which had recently defeated China in a war, the development of individual consciousness was inevitably intertwined with that of the national consciousness. Pressed by alienation and loneliness, sometimes those early Chinese students had to seek comfort in the privileged domain of national discourse. Furthermore, the overseas Chinese students were the first group to experience the throes of parting with the traditional identity politics in imperial China. It is not a surprise that most of the early literary works they produced are more or less associated with the Chinese nation-state and the construction of nationalist identity. Later, when they made their debut in the New Culture Movement in the mid-1910s, their works helped to “give shape to the awakening nation by confronting issues of self-consciousness and alienation and by exploring themes of bondage, emancipation, and romantic love” (Fitzgerald 94).

Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping are two modern Chinese writers who consistently explored the frustration, or suffering, of modern men in their literary works. In addition, the literary works of both writers are characterized by blatant depiction of sexual impulses and bodily desires, which were regarded as having a negative impact on Chinese youths at that time. In his article, “Yu Dafu, Zhang Ziping, and Their Influences,”¹⁹ the modern writer Shen Congwen (1902-1988) compared the two leading figures of the Creation Society: both of them wrote extensively on modern man’s sexual

¹⁹ Shen’s article was first published in March 10, 1930 in *Xinyue* (*New Moon*) under the pseudonym of Jia Chen 甲辰.

love and bodily desires. However, “the works of Yu Dafu give us biological anguish, and we seek relief in Zhang Ziping’s works” (42). Shen approved of Yu Dafu’s consistent effort at self-expression as his “purest achievement” (39) in literature, which won him a lot of sympathy among young readers. By contrast, he apparently disapproved of Zhang Ziping’s formulaic love fictions and his pandering to the vulgar taste of the masses.

In 1914, Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping met for the first time at the First Higher School of Tokyo; later, they met again at Tokyo Imperial University. It was at this university that they held meetings, together with Guo Moruo (1892-1978), Cheng Fangwu (1897-1984), and others, to discuss the foundation of the Creation Society. The Creation Society was founded in July 1921 in Yu Dafu’s shabby apartment in Tokyo. At that time, Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping were apparently excited about the prospect of publishing their own literary works in China and they started to engage in creative writing with great enthusiasm. From 1920 to 1921, Yu Dafu wrote “Silver Death” (*yinhui se de si*, 1920), “Sinking” (*chenlun*, 1921) and “Migrating to the South” (*nanqian*, 1921), which were gathered together in the first short-fiction collection in Chinese history, *Sinking*, in 1921. Before Yu Dafu graduated from Tokyo Imperial University and finally returned to China in July 1922, he had also written “Stomach Trouble” (*weibing*, 1921), “Endless Night” (*mangmang ye*, 1922), “Nostomaniac” (*huaixiangbing zhe*, 1922), and “Emptiness” (*kongxu*, 1922).

Zhang Ziping was no less a productive writer than Yu Dafu. Prior to his return to China in May 1922, Zhang had completed “The Water of Yuetan River” (*yuetanhe zhi*

shui, 1920), “She Gazes into the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment” (*ta changwangzhe zuguo de tianye*, 1921), *Wooden Horse* (*muma*, 1922), “The Focus of Love” (*ai zhi jiaodian*, 1922), “Hyperbola and Asymptote” (*shuangquxian yu jianjinxian*, 1922), and the first full-length modern novel in Chinese history, *The Fossil of Alluvial Epoch* (*chongjiqi huashi*, 1922). The golden period of the Creation Society in the 1921-23 is largely due to their contributions. Most of the early works of Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping are based on their experiences in Japan. On the one hand, those works faithfully recorded the disappointment and frustration of modern individuals; on the other hand, those individual sentiments were expressed in the syntax of the nationalist discourse. Those works provide a textual ground on which one can set out to examine how Chinese nationalism is invoked as a redeeming force for the crisis of the individual’s self-consciousness. Those works have registered the writers’ effort and struggle to construct a viable modern subject through the mediation between the individual identity and the national identity. In this chapter, I will mainly focus on Yu Dafu’s “Sinking” and Zhang Ziping’s “She Gazes into the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment.” While both of them demonstrate the power of fantasmatic nationalist identification, they illustrate the working of the identification in different ways.

Yu Dafu’s “Sinking”

Yu Dafu’s “Sinking” portrays a Chinese male student in Japan who is troubled by low self-esteem, loneliness, paranoia, fear, hypochondria, sentimentality, hatred, sexual

frustration, and self-abjection. He yearns for sexual love, but is pulled back by his own feeling of inferiority. To release his sexual impulses, he starts to masturbate every morning, which only increases his sense of guilt. After a brief voyeuristic experience in an inn he runs away to an isolated hilltop cottage. There he overhears a couple making love among the bushes. He runs away again and ventures into a Japanese brothel, where he gets drunk and falls asleep. At the end of the story, filled with unbearable shame, the hero is standing by the ocean ready to commit suicide.

In his preface to the collection of stories, *Sinking*, Yu Dafu explained:

“Sinking” describes the psychology of a sick youth. It can be called an anatomy of hypochondria. It also describes as a broad theme the suffering of modern man – that is, sexual need and the clash between soul and flesh...In several places I have also mentioned the discrimination of Japanese nationalism against our Chinese students here (qtd. in L. Lee, *Romantic Generation* 111).

Michael Egan argues that “Sinking” is “essentially apolitical and individualistic, as opposed to social and ideological” (321.) Egan does not believe that there exists a compelling analogy between the sexual and the national, as he thinks the attempt “to make nationalism and anti-imperialism issues in a story of a pathological character must be considered a failure.” Nationalism, for Egan, has no bearing on the sexual frustration of the protagonist and it is “introduced almost as an afterthought” and is “irrelevant to the development of the story” (320-321). However, Egan’s analysis leaves two questions unanswered: first, does nationalism necessarily refer to the grand ideological superstructure that overrides the individual? Is it possible to discuss a form of nationalism

which is “personal and psychological, not exclusively political and ideological,” as Leo Ou-fan Lee has suggested (*Romantic Generation* 91)? Secondly, while Egan thinks it is arbitrary to say nationalism has some bearing on the psychological deterioration of the hero, is it possible to ask the question the other way around – that is, whether the “suffering of modern man” has any bearing on the invocation of nationalism?

With these questions in mind I set out to re-read “Sinking.” The story is not narrated in a chronological order. In Part One of “Sinking,” the hero is a loner who roams about in the pastoral landscape of the Japanese countryside, seeking refuge and comfort in nature. The hero believes that his “emotional precocity had placed him at constant odds with his fellow men” and he builds an increasingly thicker wall between himself and others (Lau et al. 125; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 16). Apparently, the hero finds his own existence both defective and painful, his self-consciousness unbearable. It has been mentioned several times that he wants to immerse himself in nature, as if “sleeping in the lap of a kind mother” (Lau et al. 125; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 17). Integration with nature means undoing the alienation of the self by reintegrating unity of body and soul. This moment is reminiscent of what Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* calls the “oceanic feeling.” According to Freud, the oceanic feeling can be traced back to an early phase of ego-feeling, in which the ego feels a “oneness with the universe” (19). It is the birth of self-consciousness that opens a breach in the limitless narcissism of the primal ego and forces it to realize the limited boundary of itself; consequently, the ego has to cope with the separation, which induces pain and suffering. Rejoining maternal nature, therefore,

implies that the hero tries to reclaim a certain enjoyment that he has lost as a consequence of his individuation and alienation, an enjoyment which can only be achieved through a regression from the hero's precocious self-consciousness.

It seems that the very sentiment embodied in the opening part of the story is echoed by the ending. At the end of the story, the hero stands before the vast ocean contemplating committing suicide. Kirk Denton points out that the vast and chaotic ocean represents "a kind of origin, a time prior to the alienation of modern self-consciousness, to which the protagonist desires to return" ("The Distant Shore" 113). However, the moment foreshadowing the hero's suicide expresses something more than the suffering born of the birth of self-consciousness; it contains a prominent nationalist tone, as the hero addresses China directly and mentions that many of his fellowmen are still suffering. It is evident that at the end of the story the tortured self-consciousness has found its representation in the nationalist discourse.

The nationalist theme, in fact, is introduced in the middle of the story; but the hero's psychological suffering had started as early as before he came to Japan. Part Three of "Sinking" is a flashback to the life of the hero before he came to Japan. The readers learn that, as an adolescent, the hero already deemed himself different from others. As a rebellious student who loved freedom, he was constantly shifting from school to school until he completely withdrew from them to stay at home, where he read books and wrote stories. Although the hero was able to find "a world of fantasy" in literature, "it was probably during this time that the seeds of his *hypochondria* were sown" (Lau et al. 129

Yu, *Wenji* 1, 27). Perhaps it was the absence of a father figure (the hero's father passed away when he was three) and the enlightening ideas in the Western books that prompted the hero's emotional precocity. At that time, the hero already consciously sought to alienate himself from other Chinese, as well as from China. When the opportunity came to go to Japan to study, he welcomed it without hesitation.

The idea of leaving China actually boosted the hero's so-called "dreams of the romantic age" (Lau et al. 130; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 28). After studying in Tokyo for one year, the hero moved to City N, because the latter was famous for its beautiful women. Ironically, the departure from Tokyo was depicted as much more distressing than his departure from China. On his way to City N, the hero suddenly became sentimental. He compared himself to the first Puritans who left their homeland to go to a new continent (Lau et al. 130; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 29). At that moment, the hero didn't harbor a single thought of his own homeland, which he had left one year before. Apparently the concept of nation or nationalism had yet to occur to him.

The isolation and loneliness the hero experienced in the rural environment of City N was both cultural and physical. He felt an inexplicable, yet profound sense of lack that could not be erased even by reading his favorite books. Within half a year, "his extreme sensitive nature also became adapted to the pastoral environment" (Lau et al. 132; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 32). It is from here on that the narrative finally connects to Part One of the story, where the hero was roaming in the Japanese countryside. In the vernal breeze of nature, the hero started to feel the palpable needs of his body. The "I" who desired a return to

motherly nature was simultaneously the “I” who committed the “crime” of masturbation, or the “I” who coveted the erotic bodies of Japanese women. Apparently, the symptom here is still “the suffering of modern man.” The eruptive bodily desire, which is the desire to approach and embrace the other, can be regarded as a desperate effort to make up for the lack in the modern self.

The nationalist theme is first invoked in the story as an explanation for the hero’s failure in sex appeal. One day, after an embarrassing encounter with two Japanese girls, the hero regretted his cowardice; then, on second thought, he cried out:

Oh, you fool! Even if they seemed interested, what are they to you? Isn’t it quite clear that their ogling was intended for the three Japanese? Oh, the girls must have known! They must have known that I am a Chinaman; otherwise why didn’t they even look at me once? Revenge! Revenge! I must seek revenge against their insult! (Lau et al. 127-128; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 23-24).

Here the hero located his individual failure in the framework of the national failure, in order to alleviate his individual crisis. For the first time he started to realize that he was in the wrong place, with the wrong people. It is from this point on that the hero starts to identify with the nation *sympathetically* by associating his own failure with the national failure. In his diary the hero repeatedly expressed his discontent: “Why did I come here to pursue my studies? Since you have come, is it a wonder that the Japanese treat you with contempt” (Lau et al. 125; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 17)?

However, the sympathetic identification with the nation is soon intercepted by a *fantasmatic* one. In the same diary entry, the hero fantasized the distant homeland to be

his lost paradise: “Isn’t the scenery in China as beautiful? Aren’t the girls in China as pretty? Why did I come to this island country in the eastern seas” (Lau et al. 128; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 24)? One can see that for the hero, China is both the source of his humiliation and the very opposite – a fantasmatic object redeeming him from humiliation. Therefore, the hero oscillates between the commitments to the real China and to an imaginary one, which somehow recuperated his dignity.

The fantasmatic identification with the nation derives from the hero’s “world of fantasy” back in China; it seems that the sympathetic identification with the nation serves as a catalyst for the fantasmatic identification, while the latter comes to dominate the hero’s psyche. The differentiation of We-ness and They-ness is central to the nationalist identification, yet the hero stands beyond such categorization – he remains the single *I* who resists being referred to either as We or They. The fantasmatic identification with the nation works to alienate him further from the Chinese community in reality. Probably out of the unconscious desire to dissociate himself from the label of “Chinaman” that had brought him humiliation, the hero shunned other Chinese students in the university. He even broke with his elder brother in China. Kirk Denton observes that the hero of “Sinking” “is caught in the paradoxical bind of the self-imposed exile: his conscious rejection of the motherland is continuously undermined by an obsessive desire to return to it” (“The Distant Shore, 110). However, the “motherland” that the hero desires to return to is one that does not exist – it is an imaginary land constructed in fantasy. The hero’s ultimate object of desire is not the sympathetic exchange with his fellowmen, but

with an imaginary “heart”: a “heart” that can understand and comfort him, “a warm and passionate heart and the sympathy that it generates and the love born of that sympathy” (Lau et al. 128; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 24).

It is for the same reason that the hero’s rampant sexual desires do not aim at any concrete erotic body. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that, in a sense, “Sinking” is not a story about a Chinese youth’s failed sex appeal; it is about the fundamental fear of losing his bodily integrity. The hero is obsessively preoccupied with the health and purity of his own body, as if guarding his body is the only means to recuperate his self-consciousness. Every time the hero committed masturbation he felt sinful, because he “was ordinarily a very self-respecting and clean person,” and was very much concerned about his health and body (Lau et al. 132; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 33). He tried to observe the old admonition that ‘one must not harm one’s body under any circumstances, since it is inherited from one’s parents (Lau et al. 132; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 33). The hero’s heightened concern for bodily integrity represents an aspiration to wholeness. While the split brought about by individuation creates an irreversible lack in his psyche, the body, as the ultimate and radical embodiment of the self, assumes the importance of preserving the unity and wholeness of self-existence.

Therefore, although the hero loved the white and plump bodies of Japanese women out of his biological instincts, the very bodies’ proximity was viewed as an immediate menace to his existence, as if the contact with the bodies would cost him his physical integrity and spiritual purity. Such a conviction turns the hero of “Sinking” into

a voyeur: one that keeps his desire secret and refuses to make any real advances. For instance, after peeking at the naked body of the innkeeper's daughter, though the hero experienced pleasure at first, he was soon seized by a neurotic fear and chose to move away immediately. Later, when he ran into a Japanese couple on a hill, he listened attentively to the sound of copulation, at the same time vehemently reproaching himself.

According to the French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the voyeuristic gaze is the "object lost and suddenly refound in the conflagration of shame, by the introduction of the other;" what the voyeur tries to see "is the object as absence" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 182). The lost object, therefore, can only be found in its absence, by the introduction of the other. If the lost object is regained by the subject, it will shake the foundation of the subject's existence, or even eliminate the subject. Although the hero was troubled by his self-consciousness, he valued it greatly. The bodies of Japanese women are mesmerizing objects which repeatedly return to threaten his self-consciousness; the bodies represent a radical enjoyment which unsettles the confidence in his own existence. Throughout the story, the Japanese female bodies become an unexorcisable specter that constantly looms close to the hero. Wherever he goes, the female bodies fortuitously show up to disturb his barely acquired psychological equilibrium. From the girl students in red skirts, to the naked body of the innkeeper's daughter, to the copulating couple, and finally to the prostitute, the bodies are constantly driving the hero into exile, invading his personal space and crushing him inexorably.

The problem with the bodies is that they are completely acquirable, too close –

which means that the bodies are only the shoddy substitute for his lost enjoyment, the impossible Thing. Žižek has stressed the inaccessibility of the Thing: “the Object is attainable only by way of an incessant postponement, as its absent point of reference. The Object, therefore, is literally something that is created – whose place is encircled – through a network of detours, approximations and near-misses” (“Obscene Object” 156). The nation thus emerges as an absent object which, in a way, resolves the hero’s psychological crisis – through desiring the nation as an imaginary object, the hero can keep his desires alive while preserving his bodily integrity. At one moment in the brothel the hero vowed to take China as his lover (Lau et al. 139; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 49); indeed, the nation would make an ideal object, as the nation in his imagination represents a remote enjoyment which the hero can never get.

Nationalism and “He”

The nation enters the hero’s mind via a sympathetic identification amid his crisis of consciousness; the crisis is not relieved until the nation is consumed by the “I” on a fantasmatic level. For the hero of “Sinking,” nationalism is not looked upon as a collective enterprise; rather, it is an individual harbor of refuge. The intervention of the nationalist concepts, in fact, reinforces the alienation of “I” from the Chinese community.

The nation as a fantasmatic object is directly consumed by the unconscious desire to make up for the crisis of the self. The nation is invoked as a lost object of enjoyment, which recuperates the inherent lack in the character’s individual consciousness. While all

the other rational nationalist discourses sought to identify the masculine subject with the national subject, the invocation of nationalism in “Sinking” only leads to the intensified identification of the narcissistic “I”. Even if the hero is aware of the difference between the Chinese and the Japanese – “we” and “they” – he is reluctant to situate himself in any community. The hero’s concern for body and selfhood actually represents the universal concern of modern man. As Bonnie McDougall points out, the collective counterpart of this discovery of the individual in the May Fourth era was not the national community but the universe or the world in general, “identification with mankind as a whole was a more progressive and enlightened way of thinking than identification with any particular race or nation” (44-45; Fitzgerald 93).

The consumption of the nation as an imaginary object is, therefore, based on a foundation which is universal – “the suffering of modern man.” The individual’s affective tie to the nation is created as a nostalgic tendency to recuperate the lack in the modern self-consciousness, through an imaginary world where the individual can find freedom and enjoyment. John Fitzgerald points out that in the New Culture Movement, “radical intellectuals had anticipated little conflict between the wider demands of nation-building and their own demands for individual freedom” (100). Nationalism was not looked upon as an adverse condition for individualism; instead, it could open a space where individuals could seek empowerment and enjoyment. In this way, the kind of “nationalism” in “Sinking” challenges the rational and collective nationalist project in the early twentieth century.

“Sinking” is narrated in the third-person pronoun “he” (*ta*). The Chinese singular pronoun *ta* stands for the hero’s solitary self-consciousness which is “separated from the cultural ‘we’” (Denton, “Distant Shore” 110). However, *ta* as a masculine pronoun also carries with it the moral burden ascribed to the masculine subjects. C.T. Hsia asserts that what distinguishes the “modern” phase of Chinese literature from all the other phases is “its burden of moral contemplation: its obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity” (Hsia & Wang 533-534). This moral obligation is often associated with the sympathetic identification with China. In other words, the moral imperative is the rational means to sustain the sympathetic identification with the nation. Therefore, on the one hand, the hero, as a modern individual, consciously seeks self-exile to immerse himself in his world of fantasy; on the other hand, as a Chinese man, the hero constantly faces the rational imperative to maintain the identification with the national community. The hero is caught in a dilemma of choosing between two identifications – the sympathetic identification and the fantasmatic identification.

In fact, these two identifications do not always oppose each other. For example, in “Sinking,” the hero’s heightened concern for his own body can be understood as his persistent pursuit of an imaginary unity of the self, but it also converges with the concern for the male body in the popular nationalist discourse. Since China’s defeat in the Opium Wars and the subsequent suppression of the Boxer Rebellion by Western powers, Chinese people had been called “the sick man of East Asia” (*dongya bingfu*). China’s national

vulnerability was associated with the absence of a robust physicality and a vigorous sexuality. The weakness of Chinese men was at once individual and national. The fortification of the sickly bodies, therefore, carried a significance of strengthening the national power. For example, spermatorrhea was a category of disease deeply rooted in the ideas of vitality that had sustained Chinese medicine since the late classical period. Hugh Shapiro's research shows that during the early twentieth century, a striking amount of public discussion and attention was devoted to spermatorrhea. The clinical record also suggested a disproportionate concentration on this malady (553). In the traditional Chinese medical discourse, semen (*jing*) was regarded as the concentrated material provision for the masculine vitality; a body depleted by the loss of semen would leave one vulnerable to external attack. Conserving the seminal essence was thus fundamental to the body's defense (554), which was associated with the nation's integrity and strength. By the same token, the medical discourse also forbade masturbation, which was perceived as sapping man's virility and endangering the national strength, and emphasized the importance of self-control.

At other times, however, the sympathetic nationalist identification can be regarded as toxic to the fantasmatic one. A prominent example of this is at the end of the story, when contemplating suicide, the hero says between pauses: "O China, my China, you are the cause of my death! ... I wish you could become rich and strong soon! ... Many, many of your children are still suffering" (Lau et al. 141; Yu, *Wenji* 1, 53). It seems that in his last words the hero returns to the sympathetic identification with the

nation, as he mentions that other “children” – his fellow men, are still suffering; his wish that China can become rich and strong also implies his awareness of the reality that China is *not* rich and strong. Yet this painful sympathetic identification with the nation is achieved at the cost of the death of the “I” – the singular self-consciousness. The hero declares that China is the cause of his death, as if his self-consciousness cannot bear the torture or burden of sympathetically identifying with China, or as if the access to the “world of fantasy” is cut off by the encounter with reality.

Throughout the story, the conflict between the sympathetic identification and the fantasmatic identification with the nation creates an *impossible* masculine subject. As much as the third-person pronoun *ta* is resourceful in creating a “world of fantasy” as the foundation of the hero’s self-consciousness, he is also obliged to fulfill the moral burden as an indispensable part of constructing his subjectivity. In this highly autobiographical work, the dilemma of the hero mirrors that of the writer. Yu Dafu himself was an ardent celebrant of self-discovery, as is proven by his famous words: “The greatest success of the May Fourth Movement lay, first of all, in the discovery of individual personality” (qtd. in L. Lee, *Romantic Generation* 263) At the same time, Yu was also widely known as a patriot. Like the hero in “Sinking,” the writer Yu Dafu was caught between the two levels of nationalist identification.

One of Yu Dafu’s essays, “Sailing Home” (*guihang*), which was written immediately after he returned to China in 1922, illustrates how the two levels of nationalist identification superseded each other in his writing. In this essay, Yu

emotionally recalled the ten years he had spent in Japan, which he referred to as the “Island country” (*daoguo*). When he was leaving “the ferocious little country,” he dreamed that he was returning to the imaginary homeland: “He will ride on the white crane to go back to the arms of his mother. Once he goes back, he will embrace the Nishang Fairy and enjoy the songs and dances night after night; he will never have to beg for your mercy” (15). Here, the fantasmatic identification with the homeland not only helps to cover the wound which epitomizes the ten years of shame and hatred in Japan, but also creates a wonderland where his ideal self can roam freely.

On the ship home, however, when the writer saw a young “Euroasian”²⁰ girl who was talking with a white man, he suddenly became enraged. In deep shame and indignation, Yu Dafu wrote:

Young girl, my half compatriot! Your mother has been besmirched by the beast of foreigners; on no account shall you be intimate with them! I’m not thinking of you, I’m not coveting your beauty; but how could I possibly endure it if a beauty like you is ravaged by the beast-like foreigner? Fire comes out of my eyes as soon as I imagine your soft and dark-yellow body under the corpulent and swinish trunk of the foreigner. Girl! I don’t need you to love me, nor do I need you to share a dream with me. I only beg you, do not give your body to the foreigner’s pleasures. There are handsome men in China; there are men in China who were as strong as the black men; there are rich men in China who have millions. Why do you have to go to the foreigners? Ah~ China may die, but Chinese women cannot be raped by the foreigners (20).

As soon as the writer saw the half-Chinese woman with a foreigner, Yu Dafu was spontaneously awakened to a sympathetic identification with China. Yet, again, this

²⁰ Yu Dafu used the word “Euroasian” to refer to the girl who is born from a Chinese mother and a white father.

sympathetic identification is intercepted by a fantasmatic one. The writer emphasized that he is not speaking for himself – he speaks as a guardian of the nation. However, the nation he speaks for is one that exists in the imaginary domain. It is the female body, rather than territory, that marks the boundary of this imaginary nation. The core of such a nation-state is enjoyment, and Yu Dafu makes it clear that enjoyment is more important than the existence of the nation as a sovereign state: “China may die, but Chinese women cannot be raped by the foreigners.” It is evident that the nation as the object of love exists only as long as it sustains the fantasmatic construction of enjoyment.

Paradoxically, the nation as object of love is also an object of absence. It is not directly desired until the subject identifies it in the presence of the *other*. For the masculine subject, it is as if there is no way to pursue the nation as a loved object in a positive manner; the nation has to be approached and grasped negatively, through its very absence. As the ship sailed toward the land of China, the writer was approaching his nation physically. The excitement of returning to his homeland was replaced by an anxiety to embrace it. As the distance from the homeland died away, his fantasies of the homeland started to dissolve: “Looking at the shadow of the night outside the ship, my heart is like the brightness of the day being eaten by the darkness bit by bit” (21). He thought of the dark future which awaited him; he thought of how his ancestor had been maltreated in China and had thrown himself into the sea. It occurred to him that returning to China was a wrong decision: “Alas, alas, alas, alas! I’m wrong, I’m wrong. I would rather be humiliated by the people of other nations than by my own compatriots” (21).

Actually, in 1919, after Yu Dafu graduated from a high school in Nagoya, he wanted to find a governmental position in China, so he returned to China to take the examinations of diplomat and civil officer, respectively. But he failed in both due to bureaucratic corruption. He had to return to Japan in disappointment and resentment. The prospect in China once again appeared very gloomy to him.

Sailing away from Japan, the writer was losing the distance that could assure the mechanism of fantasy; therefore, he was sailing away from his enjoyment. In the last paragraph, like the hero in “Sinking,” the writer was foreseeing his own death: “Japan, Japan, I’m leaving. [...] But once I suffered enough from my homeland and have to commit suicide, the last image occurring in my head is probably you. *Avé Japon*. My future is quite gloomy” (21)! Here, the fantasmatic identification with the nation is inevitably undermined by the proximity of the object of desire; it is then superseded by a sympathetic identification with the nation, in which the writer foresees his own suffering and gloomy future.

In both “Sinking” and the essay “Sailing Home,” the death of the self is the last image Yu Dafu leaves for the readers. It seems that the moral obligation of returning to the real China, both physically and symbolically, always poses the danger of terminating the fantasmatic identification with China and throws the subject into excruciating suffering. Yet the end of the fantasmatic identification also means the end of the existence of the subjective consciousness, without which no national identification can be achieved. Is it true that the nation can only be desired as an object of absence? This is the vicious

circle that the masculine subject has to painfully deal with.

“She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment”

“Sinking” was finished in May, 1921. It was only one month earlier that Zhang Ziping wrote the less-known short story “She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment,”²¹ during a trip to the suburb of Tokyo. The story revolves around Qiu’er, the daughter of a Chinese merchant and a Japanese woman. She was born and brought up in Japan and had never been to China. When Qiu’er grows up, she goes to Tokyo to work, where she is raped by a Japanese man whom she refused to marry. After Qiu’er finds out that she is pregnant, she cohabits with the Japanese man for a short period until he abandons her. Back home, she has a miscarriage and becomes a prostitute afterwards. One of Qiu’er’s clients, a Chinese student (H), arouses her immense desire to “return to” China. Intoxicated by this dream, she not only sleeps with H but also falls in love with him. However, H abandons her. At the end of the story, all Qiu’er can do is to “look at the sky of the homeland in disappointment.”

Similar to the hero of “Sinking,” Qiu’er is a precocious and sentimental girl who becomes aware of her physical beauty at a very early age. It is probably due to her special origins – she is born of a Chinese father and a Japanese mother – that Qiu’er always finds herself different from the others. In the beginning of the story, Qiu’er’s concern about herself mainly focuses on her body. As she grows up, Qiu’er only wants to use her

²¹ Zhang Ziping *xiaoshuo xuan*, 15-31.

physical charm to secure a dependent style of life, such as a maidservant in a noble family (20). When she ends up being a worker in a suburban workplace, her sentimental character begins to reveal itself. Sorrowful music can easily bring tears to her eyes; even if she is in a jubilant crowd, she still feels a sad atmosphere surrounding her (21). Her feeling of loneliness and sadness seem to have come from nowhere, as she was not in love with anyone or suffering hardships in life. However, at this stage, Qiu'er is only sentimental, not fully self-conscious.

As the integrity of her body is of utmost importance to Qiu'er, she refuses to marry the Japanese man who wants her. However, after she loses her virginity to him, her Chinese identity is mysteriously activated; under the idea that a woman should "be faithful to a husband till death" (*congyi erzhong*), she actively seeks a long-term relationship with her rapist. The failure to observe the teaching of "be faithful to a husband till death" is catastrophic for Qiu'er. After the Japanese man abandons her, Qiu'er becomes a prostitute, not for the sake of money, but due to the suffering in her consciousness: "Qiu'er valued her body more than money, and now she values money more than her body. The bodily suffering is minor compared with the suffering of mind, so Qiu'er sacrifices her body to earn money, in order to alleviate the suffering of the mind" (18). Deep in Qiu'er's mind, there is still the desire to recuperate the unity of life – to "be faithful to a husband till death"; independence or self-respect is not her concern, as she claims: "I would rather become a concubine. I would rather be the plaything of one man. But I would not be the plaything of many men" (17-18).

It is again this unquenchable belief that draws Qiu'er to H – a Chinese student in Japan. In order to seduce Qiu'er, H portrays China, the homeland of her deceased Chinese father, as a wonderland where she can redeem herself from her sufferings, and he promises to take Qiu'er to China. Qiu'er used to hate the Chinese, but now she starts to “miss” the distant homeland which she has never visited, and she forgets her hatred of the Chinese. She wants to go to China and restore her Chinese nationality. Out of this rekindled hope for enjoyment, Qiu'er falls in love with H, as if by attaching herself to this Chinese man she can connect herself to her imaginary homeland. Yet at the end she is abandoned again; what she can do is merely to look at the sky of the homeland in disappointment:

Qiu'er is a Chinese. After her father Lin Shang's death, she hates the Chinese, but she does not hate China. On the contrary, she longs for China a great deal. She wants to go to China to look at the unique mountains and rivers. Now she is desperate! Her half-brother does not love her. The Chinese she longs for does not love her. Her haggard brothers, who work on the lonely island of Japan, like her, cannot restore the Chinese nationality! After all, she has to remain the foster child of a greedy pastor in a lonely fishing village! She has to stick to the Japanese nationality! She has to restore the hatred to the Chinese that she had before (31)!

At the first glance, the story is more about the tragic life of a woman than nationalism that is blatantly claimed in the title. As a mixed-blood growing up in Japan, Qiu'er knows virtually nothing about China or Chinese culture. The insertion of the nationalist theme seems quite arbitrary and irrelevant. Yet, at second glance, “She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment” actually shares a common theme with Yu

Dafu's "Sinking": the nation is invoked as a fantasmatic object which can complete the wholeness that the protagonist searches for. Although Qiu'er does not have as highly a developed self-consciousness as the hero in "Sinking," she nonetheless suffers from her individuation and separation, first physically and then psychologically. Throughout the story, Qiu'er always exhibits strong desires to ease the pain of her individual existence by attaching her self to something or somebody else.

It is unclear how the traditional Chinese teaching on woman's virtue, "be faithful to a husband till death," comes into Qiu'er's mind. Qiu'er's father had died when she was only four months old, and her Japanese mother, who married an old Japanese pastor after the first husband's death, is definitely not an observer, and seemingly not a transmitter, of this teaching. In fact, Qiu'er's insistence on this teaching quite behind the time in other people's eyes; all of the other characters in the story – her mother, the Japanese man who raped her, and the Chinese student H – all ignore this tradition. However, it is precisely in such a regressive sentiment that Qiu'er can find an outlet to express her innermost longing. For her, "be faithful to a husband till death" is not really about how a virtuous woman should behave in society, but how a modern individual can ease his/her suffering. Qiu'er's relation to the imaginary nation is not merely a reduplication of the traditional model of female loyalty, because the nation is put forward as an object both of loyalty and of affection. It is ultimately a symbolic means to recreate the primordial unity which has been broken for the sake of individuation, an unconscious desire to regain the lost enjoyment through the merging of self and the other through the bond of love.

In the title of the short story, Zhang Ziping used the word “*chang*” (怅) to describe the gaze that Qiu’er directs to her homeland. In Chinese, *Chang* refers to a kind of distress or frustration, a tendency to depression and a sense of futility and despair, which is always accompanied by a melancholic feeling of loss. Similar to the hero in “Sinking,” Qiu’er does not know consciously what she has really lost and what exactly her object of desire is. As the hero in “Sinking” repeatedly invokes the imaginary nation to alleviate his sexual frustration, Qiu’er finally finds the unknown homeland as a viable object of her longing. China for Qiu’er is literally an object of absence, but precisely because Qiu’er is radically alienated from the Chinese community and has no real knowledge of China, she can freely imagine China as a paradisiacal land where all her individual sufferings will be eased and her ideal self can be found.

Unlike Yu Dafu’s “Sinking,” which ruthlessly records the shame and humiliation at both the individual level and the national level, the special setting of “She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment” makes it possible to avoid any direct confrontation of China’s national failure in the story. There are only a couple of comparisons between China and Japan, such as “Japan is a nation of laws, unlike China, which has too many subtleties”(19); and “The living conditions in Japan are ten times better than China” (20) The distant and unknown China is indirectly introduced to Qiu’er by the Chinese student H as a paradisiacal homeland. Qiu’er’s case demonstrates that the innate lack of the individual is not necessarily associated with a national inferiority complex via the sympathetic identification. The national crisis is not necessarily the cause

of the individual crisis, nor is the knowledge of the real national problem necessarily a prerequisite for the nationalistic identification. What propels the individual's attachment to the nation is that the nation as an imaginary object offers a domain where the individual can regain a sense of unity and wholeness.

The feminine identity of Qiu'er frees her from the obligation to situate herself in the Chinese community. While the hero of "Sinking" still considers his detachment from the Chinese community as an unseemly act, Qiu'er's alienation appears to be justifiable and natural. Her utterance of the words "be faithful to a husband till death" challenges the rational model of nationalism with an affective one. Qiu'er's nationalist identification is not grounded in the realization of any solid Chinese identity; her relation to China as an imaginary nation, in this way, contains no political implications, but is purely affective. However, it can nonetheless produce an unbreakable emotional tie with the nation as an imaginary object.

Nationalism and "She"

Anne McClintock asserts that nationalisms typically spring from "masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope;" women, on the other hand, as symbolic bearers of the nation, are denied direct access to national agency (89-90). Women participate in the masculine nationalist discourses as bodies, symbols, and signifiers, but are hardly able to occupy the subject position. In the early twentieth century, female bodies were frequently treated more as the "subjected territory across

which the boundaries of nationhood were marked than active participants in the construction of nations” (Hall et al. 162). The integrity of female bodies, as represented in female virtue, was elevated to an unprecedented height, because it was associated with the national integrity. This association was evident in the heightened concern with preserving female virtue in the early twentieth century. “Virtuous and chaste girls” schools (*zhennü yixue; baonü yixueyuan*) sprouted everywhere; and the journals about women, such as the *Fünü Zazhi* (Women’s Journal) of the early 1920s, were filled with essays anxiously talking about the problem of gender mixing (Duara, “Regime of Authenticity” 298). On the other hand, woman was a unique signifier of Chineseness and of the Chinese culture’s absolute difference from the West. The struggle for China’s survival was as much as a struggle to protect its cultural integrity as it was to defend its territorial integrity (Judge, “Talent, Virtue, and the Nation” 768). Chinese women, whose traditional role was to attend family and raise children, now carried the responsibility of maintaining the cultural tradition. The figure of woman thus embodied longstanding cultural norms and personified the essence of the national tradition.

Zhang Ziping’s use of a female protagonist offers an interesting case, in that it explores the possibility of the constitution of a feminine nationalist subject. First of all, the choice of the female protagonist “she” strengthens the individual’s alienation from any ethnic or national community. As a woman who has no knowledge of China, Qiu’er is neither a symbolic bearer of the nation nor a signifier of Chineseness, and thus she has no ethical obligation to sympathize with other Chinese people. From the beginning

Qiu'er is absorbed in her personal world. Compared with the hero in "Sinking," who now and then had to be troubled with his identity as a Chinaman, Qiu'er's self-consciousness is never challenged by such a collective identity. In "She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment," other than the respectable deceased father, the two Chinese men – Qiu'er's half-brother Shoushan and the Chinese student H – are both depicted through a negative lens. Shoushan is a greedy man who cares nothing about the wellbeing of Qiu'er and her mother; H is a lustful playboy who has no sense of morality. Therefore, as a literary surrogate of the writer himself, the choice of a female protagonist in fact represents a radical form of individuation or alienation.

In this way, Qiu'er can be read as an alter ego of the writer, and her story as a typical account of an individual's struggles that the writer experienced. The suffering of modern man Zhang Ziping's other stories also. In Zhang Ziping's first highly autobiographical short story "The Water of Yuetan River" (1920), he compared the fatherless protagonist to "a piece of duckweed in the storms of the bitter sea, drifting around" (2). The male protagonist felt that that there was no place to make his home.

Like Zhang Ziping, Qiu'er "hates the Chinese, but not China" (31). This radical alienation from the collective identity is a real portrait of the writer himself. As a matter of fact, it had been difficult for Zhang Ziping to identify with the Chinese community. According to him, because of his hypersensitivity and keen intuition, he was always too quick to see others' problems; thus he was bad at socializing with other Chinese students in Japan. Zhang was almost relentless in severing himself from the other Chinese. In his

early stories, the narrator or protagonist never fully identifies himself with the other Chinese – he is always the spectator who observes other people and incidents with a certain sense of aloofness. In the beginning of “Wooden Horse” (*muma*), for instance, Zhang Ziping depicted the “bad habits” of Chinese students in the public spaces in Japan, such as spitting on the ground, wiping off nasal mucus with fingers, licking the public scoop in the dining hall, and neglecting their personal hygiene (33). The protagonist has a strong repulsion to the collective identity of Chinese, and wants to be referred to as a unique individual. In Zhang Ziping’s mind, it is shameful to identify himself with the other Chinese, whom he thought of as very different from, and inferior to, himself.

Secondly, in “She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment,” Qiu’er’s relationship toward the nation is different from that of the hero in “Sinking.” In “Sinking,” the hero experiences two alternating modes of nationalist identifications: a sympathetic one and a fantasmatic one. The sympathetic identification is gender-specific, which endows the subject uniformly with a masculine identity. The hero mainly imagines the nation in feminine terms: the nation represents the land where his sexual desires will be satisfied and his masculine identity will be affirmed. The fantasmatic identification, on the other hand, is not limited to a specific gender.

By contrast, in “She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment,” there is only one level of identification – the fantasmatic identification with the nation. Because Qiu’er is a woman with no knowledge of China, the sympathetic nationalist identification cannot find a foothold. In the fantasmatic identification, a woman becomes a desiring

subject without losing her gender identity. In the story, China is unequivocally invoked as the “fatherland,”²² a land where the self would find shelter and regain the sense of belongingness. Qiu’er loves H heart and soul because she believes that H can be her “permanent protector” (28), and she can resume her dream of “being faithful to a husband till death” with H. These are typical feminine desires per se. Therefore, as a woman, Qiu’er actively participates in the process of desiring, including desiring the nation as a love object.

As I have mentioned, although the sympathetic nationalist identification is affective in nature, it is subsumed under the rational scheme of building a nation. The masculine subject faces the rational imperative to keep identifying with the nation via a sympathetic connection. However, the sympathetic identification with the nation will produce a masculine self that is somewhat limited, if not battered, because China’s national weakness inevitably “conditions a symbolic castration of the Chinese male” (Shih, *Lure of the Modern* 116). In this way, the sympathetic identification with the nation, like the other rational nationalist sentiments, does not serve as an empowering mechanism for the individual. As an emotional discharge which cannot sustain itself and only occurs sporadically, the sympathetic identification with the nation needs an extra urge to persist.

²² Zhang Ziping’s mother died when he was very young, and his father had devoted his entire life to his son. For Zhang Ziping, the love of father represented the most profound love in his life. When Zhang Ziping received the news of his father’s death in Japan in 1917, he was stricken by enormous grief, and even thought of ending his life. In “She Looks at the Sky of the Homeland in Disappointment,” the nation as the object of love also embodies such a fatherly figure.

The employment of a female individual as a fictional protagonist, therefore, represents a masculine desire to transcend this given limitedness. While Yu Dafu's character faces the ordeal of observing the moral obligation of the masculine subject and suffering from the self's consciousness, Qiu'er, in contrast, flings herself into the longing of China without any reservation. The introduction of woman as a nationalist subject actually creates a freer domain for the individual's affiliation with the nation. Through the literary image of woman, it is easier for the writer to reconstruct the nation as an object of love and enjoyment: the writer is able to distance himself from the collective identity of Chinese and to imagine and enjoy the nation with relative freedom.

The literary image of woman thus can be regarded as a haven where the male individual can extricate himself temporarily from the unbearable burden of having a distinctive self-consciousness and moral obligation. In fact, Yu Dafu, who had struggled with his masculine sexuality, also occasionally wrote about the nation in a feminine tone. In 1926, Yu Dafu confessed that "Witnessing the sinking of the homeland, and suffering the humiliation in another country," there was nothing but sorrow; he was like "a young lady whose husband has just died," who was filled with the feeling of weakness, timidity, and sadness – "and all these added up to the controversial 'Sinking'" (*wenji* 7, 250). Even in Yu's "Sinking," the male protagonist is portrayed as an effeminate man who fails to live up to masculine ideals. When he determined to commit suicide after "losing his body" to the Japanese prostitute, it seems to imply that his ideal self is no different from that of Qiu'er – to "be faithful to a husband till death."

However, does the employment of a female character mean the abjuration of the masculine identity? The answer is no. The creation of a female nationalist subject in literary representation has a double significance: on the one hand, it represents the domain of freedom for the masculine subject; on the other hand, the image of the longing woman constantly invites love and sympathy from the masculine subjects, and works as an intermediate love object between them and the nation-state. The woman, therefore, represents both what man desires to be and what he loves; she is, in other words, a materialization of the fantasmatic nation-object, through which the individual's unconscious desire to regain unity and wholeness can be fulfilled. This model of indirect nationalist identification through the love of women abounded in the romantic fiction of the May Fourth era. As Haiyan Lee writes, both May Fourth romantic fiction and nationalism are "premised on a code of intimacy as the only authentic and morally legitimate mode of constructing social relationships" (249). In this sense, although both Zhang Ziping and Yu Dafu wrote intensively of sexual love, instead of nationalism, in their later literary careers, their subject matter nonetheless can be regarded as complying with the commitment of constructing a nationalist subject, albeit affectively. The sentimental, decadent, and amorous (male) protagonists represent a "self-involved interiority and a deep and authentic awareness of modern crisis" (J. Liu 91) that cannot be expressed within a masculine voice.

Zhang Ziping was never committed to the popular version of nationalism. In an article written in response to Guo Moruo's poetry collection *Goddess (nüshen)*, (1922), he

called Chinese people “the most miserable people in the world,” whose patriotism was “the provincial patriotism – the dead patriotism” (“Zhi nüshen duzhe” 34-34). So what is the live patriotism? Zhang Ziping didn’t explain in his article. Yet it is certain that the kind of patriotism that Zhang Ziping advocated did not pass the sanction of the ideological machine at that time. In his Yan’an talks on literature and art in 1942, Mao Zedong specifically criticized Zhang Ziping as one of the representatives of “traitor literati” (*hanjian wenren*) (Mao 113). It is true that the individual’s affective identification with the nation does not always entail his political correctness; however, even the nationalist movement as a political campaign has to constantly derive its motivating force from the individual’s affective relation with the nation.

The modern writer Zhu Ziqing (1898-1948) used to assert that the emotions embodied in romantic fiction are “undisciplined” and “cannot produce practical effects.” He believed that the individual’s romantic feeling were “unimportant matters” as opposed to the more urgent work – revolution (L. Lee, *Romantic Generation* 273). However, the romantic fiction of Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping represents modern Chinese individuals’ experimentation, exploration, creation, and compromise during the transition from rational nationalism to affective nationalism. The animated emotions in their stories are nonetheless a powerhouse for political movements. The marriage of romantic fiction and nationalism produces, as Ban Wang suggests, a kind of “political sexuality,” which means that sexuality is “culturally orchestrated” and assumes “public forms in finding outlets and fulfillment” (134). In both Yu Dafu and Zhang Ziping’s stories, the nation as a

fantasmatic object lies forever at the other shore, a shore which is beyond reach; as an absent object it works to organize the subject's enjoyment by creating an imaginary domain of freedom and unity.

Chapter Three: Plumbing the Abject

The Modern Woman and its Other in Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiying's Stories

[The abject is] what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.

——Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4

She will not grow old, she will only die. She will be forever young and jocund.
Don't you see she is always smiling at people?

——Shi Zhecun, “Kumarajiva,” 34

The May Fourth Movement promoted a series of profound social and cultural revolutions, one of which was the liberation of women.²³ Chinese men felt the urgency to liberate Chinese women because they realized that there could be no transformation of China without transforming the female condition.²⁴ Chinese male intellectuals realized that true democracy, which was one of the two emblems of the May Fourth spirit, could not be achieved without women's liberation. In September 1915, Chen Duxiu (1879-1942)

²³ According to Tani Barlow, a rash of masculinist interest in woman had emerged as early as the 1830s. Anti-foot-binding and female education were two concerns for the male intellectuals in the late 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. Male reformers in the 1860s spoke admiringly of “enlightened” relations between woman and man in Western countries. See Tani E. Barlow, “Theorizing Woman: *Funi*, *Guojia*, *Jiating*.” In *Body, Subject & Power in China*. Ed., Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.262.

²⁴ The Kang-Liang reforms of the last years of the nineteenth century argued that the reform of China's women was fundamental to China's modernization. See Edwards, p.126.

published “To the Youth” (*jinggao qingnian*) in the inaugural issue of *New Youth*, in which he called upon the Chinese women to break away from the bondage of slavery and seek independent and free subjectivity. Other intellectuals, such as Li Dazhao (1889-1927), Lu Xun, Hu Shi (1891-1962), Li Da (1890-1966) and Ye Shaojun (1894-1988), responded to Chen Duxiu with a significant number of passionate articles.²⁵ During the first few decades of the twentieth century, contending groups of Chinese intellectuals used the “woman question” to address issues of modernity and nationalism (S. Stevens 82). All of them envisioned a new creature, the New Woman (*xin nüxing*), who was conceived as politically aware, patriotic, independent, and educated.

Against this historical background, the new woman emerged as a creature born of the male intellectuals’ radical challenge to the Confucian ideology and their enthusiasm in saluting the Chinese modernity. The New Woman trope was frequently invoked to represent a positive view of linear modernity and hopes for a strong Chinese nation-state. However, it is widely believed that the new woman is a discursive construction which is completely under the supervision of the masculine discourse. Some scholars point out

²⁵ The articles on the women’s problem include: Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, “孔子之道与现代生活” [The Confucian Way and Modern Life] (Dec, 1916); “妇女问题与社会主义” [Women’s Problem and Socialism] (Jan, 1921); Hu Shi 胡适, “贞操问题” [On the Issue of Chastity], (July,1918); “李超传” [The Story of Li Chao] (Dec, 1919); Li Dazhao 李大钊, “战后妇女问题” [The Women’s Problem after the War] (Feb, 1919); “现代的女权运动” [The Modern Feminist Movement] (Jan 1922); “妇女解放与 Democracy” [Women’s Liberation and Democracy](Oct, 1919); 鲁迅 Lu Xun, “我之节烈观” [My Views on Chastity] (Aug, 1918); 李达 Li Da “女子解放论” [On Women’s Liberation] (Oct, 1919); 张慰慈 Zhang Huici, “女子解放与家庭改变” [Women’s Liberation and Changes in the Family] (Aug, 1919); 叶绍钧 Ye Shaojun, “女子人格问题”[On Women’s Personality] (Feb, 1916); 向警予 Xiang Jingyu, “女子解放与改造的商榷” [Discussion on Women’s Liberation and Reform] (May, 1920).

that the New Woman actually did not play the role of “a subject of representation and an autonomous agent”(Barlow, “Theorizing Woman” 266); she was “first and foremost a trope in the discourses of masculinist, Europeanist, Chinese realist fiction” (Barlow, “Theorizing Woman” 267). Such a view seems to suggest that the New Woman trope is a derivative of the masculinist discourse and is well contained in the latter. For the same reason, all the causes and developments of the contradictions and controversies of the New Woman are already inscribed in the masculinist discourse, which is responsible for its creation. However, if the creation of the New Woman trope is completely an extension of the masculinist power, how can it maintain its radical otherness to its creator? Why can such a creation be, as some believe, constructive of the masculine discourse and the (masculine) modern subjectivity? With these questions in mind, this chapter sets out to rethink some of the statements about the relationship between the trope of the New Woman and the masculine discourse’s appropriation of it. Through the fiction of two New Sensationalist (*xin ganjue*) writers, I will focus on a variation and anomaly of the New Woman trope: the modern woman (*xiandai nixing*), whose literary representations not only transgress the attempted containment of the masculine discourse, but also function to rectify and guide the masculine subjects into modernizing themselves.

The New Woman and the Modern Woman

Women’s bodies are a privileged site of contestatory meanings, where one can find male fantasies and male anxiety about modernity. The trope of the New Woman was

never a transparent or controllable creature for male intellectuals. The male intellectuals hoped to make a clear demarcation from the past by imagining and creating the trope of the New Woman. However, after the New Woman trope was established, the male intellectuals had to constantly supervise and police it by criticizing and exorcising the “bad” tendencies or elements that might tarnish the trope. The paean of praise to the New Woman had to be composed against a background cacophony of condemning the “bad woman,” or the “bad new woman.” It is hard to tell what the absolute or ultimate standard is to distinguish a new woman from her variations. Sometimes the very new woman that some people praised would appear negative in other people’s eyes. Many Chinese writers, including Li Haiqiu (1873-1923), Lu Xun, Mao Dun, and Bao Xiaotian (1876-1973), wrote literary works in which the new woman was discredited, mocked, or disparaged by her male counterpart.²⁶

Among all the representations of the New Woman, the most controversial, and probably the most widely criticized image, was that of the modern woman. The modern woman emerged when the new woman entered the “cultural and economic circulation on [her] own accord” (Barlow, “Theorizing Woman” 267) in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In Chinese urban areas, commercial power usurped the initially politically-oriented new woman and transformed her into a strange creature, against the will of her creators. In this commercial framework, the modern woman was “glamorous, fashionable, desirable,

²⁶ Some representative works are Li Haiqiu’s *The Tides of Yangzhou* (*guangling chao*, 1911), Lu Xun’s “Regrets for the Past” (*shangshi*, 1925), Mao Dun’s *Shi* Trilogy (1927-1929) and “Creation” (*chuangzao*, 1928), and Bao Xiaotian’s “Farewell” (*zaihui*, 1921).

and available” (Edwards 116). As the new object of desire in the urban milieu, the modern woman commercially rather than politically centered. The modern woman represents both new forms of pleasure, and unprecedented autonomy. The term “modern woman” was used most frequently to refer to female film star, singing girl, and professional women. The stereotypical new woman wears the most fashionable clothes, goes to theaters or shows without men’s company. She is a frequenter of various dance parties, an old customer of the largest shops, and an advocator of free love.

The fascinating image of modern women constituted an outstanding urban spectacle in the modernizing cities like Shanghai. Chinese men probably had never seen so many women in public spaces in the last five thousand years as they saw in the first decade following the May Fourth movement. The figure of the modern woman became a consumable entertainment symbol and occupied the media. Men found more and more erotic and beautiful pictures of modern women in magazines, pictorial advertisements, and wall calendars. On the cover of magazines such as *Liangyou Huabao* (*Good Friend Pictorial*), *Furen Huabao* (*Lady Pictorial*), and *Libailiu* (*Saturday*), the charming modern woman was designed to lure the reader into the magazine’s written contents, which sometimes were intellectual (L. Lee, *Shanghai Modern* 66). These new urban media had abolished the division of literature and life; in the fiction sections there were also essays on love, cosmetics and fashion, and techniques of contraception; lectures on modern life; and numerous pictures of modern women. They attracted a large number of female readers. In fact, women not only participated in the reproduction of urban culture as

readers, but more actively, as the editors and contributors of these magazines. Women thus played a significant role in the circulation of commercial and cultural power, which in turn help to give birth to the erotic and autonomous trope of the modern woman.

In the trope of the modern woman, the translation of political discourse ran into an alien power and experienced a certain degree of setback. During the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese intellectuals engaged in a protracted discussion on the condition of the nation's women (Edwards 115). As a new object of desire, the modern woman was also a new object of criticism. Many modern intellectuals showed their discontents over the modern woman, who was thought to be the pseudo new woman. True modern women, they argued, possessed inner qualities other than superficial ornaments or verbal radicalism. The authentic new women, they argued, had inner qualities that centered on an abiding concern for China's national welfare (Edwards 115). In an article entitled "Where is the Modern Woman?" (*shidai nüzi zai nali*) published in *Libailiu* (*The Chinese Saturday Post*) in February 1934, the author Lin expressed his dissatisfaction with the Chinese modern women. He argued that the modern girls, who were able to speak a little English, wore flamboyant Western clothes, and were often social butterflies, did not adequately represent "modern women," or "women of the era." For Lin, the true Chinese modern woman would be the one who understood her responsibility to her time, which was to save China from the imperialist invasion.²⁷

²⁷ Lin [Penname] (1934) *Shidai nüzi zai nail*, *Libailiu* 542, 24 February. See Hsiao-pei Yen, "Body Politics, Modernity and National Salvation," 165.

It seems that accusing woman of bringing about moral degradation in the cities is more convenient for critics than directly castigating modern values. Discussing the movie actresses and public discourse in the 1920s-1930s Shanghai, Michael Chang points out that women were often scapegoated for the moral degradation in the city:

The consciousness of dangers in the city was often clearly gendered, since sex (both as a biological distinction and as a physical act) was an overriding concern. The mere presence of women provided the underpinnings for many moral misgivings regarding urban life. A woman who had sojourned to the city for the same reasons as men (opportunities for work and advancement) was already suspect and problematic, if not outright dangerous, by virtue of her sex. Such widely shared perceptions were reflected in the characterizations of urban women as pursuers and providers of pleasure and entertainment—as *femmes fatales*, prostitutes, and actresses tied to no kin. The concept of ‘woman’ as a site for moral contention was prevalent in Chinese film and fiction (M. Chang 137).

Indeed, the male intellectuals’ anxiety was extensively spelled out in their repeated redefinitions of acceptable appearance and behavior for the modern woman. In their discussions, the commerce-centered modern woman was more or less portrayed in a derogatory tone, “often carried additional negative connotations of superficial Westernization, hedonism, even avarice” (Edwards 133; Harris 72). Although many people were unwilling to directly contradict the progressive reform ideology by advocating a return to the traditional values, their unease about the emergence of a new social phenomenon, and a new form of subjectivity, was clearly indexed in their satire of the new woman at that time (Link 130-131). It is as if the trope of the new women had escaped from the masculine control and gained *extra* autonomy.

On September 5th, 1928, Lao Xuan, a reporter of *Beiyang Huabao* (Beijing

Pictorial), published a photo of his ordinary-looking wife together with an article written in classical Chinese. Lao Xuan wrote in the article that he loved his wife even though she was illiterate and plain-looking:

Most regrettably, she does not know how to socialize; she cannot dance, nor can she appreciate music or sing. She excels in cooking and needlework. She has no political consciousness and never talks about patriotism. She only has food-ism and clothes-ism. Giving birth to children and bringing them up is her purpose in life. She knows nothing about love. She would rather die than to shake hands with men or follow other modern etiquette. [...] If you have a wife like her, you cannot cut a figure for yourself. However, that is your luck! It is for this reason I love my wife – I do not have to worry about her (being frivolous) (H. Liu 166-167).

It is difficult to surmise whether Lao Xuan wrote the article in mockery or indignation, or both, toward the *other* of his traditional wife, the modern woman. But his words revealed the masculine anxiety toward the trope of the new woman: she made a man worry. The beauty and charm of a modern woman, her westernized ideas on love and marriage, her wit and ability to socialize, all aroused the masculine uneasiness. The image of the new woman was thus dazzling and bewildering, strange and familiar. Her carefree attitude in sexual life linked her to another image of immoral females – the prostitute. In fact, ever since the May Fourth movement, the borderlines between enlightened women, party girls, and prostitutes were blurred by the promiscuous character attributed to them.

Some scholars have pointed out that the moral policing of the new woman is associated with the male intellectuals' preoccupation with their own social status. Ever since the May Fourth period, Chinese intellectuals (male) were in a state of crisis, which

Xueping Zhong labels as “male marginality complex” (“Introduction,” ii). The discontent over the morals of the new woman thus reflected the anxiety of the male intellectuals about their marginalized social status and declining political sway as a result of social reform at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The preoccupation with the moral attributes of the modern women was understood as an attempt by some reformist intellectuals to “reclaim their roles as enlightened moral guardians and therefore leading advisers for the nation” (Edwards, 115). It is paradoxical that the same masculine discourse that was responsible for pushing feminine figures and voices to the forefront was now seeking to reinforce its dominance over the feminine (L. Luo 282-308). Although the woman in the modern period was allegedly the master of her own body, she was constantly under the supervision and scrutiny of the masculine discourse.

Other than being a target of criticism, however, is there anything inherent in the trope of the modern woman that justifies its existence? As an object of desire, why does the modern woman remain as a focus of political debates? It is necessary, therefore, to seek out the hidden channel through which the trope of the modern woman could empower the male intellectuals.

Sarah Stevens asserts that the New Woman and the Modern Woman reflected opposite views of modernity. The ideal New Woman, who is educated, political, and nationalistic, represents the positive aspects of modernity. In sharp contrast, the Modern Woman, who is elusive, fragmented, and cosmopolitan, “reveals disillusionment with the

promises of modernity” (82). Therefore, Stevens concludes that:

As New Women, women stand for the nation and its quest for modernity – modernity understood as an admirable state of civilization, strength, and progress. At the same time, as Modern Girls, women are used to represent fears for the modern nation and the drawbacks of modernity – modernity understood as a state of danger, individual alienation, and cultural loss (82-83).

The dialectic between the New Woman and the Modern Woman is reminiscent of the dialectic of the sublime and nothingness that I have discussed in Chapter One. The New Woman is constructed to embody the ideal image of a consistent, progressive, and self-consciousness masculine self, while the Modern Woman emerges as a destroyed version of this self – a bundle of unorganized “raw materials.”

If the New Woman was created as the other of the male intellectuals who sought to reform themselves, the Modern Woman actually was the radical other of both of them. According to Zhang Yingjing, from the 1930s, the trope of the New Woman in leftist representation appeared more and more like *wo-men*: “the Chinese pinyin transcription of ‘we’ – the speaking subject in the male discourse.” It is as if “all women – to be genuinely ‘modern’ or ‘new’ – must be redefined first of all as a subordinate part of *wo-men* before they can be given ‘positive’ configurations” in the masculine discourse (623-624). The ideal New Woman was constructed in such a way that her original otherness was undermined by the excessive elevation. While the trope of the New Woman densely and faithfully recorded the male reformers’ aspirations and hopes, her agency appeared more or less volatile, if not fake, as she only acted and spoke according to *his* will, not her own.

Therefore, the often castigated image of the modern woman is indeed crucial to the project of the Chinese revolution and the male reformers. It is not only a target for criticism and an object of desire; but also, and more importantly, a radical *other* – the genuine *other* of the modern man, from which the former derives power. However, few modern Chinese intellectuals would acknowledge the importance of the modern woman to the construction of modern subjectivity. In the following pages, I will reveal the constructive power of the modern woman through a reading of the fiction of Liu Na’ou (1900-1939) and Mu Shiying (1912-1940).

Shanghai and the New Sensationalist Writers

Both Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiying were active literary figures in 1930s Shanghai. Liu Na’ou was born in Taiwan and spent his adolescent life in Japan; therefore he spoke Japanese more fluently than Chinese. Liu returned to Shanghai in 1928 and became a diligent advocate of Japanese literature and Western literary criticism. He spearheaded two significant avant-garde journals in the late 1920s; *Trackless Train (wugui lieche)* and *La Nouvelle Littérature (xin wenyi)*.

Mu Shiying was born in a wealthy family in Shanghai²⁸. His father was a business man, his mother a romantic and sentimental beauty. Mu Shiying studied Western literature in a Shanghai college, and made his literary debut in Liu’s journals. According

²⁸ Some scholars believe that Mu Shiying was born in Zhejiang province, the hometown of his father.

to Leo Ou-fan Lee, Mu Shiyong was the more talented of the two; he imitated Liu's literary style in the beginning but soon surpassed the latter (L. Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 191).

Both Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong wrote stories to earn a living. Unlike the mainstream May Fourth writers, their literary works were not loaded with the grave duty of enlightening the people and renewing the nation; instead, they were largely market-based. Their literary works gained tremendous popularity in 1930s Shanghai. Liu and Mu are two vanguard of urban writers who learned from the writers of the Japanese New Sensationalist school (*shinkankaku-ha*), who emphasized "technical experimentation and capturing the subjective sensations of an act, instead of the act itself, in fresh new language and form" (Shih, "Gender, Race, and Semicolonialism" 942). Therefore, the writings of Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong can be regarded as a hypersensitive recorder of the riotous life of the modernizing city. Both of them were assassinated by KMD agents, in 1939 and 1940, respectively.

Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong both belonged to the "Shanghai School" (*haipai*). The writings of the Shanghai School always centered on woman and her erotic relationships with man. Woman became the metaphor through which the *haipai* writers imagined a new modern life. Ever since the 1920s, the Shanghai School had come under massive attack from the leftist writers, who accused the *haipai* writers of their indifference to politics. But the Shanghai writers responded resiliently with their best-sellers. During the 1930s, when Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong debuted in literary circles, the Shanghai School

grew rapidly in spite of the leftist criticism.

However, even among the *haipai* writers, Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong were unique. In his book *Shanghai Modern*, Ou-fan Lee points out that in the first half of the twentieth century, both city and countryside existed side by side as contrasting images and value systems in modern Chinese consciousness. The fictional landscapes of May Fourth literature, according to Lee, “remain anchored in the rural village or the small town” (190-191). By contrast, Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong were two of the few writers who treated the city as “the *only* world of their existence and the key source of their creative imagination” (191). In Liu and Mu's fiction, the modern city is frequently presented in the figure of the modern woman, who the writers regarded as a universally recognizable symbol of modernity. The city is their only life space and it is an imaginary space where they could create a world of their own, a modern world consisting of half reality and half fantasy. Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong were among the few intellectuals who had a comprehensive and intimate contact with the modern and a strong urge to narrate this experience.

As one of the earliest Chinese cities that opened to foreign trade in the mid-nineteenth century, Shanghai in the 1930's represented a novel, even a foreign world. It was often perceived as “a dynamic vanguard of history, an island of civilization, and the ultimate embodiment of the true present of modernity” (X. Zhang 367). In Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong's fictions, Shanghai was a world full of gaudy and luminous lights and colors, offering great visual impact to the spectators: “Men and women's bodies, colorful lights,

lucent glass, red and green liquids, fine fingers, garnet lips and flaming eyes” (N. Liu 1). The new appearance and rhythm of urban life forced writers to experiment with new narrative representation. The writers gave up the quest for the ultimate “truth” or “meaning” behind these dazzling spectacles. It was claimed that the exterior manifestations, without the inner qualities and attitudes, generated a false or pseudo-modernity. But what are the inner qualities and attitudes of modernity?

Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests that modernity actually has two meanings: it is “both idea and imaginary, both essence and surface” (*Shanghai Modern* 63). Therefore modernity is not only contained in the idea and spirit driving the collective enterprise, but also encoded as the façade of a spectacle. As a spectacle, it is sensuous and unstable, and may vary from individual to individual. When the novelty of the modern city distances itself from its residents, making their lived experience a kind of novel experience, it also establishes itself as a spectacle. The assimilation of the novel experience thus becomes a threshold for the modern subjects, which can only be carried out as an individual project. In a way, the constitution of modern subjectivity depends on one’s aesthetic contemplation of and adjustment to the modern spectacles.

The shift in geographical focus probably also gave birth to the shift in subjective voice. Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong portrayed the modern city and the modern women from a subjective perspective which is different from that of most of the male intellectuals at that time. Neither Liu Na’ou nor Mu Shiyong spoke from the standpoint of the masculine “we” when they wrote about the modern woman and modern city. Although they also had

a hard time accepting the image of the modern woman, they never deemed themselves as a superior moral guide to her. The narrative subject of their fiction is always a voyeuristic and skeptical male, who can be easily carried away by the rapid trends of modern life. Their gaze at the modern woman is not a condescending one or a patronizing one, but an enchanted one. For them, the modern woman is an integral part of modern life, indeed the most spectacular one of all urban spectacles. The female characters in Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong's stories often wear thin and short clothes, high-heeled shoes, silky stockings and short or curled hair; their full breasts and their sometimes "muscular" limbs reveal those women as "city-made." The modern women are "born with the noise on the asphalted street," and therefore are "most susceptible to the seduction of the crowd and city lights" (N. Liu 85). The modern woman is a radical embodiment of the modern values and the material aspect of China's contact with the West.

In Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiyong's stories, the weak, sentimental, and unconfident men are always overpowered or enslaved by the exotic and erotic modern women. However, these writers' representation of the modern woman is hardly consistent. The female character in their stories sometimes is depicted as an enthusiast of outdoor activities and sports, with bobbed hair and an elongated body; sometimes she is portrayed as a cunning creature disguised by her classical beauty. As a new creature of urban modernity, sometimes the beauty of a city-made woman amazes and surprises the man: "A pair of easily startled bright pupils; a rational forehead, and above it short hair flapped with the wind; a thin and straight Greek nose, a round-shaped mouth with a pair of thick

lips seemingly ajar. What could she be if not the product of the modern” (N. Liu 3)? Sometimes the beauty scares and shocks: “They are really like animals. Their eyes are painted like two caves, their lips drip blood, their clothes reveal their bodies and emphasize their curves. They always exhibit the nature of the female mantis to feed on the male” (N. Liu 60). One moment the modern woman is the passionate and promiscuous femme fatale; another moment she may appear inaccessible and apathetic. It seems that the existence of the modern woman exceeds the knowledge of the male narrator, and his understanding falls short in front of her image. For the narrating subject, there are no ready-made paradigms to apply, no existing discourses to use, no previous experiences to follow. The encounter with the modern woman and modern life throws the man into a hollow abyss where he is all by himself. And he has to work his way out all by himself.

In the process of representation, therefore, the narrator can only resort to sensual and intuitive ways to approach the anamorphic other. The narrative voice is thus fragmented and inconstant. Such representation can be regarded as a kind of deconstruction in itself: the speaking subject deconstructs itself through its inability to represent the other.

The Promiscuous *Femmes Fatales*

Different from traditional Chinese women, who often become victims of men, the new women are, in Liu and Mu’s stories, strange and dangerous creatures. In Mu

Shiying's fiction "A Man Who is Treated as a Plaything" (*bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi*), the male protagonist Alexy depicts the look of the female protagonist in animalistic or monstrous terms: "What a dangerous animal!" Alexy thinks of her; "she has a snake's body, a cat's head, a mixture of softness and danger;" "a lying mouth, a pair of cheating eyes" (96). Apparently Alexy is as much attracted to her as he is intimidated by her. The metaphors of snake and cat, on the one hand, dehumanize, and thus defamiliarize the woman; on the other hand, they reveal some inherent qualities of the woman, such as her coyness, swiftness, calmness and wit, which are necessary for her existence in a modern city.

At the beginning of the story, Alexy claims himself to be a "misogynist," because he has been fooled by girls in the past. In contrast to the robust figure of the city-made woman, Alexy confesses the inherent weakness in his character: "Once having suffered loss, I know my straightforward character is not adequate to handle the lying mouths of the girls" (96). However, Alexy cannot resist the passionate courtship of Rongzi; he falls in love with her, even though he knows very well that he is just one of her many boyfriends. He chooses to believe her lies and dives into the romantic relationship, even though he concedes that Rongzi is still a stranger to him. Shortly after his sweet surrender, Alexy finds out that Rongzi is lying in another man's arms. He forgives her, but soon she is with another man. Finally, Rongzi warns him: "Remember, I love you, kid. But you cannot interfere in my actions." "Do you think a woman can be adored by only one man? Love is for the one; but the playthings, the tools, you can have many. You must have

some photos of other girls in your pocket” (113).

Rongzi’s manifesto on modern love shows that she is leading a life of spontaneous passion, promiscuous love and quick pleasures. Rongzi is not the kind of woman who meets a man’s expectations and satisfies his desires. She consciously denounces the role of a “normal” woman; for her, marriage, husband, child and chores are but killers of woman’s ebullient youth (116). What she cares for most is new stimulations, which in turn yield new pleasures. She is an omnivore who takes in everything, regardless of their differences. She remains the center of her own world and lives only for the present.

It is interesting that at the beginning of the story there is a competition for power between the man and the woman. Alexy, who allegedly is a misogynist, laughs at Rongzi’s miscellaneous diet and her symptoms of indigestion (*xiaohua buliang zheng*): “Girls like snacks too much. You swallow the Nestlé chocolate, Sunkist, Shanghai beer, sugar chestnut and peanut together, so it is natural that you’ll have indigestion” (97-98). Ironically, it is not Rongzi, but Alexy, who has the problem of indigestion. Rongzi’s miscellaneous diet, an odd mixture of Western and Chinese food, already proves her strong ability of assimilation of heterogeneous elements from different cultures. Her promiscuity itself indicates the diverse orientations of her receptivity. By contrast, Alexy shows symptoms of disturbed digestion when dealing with the modern woman and her lifestyle – he can neither understand nor predict her actions. Later, when Alexy finds out that Rongzi has very diverse and heterogeneous interests, such as her diverse and

heterogeneous diet, he is quite amazed and has the following conversation with Rongzi:

“You are a girl who lives with stimulation and speed, Rongzi! A combination of Jazz, machines, speed, urban culture, American style, the beauty of the epoch...But the problem lies here...”

“Has your misogyny been cured?”

“Yes, and your indigestion?”

“Much better, I eat less snack food now.”

“A new discovery in 1931 – the germ of misogyny is the miracle drug for stomach trouble.”

“But perhaps it is the opposite – aren’t the discharges of the undigested stomach the liquid medicine for misogyny” (104)?

At the beginning of the story Alexy still maintains a limited share of male superiority; he thinks that he can advise the woman (on her diet and health). In fact, he is the one who needs to be advised. In the story, Alexy appears to be an immature figure who has little discretion. When he is with Rongzi, he feels his misogyny is cured; when he finds himself betrayed, he will go back to his misogyny again, “reading articles ridiculing women, and advocating patriarchy vehemently...”(111) In their relationship, Alexy is dependent and only wants to cling to Rongzi, who calls him “kid” sometimes. By contrast, Rongzi is always independent and clearly knows what she wants.

Alexy surrenders again and again to Rongzi’s sweet words and hot kisses. He completely becomes Rongzi’s “plaything,” until she disappears one day without a trace. There is an interesting detail at the end of the story – after Rongzi disappears, Alexy buys a walking stick and keeps it as his new companion. “I find that I have missed one thing – a girl as my companion. Having a girl is like having a walking stick; at least one will walk more conveniently” (116). If the walking stick becomes the substitute for the

woman, does it mean that the woman also helps the man to walk, in a way, in spite of her lies and promiscuity? It seems that a man can at least learn something from the modern woman: to “walk better.”

Liu Na’ou’s fiction “Beneath the Equator” further proves that the modern woman can “walk better” because of her promiscuity. “Beneath the Equator” (*chidao xia*) has a transnational setting. A young married couple leaves the big city in China and seeks a period of relaxation on an island on the southern coast of the United States (probably Hawaii). The environment of the island is primitive and wholesome, and the young couple indulges in the sensual enjoyment of love and each other’s bodies. In the eyes of the protagonist, Xiang, his wife Zhen possesses a hybrid kind of beauty. “This tiny trim face and the pair of round shoulders overtly prove that she is a city-made woman. However, the sight of the willow-like eyebrows (*liuye mei*) growing on the pores without the painting of the cosmetic pencil really sends me into ecstasy” (84). The male protagonist Xiang’s best aesthetic experience, however, does not come from the westernized body, but from the willow-like eyebrows that are typical of the beauty of traditional Chinese women. His preference more or less discloses his nostalgic feeling toward traditional Chinese values, which are fading away in the urban milieu.

Nonetheless, Xiang is infatuated with Zhen’s body; he also enjoys the feeling that she completely belongs to him at this moment. Unfortunately, it is only an illusion. The scorching sunshine and the hot sand on the island have gradually transformed Zhen. Not only is her skin getting darker, her mind is going wild: “I want to become a southern girl,

an aboriginal woman. Do you still want me? I'd rather you become an aboriginal, a naked savage" (85). Zhen begins to walk around half-naked, wearing the decorations of the aboriginals, and even smells like them. One day, Xiang comes across Zhen taking a bath in the presence of her aboriginal servant. When Xiang accuses her, she tells him that it is not necessary to make a fuss over such a trivial thing. Xiang succumbs to the sensuous body of this *femme fatale*; after all, he cannot believe that his wife is attracted to an aboriginal man: "What is the charm in the dark-colored man? Is it in the smooth skin? The strong limbs? The body smell? The pupils? Or his primitiveness" (91)? When Xiang sees Zhen making love with the aboriginal man with his own eyes, he is seized with tremendous pain and passes out. When he wakes up from the blackout, he makes love with an aboriginal girl, who is a young virgin, out of a surge of unspeakable passion. At the end the story, the couple is leaving the island together; they will go back to the city and solve their problems with some "civilized means" (94).

In the strange and primitive land, at first Zhen is afraid of the keen eyes of the aboriginal people and their nocturnal voodoo drums. However, she gradually becomes fascinated with the primitive and the wild, and transforms herself to merge with the environment. At the same time, her husband Xiang is left bewildered, unable to understand her change. Rey Chow asserts in *Primitive Passions*: "The interest in the primitive emerges at a moment of *cultural crisis*" (22). She explains that when the predominant traditional culture is being dislocated through vast changes and can no longer "monopolize signification," fantasies of an origin will arise (22). In this cultural

imagination, the primitive serves as a common ground where the new form of culture can be conceived. In China, traditional Chinese culture had been in crisis ever since the late imperial era. Discussions on whether the Chinese culture or the Western culture can save China from its deep national crisis had never ceased. Liu Na'ou's use of the primitive, in this context, seems to be a strategic transcendence of the cultural debates. In his story, the primitive appears as the opposition both to the Chinese culture and to the modern urban culture. But, in fact, the primitive has eventually helped the couple to complete the baptism of modernity. The primitive offers a kind of fertile maternal soil where the modern ideas can burgeon and develop. Zhen's fascination with the primitive reveals the inherent link between the primitive and the burgeoning modernity – they share a wild, irrational, and promiscuous urge. However, one needs to note that Liu Na'ou's notion of the primitive is still based on the Western model. The location of the island (on the southern coast of the United States) reveals that Liu's imagination of Chinese modernity still follows the model of colonial modernity.

The story of "Beneath the Equator" is an allegory of Chinese man and woman's entering of the modern world. Both Xiang and Zhen are dislocated from their habitual civilized milieu and transported to a new, novel world. Zhen soon transforms from a civilized urban woman to an aboriginal woman who enjoys new freedom and pleasures in a new style, while Xiang is both reluctant to accept and repelled by the change. When the woman constantly renews herself by adapting to the new world, the man, frustrated, still upholds the old morals and values. The man in "Beneath the Equator," like Alexy in "A

Man Who is Treated as a Plaything,” shows the symptoms of indigestion. Both male protagonists are baffled by the occasions of change, unable, or at least very reluctant, to make the corresponding adjustments. When compared with the *femmes fatales*, the men’s ideas are somewhat provincial and timeworn. Zhen is like Rongzi, who is receptive and excited about the changing world, and embraces it without hesitation. Is it possible that the promiscuous body actually is bliss for the woman – that is, because a woman can march from one man to the next, she can thus march from one culture to the next, and from one temporality to the next?

The Impenetrable Woman

However, not all the modern women in Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong’s fiction are erotic and promiscuous. Sometimes the writers would depict them in an opposite way, in which the modern woman appears completely impenetrable for the man.

In Liu Na’ou’s story “Attempted Murder” (*sharen weisui*), the anonymous protagonist, probably an urban professional, is lost and demented in front of an image of a professional urban woman. The woman is an ordinary clerk working in a bank, which the protagonist frequently visits for business purposes. The anonymous protagonist secretly loves the female clerk and covets her modern woman’s beauty, which gives him a lot of visual pleasure. However, the protagonist finds the woman somewhat inaccessible. While doing business with the protagonist, the female clerk never speaks to or smiles at him. In his eyes, she is like “a wispy nameless statue, without warm blood, without a

nerve center, without antennae – only a mechanical dispassionate body” (95). It is a body devoid of sexuality, and even life. This troubles the male protagonist a lot as he tries to figure out why this “common city-made modern woman” (99) is so impervious or impenetrable to him. He desires to make love to her and warm up this robot-like statue.

One day, the protagonist comes across the female clerk in a restaurant. He observes her and finds out that she is actually “a soft creature” when she is with her lover: “She talks while eating, she laughs, leers, flirts, pretends to be ignorant, confides; and once or twice she touches his foot with her own under the table” (99). This new discovery gives the protagonist a lot of pleasure; he feels that from now on he can approach her without difficulty: “Now she has removed her mask, taken off the inviolable shell” (99). However, when they meet again in the bank, she looks dumb and cold as before. The soft and passionate modern girl he saw in the restaurant merely dies out in her. Her change bewilders and frightens the protagonist so much that he goes crazy. Suddenly, the protagonist perceives a subtle sneer on her face, and he loses control of himself. Possessed by intense sexual desire, he clasps her in his arms and kisses her all over forcibly. She resists, which turns his desire to rape into a desire to murder. He then strangles her, until the police come. The protagonist is arrested for attempted rape and murder.

It seems that there is an invisible wall adamantly separating the protagonist’s world and the world of the modern woman. The protagonist is very curious about what her world is like. He assumes that, as a matter of fact, a modern woman should be

passionate and sexually accessible. In the brief moment when he sees her intimate behaviors with her lover, the protagonist feels “a warm flow” circulating in his body (99). He starts to weave rosy fantasies about her. However, the protagonist never succeeds in understanding the world of the modern woman. She remains impenetrable to him throughout. Even at the end, when she is lying on the floor unconscious, the female clerk still does not look like a real person in the protagonist’s eyes. Looking at her, he only sees something like a dozen fragmented pictures, which cannot be put together as a living woman: “unkempt short hair, white face, red lips, green clothes, naked bosom, crinkled skirt, bare thighs...” (101) When he gets so close to her, even her image begins to shatter, and it seems that there is really nothing behind this image. Frustrated, his passion becomes hatred and he wants to kill this stranger whom he can never understand.

For the protagonist, the modern woman and the modern world she represents are cold, stern, and petrified. He feels himself being marginalized by this indifferent world, and he is not satisfied to be a mere onlooker of the ongoing modern life. The attempted murder is initiated by an attempted courtship, then an attempted rape. The desire of courting and raping both reflect a desire to get along with and take part in the ongoing modern life. He desires to reach for and penetrate into the truth of modern life, or the modern subjectivity that the modern woman embodies.

This strong desire to explore the unknown can be understood as a desire for self-transformation, in order to replace the self at the center of the world. When the attempt fails, the infuriated protagonist adopts the radical step of murder to vent his discontent.

Isn't rape an extreme form of masculine control? Then, to some extent, the action of the protagonist in "Attempted Murder" resembles the action of some of the male reformers who took on the modern woman as an object of criticism. It is as if only by vandalizing the trope of the modern woman can the man acquire a sense of mastery. However, the destruction of the modern woman as a radical other only shuts off the road to modernity. At the end of the story, the protagonist is jailed, but he is excited about his crime. Perhaps he has already learned something about the modern from his intimate contact with the modern woman.

In Liu Na'ou's fiction "Attempted Murder," the woman is cold, stern, and lifeless, like an impenetrable statue. Interestingly, in Mu Shiyong's fiction "A Platinum Statue of the Female Body" (*baijin de nüting suxiang*), the writer also compares the female body to a statue. The protagonist of Mu's fiction is Doctor Xie, an urban bachelor who maintains a rigid, almost puritanical style of life. One day in his clinic he receives a female patient who claims to have suffered a lack of blood in her body. She claims to have a bad appetite and a melancholic heart. Doctor Xie diagnoses her symptoms as developing tuberculosis; he suspects that it is a result of her excessive sexual life and asks her and her husband to sleep in separate beds. The female patient undresses herself as Doctor Xie uses the sunlamp therapy on her. On her naked body, he sees "an inorganic statue devoid of shame, devoid of morals, devoid of human desires; metallic [...] This senseless, emotionless statue merely stands there, waiting for his order" (445). The body attracts Doctor Xie greatly, making him tremble during the procedure of therapy. He keeps

thinking of her after he gets back home that day: “A body that is a platinum statue! Without sanguinity, without humanity, exotic. Without blood color, without humanity, exotic. No one knows her feelings or her physical constitution; it is a new sexual object in the year of 1933, which has the human shape but not the human nature or odor” (447)! He feels extremely lonely – he needs a woman. Doctor Xie gets married soon after, and starts to enjoy a comfortable life.

When the story begins, Dr. Xie has been leading a life of a young urban bourgeois; he maintains a rigid and punctual schedule which exactly meets the prevailing standards of modern life. For him, modern life is about time, about the regulation and organization of time. Therefore his everyday practice strictly follows a predetermined schedule. This might have been the reality of a typical modern man in the 1930s. For example, the February 1935 issue of Shanghai’s *Liangyou Huabao* (*Good Friend Pictorial Journal*) included a two-page photo spread entitled “The City Man’s Life, Twenty-Four Hours: A Complete Guide.” Going clockwise around a plain-faced clock at the center, a young urban couple is showcased in fourteen chronologically arranged photographs, performing essential daily activities.²⁹ Such an advertisement creates the impression that modern life is completely exterior and can be achieved by imitating the spectacles. However, modern life is “both idea and imaginary, both essence and surface” (L. Lee, *Shanghai Modern* 63). Turning oneself into a mere spectacle does not qualify one as modern. The problem is

²⁹ “The City Man’s Life, Twenty Four Hours: A Complete Guide,” *Liangyou huabao* (*The Young Companion*), no. 102 (1935): 40-41. See Guo-Juin Hong, “Framing Time,” pp.553-554.

how to turn the exteriority of modern life into an interiority of modern subjectification.

When Dr. Xie sees the female patient, he is shocked by her chilling indifference and immediately associates her with a platinum statue. A statue is a cold, lifeless, stern, and impervious object, contradicting in almost every aspect the promiscuous image of the modern woman. However, when Dr. Xie discusses her symptoms with the woman, she slowly reveals her most private and intimate life to him, albeit with the same indifferent tone. Dr. Xie finds himself somewhat misled by her statue-like appearance. There is a discrepancy between what the female patient appears to be and what Doctor Xie diagnoses her to be. She looks pale and delicate, like a platinum statue with no blood or human desires. But after hearing her words, Doctor's Xie knows that she has incipient tuberculosis, the cause of which might be excessive sexual activity.

In the Western imagination, tuberculosis is a disease that is often associated with modern subjectivity. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag points out: "Having TB was imagined to be an aphrodisiac and to confer extraordinary powers of seduction" (12). The tuberculosis was viewed as a disease of passion. "Fever in TB was a sign of an inward burning: the tubercular is someone 'consumed' by ardor, that ardor leading to the dissolution of the body. [...] TB was conceived as a variant of the disease of love" (20). Under the cold skin of the female patient, therefore, Dr. Xie sees a vibrant and sexual body. Like the protagonist in *Attempted Murder*, he feels a surge of warm blood in his body: "a lazy flow sprouts from his heart, running into every artery and capillary in his body; even his veins begin to itch oddly" (443). When he is applying the sunlight therapy

on the naked female patient, he finds her eyes still cold, as usual, but there is a stream of passion rising from her lower body. The combination of her exterior frigidity and her interior passion is so fascinating that Doctor Xie is paralyzed by the “primitive heat” in his body (446).

The diagnosis of and close contact with the patient enables Dr. Xie to see into the body of this modern woman. Dr. Xie is astonished, shocked, and forced to reflect on himself. Suddenly he feels lonely and wants a family: “He thinks he needs a child, a woman sitting beside him doing knitting. He thinks he needs a wide bed, a dresser, some perfume, powder, and rouge” (447). At this point, the story takes a dramatic turn. The doctor no longer holds a superior position from which he can advise and help the female patient; on the contrary, he becomes the real patient. If she is a platinum statue outside, he is a platinum statue inside. His puritanical and robotic life style has strangled the life inside him. The platinum statue of the woman’s body mirrors the symptoms of Doctor Xie, while the sparkles of her vibrant sexual life mock his abstinence. It is as if the woman is the true doctor – she has diagnosed and advised him. The woman’s body, which has been consumed by tuberculosis, or, by excessive sexual desire, reflects the lack in Doctor Xie’s body and lures him into revolutionizing the self. Through this encounter with her body, Dr. Xie is able to understand what is hidden in the statue and manages to walk into a new style of modern life, which liberates himself from his previous imprisonment by the idealization of modernity. He gets married within a month and starts to enjoy his modern-style family life; he is happy and he gains weight.

Both the protagonist in “Attempted Murder” and Dr. Xie in “A Platinum Statue of the Female Body” are bewildered by the seemingly contradictory representations of the modern woman. On the one hand, she is cold, apathetic, and distant, representing the industrialization and alienation in modern society; on the other hand, when her inner life is revealed, it is sexual, passionate, and vibrant, representing the liberation of the self in the modern period. The body of the modern woman is like Pandora’s box, inviting the man to open it and explore the mysteries within. She will remain impenetrable as long as the male subject is not genuinely modern.

Woman as the Symptom of Man

The promiscuous or impenetrable modern women in Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiying’s fiction create a lot of trouble for the narrative subject. Their existence is malleable, porous, and elusive; there is no available masculine discourse to represent and contain them. The modern woman is constantly mocking and ridiculing the male subject, on the one hand, and seducing and challenging him to approach her, on the other hand. The masculine experience of dealing with a modern woman proves to be a mixture of pleasure and pain.

The tension between man and woman in Liu and Mu’s fiction is reminiscent of Lacan’s famous assertion that “woman is the symptom of man.” In psychoanalysis, a symptom is a compromise-formation: “in the symptom, the subject gets back, in the form of a ciphered message, the truth about his desire, the truth that he was unable to confront”

(Žižek, “Rossellini” 20). Therefore the symptom is formed out of the need to hide one’s desire; in other words, it is the disguised form of one’s own desire. If woman is the symptom of man, then in the image of the woman one can find the hidden tendency of the male subject, of his unconscious desires and needs. The representation of women in narrative works thus is not merely about how the male subject, as a narrative subject, understands or looks at women. It is ultimately a process of self-transformation through approaching one’s symptom – the truth of one’s desires. The significance of the anamorphic image of the woman lies in the fact that it lays bare the unconscious desire of the man, albeit in a way that he does not acknowledge. Through the representation of woman, the man will finally recognize and acknowledge his own desire. This mechanism of the symptom is especially evident in Mu Shiyong’s stories “A Man Who is Treated as a Plaything” and “A Platinum Statue of the Female Body.” In both stories, the writer even uses the idea “symptom” repeatedly. Both male protagonists tried to identify a symptom in the body of women, but ended up discovering their own symptom. The woman’s symptom, in fact, only reflects the man’s lack. As soon as the man can see through the woman’s symptom, he can realize his own symptom; this realization builds a bridge between his unconscious desire and his conscious motivation, resulting in a new subject that is more powerful, but less intelligible by itself.

All of the modern women in Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong’s fiction are portrayed as objects of desire. If, as the symptom of man, woman actually reflects man’s unconscious desires which he is not able to face directly, we can decipher, from the image of woman

what the man's lack and anxiety is. In the stories of the two New Sensationalist writers, modern women are an unorthodox kind of being who are promiscuous, ruthless, and pleasure-driven. However, if one adopts a different perspective, these "symptoms" of the modern woman are connected with the ideals of modern subjectivity: her promiscuous sexual life can be understood as her willingness to embrace the new things. Her ruthless, indifferent attitude to men can be understood as her determination to maintain her independence; thus, she is not subject to man's will. And finally, isn't the woman leading a pleasure-driven style of life precisely because she has been liberated from any bondage of her body and mind? In this way, the evils and vices in some moralists' eyes are the ideals and essence of the anticipated Chinese modernity.

The promiscuous sexuality of the modern women was indicative of a "search for a new identity" (Edwards 133). The obsession to embrace the new can be regarded as the essence of modernity. As a matter of fact, the aspiration of the May Fourth generation was crystallized in the word "new" (*xin*): "new literature," "new woman," "new people," "new youth," "new nation," and so on. The desire for the new "quickly acquired the force of an ideological imperative that successfully rationalized China's contact with the West" (Chow, *Women and Chinese Modernity* 35). The May Fourth movement imposed itself as the watershed between the old and the new China, and the May Fourth reformers proclaimed themselves as the pilots to the new world. The modern woman is the perfect embodiment of such a spirit. Modern women live on excitement, on speed; they like fresh experience and they change lovers frequently. By contrast, Chinese men, who are

ironically the advocates of newness, are afraid of change and slow to move forward. In contrast to the modern woman's meteoric reception of the modern, the Chinese man appeared a little melancholic and stagnant in the process of cultural transformation. As compared to the modern woman, the man was more likely to feel himself being marginalized in the process of modernization because he truly valued what remained at the core – traditional masculinity and patriarchy. However, the process of modernization inevitably obscured the identity of the subject and forced him to seek changes. Facing the new world, the Chinese man could no longer look at and judge things from the comfortable point of view of a pure Chinese, because it would now only make him uncomfortable.

The determination to pursue independence is also crucial, as it is conditioned on a clear and integral concept of selfhood. The modern women in the stories understand their own needs and desires, and actively seek the full realization of them. They are the masters of their own bodies and feelings. The modern woman's actions are always guided by her own subjective experience; thus, they are egoistic in nature. Her action and choice is not dependent on any man or object, because she is malleable and can always freely change her love object. She can be warm or cold, promiscuous or impenetrable, because her mind, body, and pleasures are independent. In contrast, in those stories, the independence of the men is fragile. In romantic relationships they are easily lost; strong moral obligations always prevent them from seeking independent pleasures. After all, independent selfhood is not a very comfortable position for the man; he is seeking a more

traditional unit, like the family, to accommodate his existence. But the modern woman remains independent even if she already has a family.

Finally, the liberation of the modern woman is complete and thorough, from inside out. The liberation includes her conscious self, as well as her unconscious psyche and body. The modern woman is often represented as a hypersexual creature who tirelessly hunts for new stimulations. She is a social butterfly and a goddess of desire and pleasure. Because she is fully liberated, she bears no moral obligations and knows no shame. She combines the refined beauty of urban spectacle and the unbounded passion of the primitive. In the eyes of a moralist, the modern woman might appear as the lowest creature because of her promiscuous sexuality; however, if placed within the grand narrative of the new, isn't promiscuity a welcoming of the new? Living in the same urban city, the man is apparently more confined by the traditional moral codes and is reluctant to reveal his own sexual desires.

The modern woman thus is the shadow subject of the quasi or pseudo modern man; she represents what he represses in himself. Instead of taking pains to modernize the self, the man projected this radical essence of modernity upon the modern woman, out of his "cowardly and treacherous" (Žižek, "Otto Weininger" 132) consciousness. Then, through his desire for the woman, which connects the man to his unconscious desires, man can secretly and indirectly betray his ethical responsibility. The dominant and rational masculine discourse has an inherent lack when it comes to change or revolution, because, in a society, masculinity is expected to "stand both for unchanging values in a

changing age and for the dynamic but orderly process of change itself, guided by an appropriate purpose” (Mosse 31). The masculine discourse therefore always takes on an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary, form of change. The project of modern revolution, on the other hand, requires a sweeping transformation of the material world and of the subject’s psyche. This sweeping transformation will destroy the very masculine order that sustains the existence of the rational and dominant masculine subject. The representation of the promiscuous modern woman, at this point, helps the masculine subject to cope with the crisis of its own existence. Embodying the radical modern values that the male subject is still afraid of embracing, the modern woman is the shadow subject of Chinese modernity.

In *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cornelius Castoriadis asserts that the conscious ego can in no way entirely absorb unconscious contents; on the contrary, one’s consciousness always leans on the unconscious. The unconscious is what was present “at the start;” while the consciousness is what comes later. The autonomy of the ego “is not the pure and simple elimination of the discourse of the other but the elaboration of this discourse” (107). Castoriadis’ statement can help to further shed light on the modern woman and man in Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong’s stories. It is noteworthy that in Liu and Mu’s fiction, the modern woman is *always already* there: she is like the city, whose presence is prior to the (masculine) narrative subject. In Liu and Mu’s fiction, the modern woman is not turned into a modern woman by the male subject, as one can find in Mao Dun or Lu Xun’s stories. The modern woman is present in Liu and Mu’s stories at the

start. And her promiscuous, ruthless, and pleasure-driven attitudes are *always already* there from the start. Apparently, the modern women represent an independent and autonomous existence. The masculine subject is attracted and puzzled, but cannot articulate the reason why. His representation of the modern woman is incoherent and fragmented, due to his lack of understanding. However, the masculine subject compulsively tries to represent and understand the modern woman. Whether it is Dr. Xie, or the attempted murderer, their efforts to represent the modern woman can be regarded as a process of “elaboration” of the radical other, through which the male subject also gets a certain degree of autonomy. One can say that in Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong’s fiction, the modern woman *persists*, and the construction of modern masculine subjectivity *leans on* the representation of the modern woman. The representation cannot affect the existence of the modern woman, but is significant for the narrative subject.

Plumbing the Object

As I have mentioned, the promiscuous and independent modern woman caused a lot of anxiety and resentment among some reformist intellectuals. In their eyes, the modern woman represented the “superficial trappings” (Edwards 115) – the external façade of modernity; they believed that the pervasive trope of the modern woman was adverse to the promotion of inner qualities, virtues and knowledge. Modern women were consistently identified with the decadent and degenerated, who were perceived as “a

profound threat to established culture” (Dowling 434). The criticism of the modern woman reached its peak in the New Life Movement (*xinshenghuo yundong*), initiated by the KMT government in 1934. The New Life Movement represents an organized effort to use the Confucian doctrine to strengthen the Chinese state and cultivate the Chinese people. It immediately took on women as its main object for correction, and imposed a series of bans on specific behaviors of women. The trope of the modern woman was thought of as embodying all of the vices of modernity and noxious to the projects of moral elevation and national salvation. Therefore, it was ruthlessly flagellated, criticized, and abjected in the mid-1930s.

It is true that in the campaign aiming to criticize and rectify the trope of the modern woman, the reformist intellectuals could re-taste the flavor of having a patriarchal supremacy over women. However, the very discourse that criticizes and rectifies women actually becomes the impediment to the construction of modern subjectivity. It is indeed questionable to what extent the trope of woman could contribute to the project of modernity, as long as she was contained in the patriarchal power structure. If the woman can merely utter voices and take actions sanctioned by the masculine discourse, she will lose her radicalness and become a fake *other*. However, if woman does not embody this radical otherness, she will not arouse a great amount of masculine interest. The paradoxical truth is, in Jin Tsu’s words, that the reconstruction of the trope of woman as signifier of modernity and nationalism “is not possible without positing an internal decay” (Tsu 145). This inner flaw of decadence and degradation is

central to the self-liberation and empowerment of modern individuals.

The historical significance of the Chinese woman, as a trope of modernity, lies in that it serves as a medium for the male subject's departure from his own past. Chinese women are, in Rey Chow's words, "'stand-ins' for China's traumatized self-consciousness" (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* 170). It is no surprise that the trope of the modern woman is itself traumatic and disruptive. Therefore, the paradoxical truth is that the most "ideal" trope of woman will inevitably be treated as the abject. Precisely because the modern woman image was rendered as abject, it could play "an active role in resisting and negotiating with institutionalized repression" (Yen 167).

According to Julia Kristeva, the abject "does not respect borders, positions, rules;" it is the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers of Horror* 4). An essential characteristic of the abject is that it challenges the dominant subject position. The abject is not *I*, it is opposed to the *I*. The abject is impossible to represent in the existing discourse, as it dwells in the place "where meaning collapses" (*Powers of Horror* 4). However, the abject always "beseeches and pulverizes the subject" from its "place of banishment" (*Powers of Horror* 4). "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object." The abject contains both "[i]maginary uncanniness" and "real threat;" "it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (*Powers of Horror* 4). These characteristics of the abject certainly can be used to describe the promiscuous and anamorphic existence of the modern woman. The abject and the modern woman have something in common: both of them are opposed to the

masculine subjective position of “I”; both of them deconstruct meanings and values. If the male intellectuals assumed the position of the patriarch, the modern woman was a persisting other that constantly challenged this authorial and authoritarian voice. Strictly speaking, the modern woman is not an object of *I* – because she is not always desired by the conscious I – but an *objection* to *I*. The modern woman is also a disbeliever in any existing values and meanings. She is not bound by any traditional morals or virtues and recognizes no social obligations. Yet she exerts a deadly seductive power over the masculine subject, a power which constantly threatens to banish the masculine subject from its habitual position.

In the face of the abjected modern woman, the camp of male intellectuals was divided. In the 1930s, Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiying emerged as two “traitors” of the male camp, who “shamefully” gave up their authoritarian position in representing the modern woman. Actually, even for Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiying, their attitude toward the modern woman was not without criticism and suspicion. However, they differed from the leftist intellectuals in that, in their fiction, the abject is no longer the jettisoned object hiding in the corner; it grows and occupies center stage. In their stories, the male character always surrenders to the violent onset of the modern woman. For the masculine narrative subject, the process of surrendering to the abjected modern woman is simultaneously a process of breaking loose from the collective cultural identity. Parted from the position of patriarchal supremacy, men themselves will be abjected to a certain degree. Therefore, the male subjects in Liu and Mu’s fiction can be regarded as a compromise of subject and

abject.

Kristeva argues, in *Powers of Horror*, that during a time period when the whole society is experiencing a transformation and the old institutions are collapsing, the task of the artist is no longer to sublimate the abject or to elevate it, but to plumb the abject, to fathom “the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression.” Through this process, “‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again” (18). The Chinese society during May Fourth period was precisely a world in which the paternal law that underwrites the social order was in crisis. If one considers the May Fourth culture as a transitional culture, and if this transition means a rewriting of the old social order, then the modern woman as a trope of the abject is of extreme political significance. Leftist intellectuals rejected the promiscuous woman because they thought the latter’s existence was inimical to the construction of modern subjectivity and national identity. Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong’s understanding of modern subjectivity and national identity, however, was different. Both of them took a more radical attitude in pursuing modern subjectivity, to the extent that they exiled themselves from the masculine cultural “We.” Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong are different from those realist writers who record the ongoing world from a single solid standpoint. As writers, their narrative point of view was unanchored and constantly shifting, which enabled them to capture the most novel and exciting experiences of the modern. When it comes to the representation of the modern woman, Liu Na’ou and Mu Shiyong differ drastically from the conservative or leftist Chinese intellectuals. Both of them shared a cosmopolitan outlook: an outlook that

acknowledges and tolerates differences and diversity – an attitude which helps to extricate the individual, as a liberal subject, from the communities of race, culture, or nation. If one insists on finding out Liu Na'ou and Mu Shiying's narrative subject, one will find that it is one which has emptied itself for new identities. The narrative subject is the enchanted spectator who constantly seeks the transformation or even destruction of the self by repeatedly "plumbing the abject."

Chapter Four: “There is No Truth for Woman”

Bai Wei and the Feminine Revolutionary Impulse

The characteristic of *I* is the non-existence of *I*. I flow in the immaterial air; I float on the waves and in the bubbles.

——Bai Wei, *Zuoye*, 29

Woman has always been the unconscious of history and man, and the unconscious of herself.

——Dai Jinhua & Mengyue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, 116

In the previous chapters, I have explored the trope of woman in the literary works of male writers in modern China. Male intellectuals used the literary trope of woman to indirectly address their unconscious desires and cope with the crisis of their consciousness. The trope of woman served as a medium connecting the masculine subject with the *nihil* at the core of his crisis of consciousness. The *nihil* as a form of restructuring and revaluation must be incorporated as a principal of modernization and revolution, albeit in a covert manner.

However, not only male writers, but female writers also possessed the power of representation of themselves. As individuals in society, female writers were not exempted from the crisis of consciousness. Actually, the feminine experience is always highlighted by a crisis of consciousness – as the existing language inevitably centers on the masculine

experience and imagination, woman has little room to assert herself through symbolic language. Woman, therefore, “has always been the unconscious of history and man, and the unconscious of herself” (Dai & Meng 116). When Chinese women finally gained access to the language of representation by becoming writers and editors, they only found that language didn’t fit their experience: language either overlooked gender difference or distorted woman as the *other* of the male.

Women’s access to language in modern China, therefore, gave birth to two possibilities: 1. the feminine self is transformed by its access to language and produces new feminine experiences and desires; 2. the feminine experiences are forced to seek self-expression beyond the realm of language, thus exiling the self into a darker abyss of experience. Both of these can be regarded as an integral part of the modern Chinese revolution. While the first situation created new woman and a new subject as the agent of the modern Chinese revolution, the second situation created a self-destructive subject, which paradoxically fitted the scheme of the masculine discourse. This self-destructing subject perfectly coincided with the trope of woman as *nihil* in the representation of the masculine discourse, hence served as a symbol of empowerment and revolution. In this chapter, I will mainly focus on the feminine self that seeks representation within destructive forces and I will try to situate this form of woman’s self-representation in the masculine discourse of revolution and modernity as a whole.

Few Chinese women played a prominent role in the literary movement as a tenacious revolutionary figure in the 1920s and 30s, but Bai Wei (1894-1987) was

certainly one of these. As an unyielding fighter against patriarchal society and her own tragic fate, Bai Wei had a life which is almost awe-inspiring. The male poet Ren Jun (1909-2003) wrote of her in 1948:

Bai Wei is one of the few noted women writers from the May Fourth period... For nearly a decade, she has been persecuted by poverty and illness and other forces to such a severe degree that it is simply unbelievable. Any other person, subjected to such conditions would most likely have long been dead from illness, poverty, or suicide. Yet her will to live is like iron and fire, and she persists with pride. What an assertion of tenacity; what an act of daring spirit; and what an astonishing human attainment!³⁰

What is also astonishing is Bai Wei's writing style, which is characterized by its repetitive plots, its hysterical characterization, its convoluted rhetoric, and its unbounded passion. Both the life and writings of Bai Wei appeared unreal in the eyes of her contemporaries; and it is no coincidence that most challenging problem Bai Wei faced was the quest for "truth." As a female writer, Bai Wei could not find a viable way of self-representation within language. Her writings, therefore, are characterized by a profound disbelief in symbolic language, as well as a fascination with the extra-linguistic world. In Bai Wei's writings, one can find that the absence of feminine experience in the masculine discourse had created a powerful presence for the feminine experience in the discourse of revolution.

The Aporia of Representing the Truth of Woman

³⁰ Ren Jun, "Fuping" ("Afterword") to Bai Wei's "Xiang, jiao, kuang" ("Thought, Anxiety, and Madness: An Open Letter to Friends"), *Shanghai wanbao* (Shanghai evening news), 1948. In Bai Shurong and He You, *Bai Wei pingzhuan*, p.278. Revised translation from Yan Haiping, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948*, p.127

Bai Wei was a prominent female writer who joined the League of Left-Wing Writers (*zuolian*) as early as in spring 1930.³¹ Her literary career was a tremendous success, which won her recognition inside and outside of literary circles. Even Lu Xun praised Bai Wei's literary achievements. The very literary representation which earned Bai Wei a reputation, however, could not help her to ease the great ordeal of self-representation. In the preface to her autobiographical novel *Tragic Life* (*Beiju shengya*, 1936), Bai Wei claims that she wrote the book in order to tackle the most difficult problem of woman, especially the new woman: self-representation. Bai Wei identified herself as a marginalized figure who can hardly find a way to assert herself in society. However, she argued that a marginalized person or "a petty person" (*miaoxiao de ren*) probably possesses "more truth" than the more important figures in society, because the petty person does not have to wear a "hypocritical mask," thus is directly exposed to "the darkness and cruelty of the society." Based on this intense life experience, the petty person's desire for "enlightenment and truth" (*guangming he zhenshi*) is more vigorous (preface 1). Bai Wei had strategically built up a short-circuit between "a petty person" and "enlightenment and truth," bypassing the whole system of social institutions. While this short-circuit could not guarantee the elevation of one's social status, it definitely ensured the empowerment of the self, as the agency of representation.

While Bai Wei was able to eloquently justify her writing an autobiography as a petty person, she faltered at the idea of writing an autobiography as a woman. Once the

³¹ The League of Left-Wing Writers was founded in spring 1930.

writing assumes this specifically gendered character, according to Bai Wei, the claim of truth (*zhenshi*) appears problematic. This is because, on the one hand, the truth itself, which is filled with the capriciousness and intensity of emotions and contradicting ideas, ironically appears to be a fictional and spurious construction (*beiju shengya* 3); on the other hand, woman, who can hardly find self-representation within symbolic language, has always and already been mis-represented in a patriarchal society (3-5). In the case of Wei, the autobiographical protagonist of *Tragic Life*, she has to face different and sometimes absurd versions of “truth” about herself created by other people, most of which discredit her merits and efforts as a Chinese Nora. For these two reasons, woman’s access to the truth of her self is literally blocked up. Bai Wei wrote with indignation: “In this decrepit and moribund society, in the evil society where patriarchal power is so strong, there is no truth for woman” (preface 5)

Probably because the aporia of self-representation is so formidable, Bai Wei’s description of her methods for representing the truth in her autobiographical novel appears to be very ambiguous and confusing. In the preface, Bai Wei wrote that in order to represent the truth, she “endeavored to extract the essence from various realities in everyday life as the tragedy unfolds, objectify them and plainly record them” (2). At another place she said that she “wrote about a suffering soul” out of her “own experience” (9). However, between artistic abstraction and unvarnished experience, where lies the truth of reality? Any reader of *Tragic Life* will find that the book is a lengthy, repetitive, incoherent, and sometimes frantic work. The narrative voice

constantly shifts in the text, “oscillating between the relatively impartial stance of an omniscient narrator, to an intimate, sympathetic observer of Wei’s struggles, to that of ironic critic who zeroes in on the heroine’s contradictory and often self-defeating behavior” (Dooling 125). Furthermore, the narrative is interspersed with the poems and letters written by Bai Wei and her lover Yang Sao during their tumultuous and prolonged amorous relationship. The novel actually stands in an awkward position between autobiographical literature (marked by consistent and retroactive narration of one’s own history) and personal notes (marked by instantaneous eruptions of emotions and desires). This narrative mode defies the notion of the trajectory of progressive historical consciousness acclaimed by the May Fourth reformers: any moment, no matter whether it is past, present, or future, becomes the “now” of the writing woman, who is then thrown into an emotional whirlpool and unable to write in an “objective” (*keguan*) tone, as Bai Wei claimed she is. Bai Wei’s pursuit of truth (*zhenshi*) was so obstinate that it derailed her from the camp of realist writers. She could not maintain an objective voice, nor could she employ a scientific method to represent the feminine truth as she experienced it.³² In the repetitive hysterical mode, the narrative voice of Bai Wei’s autobiographical novel is, not surprisingly, quite subjective.

However, this subjective mode of writing seemingly did not undermine the novel’s appeal among the masses. After *Tragic Life* was published, Bai Wei gained much

³² According to the literary critic Qian Xingcun (aka. A Ying, 1900-1977), “new realism” (*xin xieshi zhuyi*) has four characteristics: an objective viewpoint, a scientific method, a militant posture, and a subject relevant to proletarian literature. See David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That is History*, 83.

sympathetic support; people even donated money to help Bai Wei recover from venereal disease. Does this mean that *Tragic Life* succeeded in representing the truth of woman? While this question remains unanswered, what can be certain is that *Tragic Life* didn't clear away the different versions of "truth" about the author, nor did it establish Bai Wei as an objective referee of reality. Thus, one needs to reexamine Bai Wei's statement that "there is no truth for woman." Does it mean, as Liu Jianmei suggests, that "there is an original truth, but she just cannot find it within the masculine dominant language" (105)? Or does it mean that the concept of truth does not serve woman at all?

In any case, Bai Wei was one of the few Chinese women writers whose belief in "truth" was almost paranoid. Even though she was clearly aware of the aporia of representing the truth of woman, she still held onto her own "truth," which she believed would not vanish under external attacks or slander (*beiju shengya* 5). This "truth" she referred to, however, apparently was not a transparent one, even to herself. Neither her ambiguous methods of representation nor her subjective mode of writing was able to help to articulate the truth of which she was unaware. The insistence on truth, therefore, could only be realized in a very primordial way by affirming the self – by holding onto her physical life: "She does not care about success or failure, all she cares about is living, living in sincerity, living in suffering; living is the entirety of herself" (*beiju shengya* 5-6). From the claim to "enlightenment and truth" to the insistence on physical life, Bai Wei had actually located the so-called "truth" in the performative act of living itself. It was a bold attempt to overwrite the masculine construction of truth, which was conscious and

rational, with her version of truth, which was rooted in the unconscious drive of life.

According to Bai Wei, her biggest motive for writing *Tragic Life* can be expressed in a Hamletian question: to live or to die? Suffering from severe venereal disease and poverty, she was already seized by despair. As she recalled in *Tragic Life*, she was murmuring frantically two words “death”(si) and “life”(sheng) more than ten times (8). Perhaps the liminal space between life and death best describes the truth of a woman – her desperate experience in a patriarchal society. Once a progressive female student, Bai Wei was forced into marriage by her father. Her husband, and especially her mother-in-law, ruthlessly tortured her both physically and emotionally, and forbade her to commit suicide. She escaped one snowy night and later enrolled at Hengyang Third Normal School (*Hengyang disan shifan xuexiao*), but she was expelled for activism against Western missionaries. Later she became a student at Changsha First Women’s Normal School (*Changsha diyi nüzi shifan xuexiao*). When her father tried to return Bai Wei to her husband, she managed to run away to Tokyo upon graduation, and continued her education there. In Japan she suffered from disease and poverty, as well as from the rejection and scorn on the part of her family and others. She fell in love with the young poet Yang Sao (1900-1957), who happened to be a fickle lover. Her romantic relationship with Yang Sao left her with not only a broken heart, but also a deadly venereal disease. In Bai Wei’s life, there were several times when she was lingering between life and death. One poem in *Tragic Life* records this excruciating experience of hers:

Breaking out of the old prison at home

I have fallen into the abyss of non-being in foreign lands;
 lingering day and night
 in the borderland of living and dying
 [...]
 Fate exiled me from the garden of hope
 with the ultimatum of cold starvation
 storms of misery!
 A woman wandering on the streets
 with no food in her body and blood-soaked tears in her eyes
 is a lone flower attacked by wind and rain, all in ruins.
 See those gentlemen
 whose harsh gazes in passing
 instantly turn this ‘*shina* female’
 into a horror of disfiguration.
 Chains of oppression, how unjust you can be!
 [...]
 Yet the fire in me will burn you
 in life or in death
 defying your destruction!³³

While Bai Wei affirms the significance of living as an unyielding assertion of self-representation, her experience and thoughts of death cannot simply be dismissed as the abnegation of self-representation. Bai Wei’s obsession with “death,” in fact, is a way to metaphysically transcend, or compensate for, her miserable life experiences. Although in real life her existence was threatened by death several times, in the world constructed by her literary imagination, death was a constant and favorite theme.

Deeply aware of her inability to reconstruct a self through writing, Bai Wei consciously identified herself with this absence of self-representation in the symbolic space. “Bai Wei” is the penname she gave herself after she arrived in Japan (her real

³³ *Beiju shengya*, 172- 174. Translation from Yan Haiping, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination*, 125. One can find from Yan’s translation that Bai Wei had used a form of broken, inconsistent poetic language which is further disrupted by her emotional turbulences.

name is Huang Zhang). She explains that *bai* 白 means nothingness and vanity, so the name itself contains “the endless tragedy of woman” (Bai & Yang 17). The second character, *wei* 薇, means a kind of flower in Chinese. However, it is also the homophone of another Chinese character 微, which means small or trivial. It is the recognition of her symbolic absence that drives Bai Wei to seek self-representation beyond the realm of language. The determination to live and the impulse to die interweave with each other to deconstruct the characters and meanings of her literary writing, creating a form of self-representation that is unrepresentable. Such a tendency already comes into being in Bai Wei’s early poetic drama *Linli* (1925).

Linli: Love and Death

Linli is a three-act poetic drama which Bai Wei wrote in Japan in 1925.³⁴ The main plot of the play revolves around a love triangle: the female dancer Linli falls in love with a male musician, Qinlan, but soon her younger sister Lili becomes the new love object of Qinlan. The story line of the second half of the play is a bit murky and enigmatic, as most of the surrealistic sequences actually take place in Linli’s dreams. Linli herself is ardently courted by the god of death but she rejects his love. Knowing that Lili and Qinlan already have a baby and she can never resume her love with Qinlan, Linli commits suicide. Later, Qinlan, who comes to look for Linli, is attacked and torn into pieces by three chimpanzees. At the end of the play, Linli wakes up from her dream in a

³⁴ *Lin Li* is the second play that Bai Wei wrote; the first one is *Su Fei*, written in 1922.

nameless hotel.

Linli is one of the most important literary creations for Bai Wei; she claimed that it was “a poetic drama that sprang from the soul” (*beiju shengya* 154). The play soon gained the attention of the public, “as if a sharp light suddenly flashed” (Qiao 204; Yan 119). The emotional intensity of *Linli* astounded some male intellectuals. The critic Chen Xingyin commented that Bai Wei’s play was “all about love or the lack of it between men and women;” he was amazed at the emotional power her works possessed: “a crying for love from a woman’s heart that runs through a total of 200 pages from first to last without any pause or repetition and opens such an infinite latitude – what a power and strength and depth and magnitude of emotion it mobilizes!”³⁵ It is as if from Bai Wei’s *Linli* male writers had found a new spring of power.

Bai Wei’s play opens with the beautiful Linli’s sorrowful singing in the moonlight in a nameless garden in winter. She is missing her lover Qinlan and praising the miracles created by love. Love for Linli is a redeeming force that rescues her from the “mother’s womb of nothingness” (*xuwu de muqin de tai*) (5). The womb of nothingness is like “a desolate well,” in which she cannot experience her own existence. Now, the burning passions of love give her an object which she feels is “reliable” (32) and on which she can build her life. Love can regenerate her devastated youth and dilute her traumatic past. It also offers Linli a glamorous way of self-representation. When her younger sister Lili

³⁵ Chen Xiying, *Modern Review* (*Xiandai Pinglun*), April, 1926. See Yan Haiping, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination*, 119.

argues against Linli's love for Qinlan, her words fall on Linli's deaf ears.

The younger sister Lili is as beautiful as Linli, but more sarcastic and practical. She thinks Linli's love for Qinlan is blind and cannot do her any good. In their debate, Lili exhibits the ability to think critically as an educated woman; however, when Lili asks Linli to analyze her lover using her "head," Linli replies that analysis is impossible for a woman in love (20-21).

Bai Wei's portrait of Lili is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, Lili is the beautiful, talented, and impassioned sister who cares about Linli and can always offer level-headed advice. On the other hand, Lili is a selfish woman who steals her older sister's lover. Different from Linli, whose youth is devastated (a suggestion of Bai Wei's own tragic life), Lili's life is blessed: she studied musicals and opera in France, Japan, and Italy, and later became a famous dancer; she has never been forced into a marriage and is an ardent advocate of free and equal love between man and woman. Lili's analysis of man and society is penetrating. In comparison with the frantic love manifesto made by Linli, Lili's words sometimes better represent Bai Wei's opinions about the male-dominated society.

Although Lili later becomes a rival in love for Linli, throughout the play Linli never resents her – she merely complains about her own fate. In fact, at the end of Act One, Linli has already noticed that Lili is ogling Qinlan when the three of them are together; yet at the beginning of Act Two, after seeing Lili dancing in front of the old temple, Linli passionately embraces her and kisses her. When Lili opposes Linli's passion violently and says that she would not accept "homosexual love" (*tongxing lian'ai*) (69),

Linli responds that she indeed loves Lili because the latter represents “an impassioned youth” (70). Lili, therefore, is an ideal self – a superego – of Linli, whom Linli loves as she loves undamaged youth. Lili’s life almost represents the fulfilled life of an educated and talented woman, who can seek freedom and happiness as she wills. However, perhaps because of Bai Wei’s deep pessimism about woman’s fate in that society, even this ideal self is conceived with tragic flaws. When Lili finally becomes the lover of Qinlan, she is unwillingly impregnated and almost loses her life giving birth to the baby. It is obvious that Bai Wei does not believe in the ultimate freedom of woman in a patriarchal society, and she refuses to forge an illusion of a free and happy woman in her play.

The most fascinating parts of the play are the surrealistic scenes, which contain an infinite depth and magnitude of emotion. The play’s poetic language and the “highly expressionist stage directions” create an “eerie, dreamlike effect” (D. Wang, *Monster* 97). In the middle of Act Two, when Linli is bidding farewell to Qinlan, the Goddess of the Purple Rose (*zi qiangwei*) appears to lead the two lovers into a hallucinatory journey, in which they see grand scenes of destruction, heaven, and the God of Death. The Goddess of the Purple Rose then gives each of them a pill to swallow, and asks them to dance following the rhythm of their hearts. Both Qinlan and Linli feel the strongest power of life and are transformed in the Dionysian frenzy as they sing: “Dance is the core of the world;” “Dance is the fountain of life” (106). The scene of the dance is the culmination of the love between Linli and Qinlan, as well as the vivid representation of the mighty

power and passion in bare physical life.

After Linli parts from Qinlan, the God of Time (*shishen*) and the God of Death (*sishen*) appear on stage. They are debating over whether Linli's frantic love is worthwhile. The God of Death believes that Linli's love brings her closer to death, and thus approves of her. The God of Time, however, disapproves of this "heretical love" (109) because he thinks that the human being should not "hold onto instinctual pleasures" (*zhizhuo zhe benneng de kuaile*) (110). The God of Death refutes him: "The one who really knows to hold onto instinctual pleasure is herself a beautiful poem. The bad thing is one does not know how to hold onto his instincts, but is instead held onto *by* instincts. Those who are held onto by instincts only have base tastes and weakening decadence" (110). The God of Time is afraid that Linli's heretical love will lead to the destruction of the world, but the God of Death welcomes the end of the world: "I cannot speak out my horrors! My curse is that human beings become extinct as soon as possible. Extinction was not my original intention. I just hope that there will be beautiful human beings after the extinction, who will build a beautiful world" (110).

The God of Death's statement on instinctual pleasure is actually also the inner voices of Linli. In Act One, Qinlan refrains from loving Linli as a woman because he believes that man's sexual love is fickle and cannot lead to eternity. He thus asks Linli to transcend sexual love, because if they "embrace each other tightly like common lovers," then in the space where they stand, there will be "a pile of dead ashes" (48). Linli, by contrast, is not afraid of the nihilistic prospect; she believes that "the deepest and finest

beauty of humanity lies only between the two sexes” (74). She dismisses Qinlan’s notion of “eternity”: “What eternity? Where is eternity? If there is the most passionate and most beautiful moment, there will be the eternity that we long for” (43). She thus prefers to follow the lead of instinctual pleasure and let love run its natural course. Qinlan’s and Linli’s views on love mirror the views of the God of Time and the God of Death, respectively.

The God of Death is fascinated with Linli. For him, Linli is a unique woman: while other people “love for life’s sake,” Linli “loves for love’s sake” (118). Lin’s love, therefore, is not guided by a conscious teleology, and her passions are not girdled by the concern for life. He also loves her because Linli has the ability of “loving to death”: she is not afraid of the suffering of love, even if this suffering is greater than the suffering of death. Linli’s will to live, therefore, is more powerful will than the will to die. The God of Death’s comment on Linli’s love and life is consistent with Bai Wei’s own assertion of living in sincerity and suffering, as expressed in the preface of *Tragic Life*.

When the God of Time and the God of Death approach Linli, they find that she is completely possessed by the spell of love; her bosom is burning like fire but her head is freezing like ice. Linli’s agency of love and action, therefore, is not located in her head, but in her heart. The God of Death tries to court Linli but is rejected; he then tries to forcefully kiss Linli and dies in ecstasy, because Linli breaks his “treasure of life,” which he gave her as a love token.

This scene, of course, takes place in Linli’s first dream. It is thus a reflection of

her unconscious activity. Of the two gods, the God of Death evidently has a closer relationship to Linli, and Bai Wei herself. As an ardent advocate of love, death, and destruction, the God of Death is unmistakably a mouthpiece for both Linli and Bai Wei. Moreover, the play mentions that the God of Death is the “first dancer on earth” (104); therefore he must also possess the Dionysian power that transformed Linli and Qinlan in their dance. The God of Death’s bold promotion of instinctual pleasure indicates that he might represent the unconscious drive (*id*) of Linli, which she only meets in dream but refuses to acknowledge consciously. Even if Linli rejects the courtship of the God of Death, the latter is already part of her self. In Linli’s fervent love for Qinlan, she has exhibited all the tendencies of the unconscious drive – tendencies towards death, destruction, and forgetfulness. Obviously, Bai Wei created the dramatic character of the God of Death as a part of her self: the god is described as an incredibly beautiful man. In this sense, the God of Death and Lili represent the superego and the id of Linli, respectively.

Although the God of Death dies in courting Linli, at the end of play he still triumphs (in Linli’s second dream in Act Three). Throwing herself into a pond, Linli finally chooses to embrace death with a broken heart. After her death, three huge chimpanzees come from nowhere to start a spree of manslaughter, killing more than one hundred and thirty people in Qinlan and Lili’s troupe. The unfaithful lover Qinlan himself becomes the first victim: he is torn to pieces by the chimpanzees in their revelry of killing.

The play is, as David Der-wei Wang observes, “propelled by irresistible death

wishes” (*Monster* 97). The sorrowful singing of Linli at the beginning of the play evolves into an ecstatic celebration of destruction at the end. A story of love turns into a story of massacre. The emotional discharge converges into a destructive force, destroying everything in its path. The wrath belongs to Linli, as well as to Bai Wei.

For the literary critic Yan Haiping, the “waves of passion” in the play *Linli* are stunning: “The energy of the drama is disconcertingly unfamiliar, so is its impetus” (119). This is perhaps due to the fact that most of the energy of the drama derives not from the ego-instinct, which aims at the affirmation and preservation of the self, but from the death-instinct, which constantly destroys and dissolves the self. Rescued from “the mother’s womb of nothingness” by love, Linli’s self soon dissolves in the heat of love after a brief struggle. If the old self, which bears a traumatic history, has to be destroyed in order to build a new one, the new self is immediately traumatized by the very force that brings it into being. The end, therefore, is still nothingness – the annihilation of the self, and the annihilation of the world in the self’s experience.

Death as Power

From the suicide of Linli and the horrific massacre at the end of the poetic drama, the audience can witness the power of death, which is able to undo the world and devour the self and the beauty of the world as the self perceives it. However, while *Linli* demonstrated the awesome power of the death drive, it did not secure a stage for Bai Wei’s self-representation. The ending of *Linli* was too dark to be incorporated into the

mainstream discourse of the May Fourth literature. It was not until the publication of *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* (*dachu youling ta*, 1928) that Bai Wei became famous as the “the most revolutionary woman writer of her generation” (Dooling 104). This was because the latter play demonstrated that the extreme power of death can be called upon as an extreme power of revolution.

Fight out of the Ghost Tower was originally named *Go, Die* (*qu, siqu*). The play was written in 1927 in response to the invitation to another modern writers Zhang Ziping (1893-1959). But the original manuscript was lost as soon as it was finished. According to Bai Wei herself, the manuscript was borrowed by Xiang Peiliang (1905-1959), a modern dramatist, and was never returned to her. It is not clear why Xiang would have buried Bai Wei’s manuscript. Bai Wei wrote in the postscript of *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* that Xiang Peiliang used to attack her poetic drama *Linli*; so probably it was due to their conflicting aesthetic views that Xiang would do such a thing to Bai Wei. Anyway, this accident must have made Bai Wei bitter about how difficult it was for a woman to be heard in a society dominated by men.

Bai Wei became severely ill under this unexpected blow and could only start to re-write the play according to her fragmented memory the following year. The new manuscript has a new title: *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*. Compared with the decadence and pessimism in the old title *Go, Die*, the new title is permeated with a combative spirit; it also indicates a reverse of the old title: while the old title implies death as the final destination, the new title points in an opposite direction – one needs to break out of the

“ghost tower,” which is a symbol of death. The difference between the lost manuscript and the re-written one, therefore, again revolves around the metaphysical question of life and death.

Compared with *Linli*, however, *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* acquired a new element, the element of revolution. In the winter of 1926, driven by the dynamic waves of revolution, Bai Wei returned to China from Japan to work for the Wuhan regime in March 1927, as a Japanese translator. When the Nationalist military butchered the revolution that spring, Bai Wei protested by quitting the position and going to Shanghai (Yan 125-127). In China, she experienced the waves of revolution firsthand. *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* was published in the first issue of *Ben Liu*, a leftist literary journal edited by Lu Xun, in June 1928. The “Ghost Tower” in Bai Wei’s re-written manuscript is a clear reference to Lu Xun’s famous essay “On the Collapse of Leifeng Tower” (*lun leifeng ta de daodiao*, 1924).³⁶ Lu Xun’s essay cheers the collapse of Leifeng Tower because the tower – and the legend behind it – represents the history of oppressive paternal feudalism. Bai Wei’s *Fighting out of the Ghost Tower* adopts this literary symbol and theme.

What differentiates Bai Wei’s play from Lu Xun’s essay, again, is the complicated relations between her characters and the unprecedented emotional intensity flowing from the narrative. *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* is a three-act play. The male protagonist, Master Hu Rongsheng, is a cruel landlord and opium dealer. He already has seven concubines but he still covets the young Xiao Yuelin, his servant girl-cum adopted

³⁶ Lu Xun’s “On the Collapse of Leifeng Tower” was initially published in November 1924.

daughter. Hu Rongsheng's youngest concubine, Zheng Shaomei, secretly loves Rongsheng's son Qiaoming, and wants a divorce from Rongsheng. Xiao Sen is a leading figure in the local women's association and is helping Zheng Shaomei to get the divorce. In a visit to Hu's mansion, Xiao Sen discovers Yuelin's true identity: she is the illegitimate daughter of Hu Rongsheng and Xiao Sen herself. Yuelin and Qiaoming love each other, but Yuelin also loves Ling Xia, a leading member of the peasant's association. When Hu Rongsheng tries to rape Yuelin, Qiaoming comes to rescue Yuelin and is killed by his father. Rongshen then falsely accuses Ling Xia of murder. Yuelin turns mad and is imprisoned by Rongsheng. At the end of the play, Xiao Sen comes to rescue Yuelin. But Yuelin and Rongsheng shoot each other to death.

The main characters of the play are the three women: Xiao Yuelin, Xiao Sen, and Zheng Shaomei. They have a common antagonist: the evil master Hu Rongsheng. The other male characters are, in fact, less important to the plot and the progression of emotion. Xiao Sen was raped by Hu Rongsheng when she was very young and gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, Xiao Yuelin, who was later adopted by Hu Rongsheng, because the latter had noticed the beauty of the little girl. Zheng Shaomei was compelled to marry Hu Rongsheng. She had been the favorite concubine of Rongsheng until Yuelin grew up. The character Hu Rongsheng, therefore, combines the figure of the despotic father and the fickle lover. In *The Monster That is History*, David Der-wei Wang points out that "Bai Wei's ambivalent feelings toward her father and her lover constitute the two strains of her works. And it is through her continued struggle against and compromise

with these two male figures that she comes to terms with the meaning of ‘woman’ and revolution” (95). In *Fighting out of the Ghost Tower*, Bai Wei’s ambivalence is resolved by the bifurcation of male characters: Hu Qiaoming and Ling Xia represent the ideal lovers and revolutionaries, while Hu Rongsheng is the target of the resentment of the three women.

The most ambivalent literary image in the play is “death.” Obviously, Bai Wei’s “death” has double metaphorical meanings: on the one hand, “death” represents the repressive and reactionary paternal system in Hu Rongsheng’s family, and his inhuman attitude toward his tenants. On the other hand, “death” is the ultimate liberating force that generates new life and a new order. Perhaps because Bai Wei’s earlier manuscript did not intend to emphasize the first meaning of death, *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* does not contain sufficient descriptions of the atmosphere of “death” in Hu Rongsheng’s mansion, except that Hu Rongsheng himself is referred to several times as a “ghost” by the other characters. Yet the second meaning of “death” is overwhelming in the play, driving the plots and generating the final climax.

The protagonist Xiao Yuelin has experienced three stages in her self-development. In the first stage, Xiao Yuelin lives in obscurity and does not know herself. The lack of self-knowledge results in her ambivalent attitudes toward other people and the world. For example, she cannot determine whether to love Qiaoming exclusively or to continue to love Ling Xia; neither can she decide whether or not to leave Hu Rongsheng’s mansion. She does not question her own history and origin. In the second stage, which is entailed

by Qiaoming's death, Yuelin has entered a state of madness. Madness increases her obscurity, yet brings her closer to death. In madness, all of her old ideas and identities are wiped out. Madness offers her a preparatory stage for the subsequent radical change. The last stage is the stage of death; Xiao Yuelin shoots Hu Rongsheng to death, while being shot by the latter. Surprisingly, the immanence of death gives Yuelin a new vitality that she has never experienced before: "Vitality rapidly flows all over my body, my organs are singing in my belly...Ah, I'm happy! I'm happy" (328)! Shrouded by the shadow of death, Xiao Yuelin suddenly becomes resolute and eloquent. Her last cries burst out not only from the ghost tower, but from the play itself as an integral piece of art:

Shame, shame...unbearable shame
 Revenge, revenge, only to be acknowledged by the sea.
 Ah! What a world it would be like? (*addressed to the audience*)
 Red, yellow, green...all colors!
 Our world is to come from our blood. (*crazier, driven to dance*)
 Ha ha ha! ...
 Upside down! ...All is upside down!
 The world has been turned upside down! ... Fresh, beautiful!
 Ha ha ha!...ha ha ha ha ha ha ha
 All is upside down! – this is the gift of "death"!
 The world is fresh –this is the gift of "death"!
 Upside down, all is fresh!
 I'm in the cradle of "living," swaying, swaying, swaying...
 I'm alive. I'm alive!
 Ha ha ha ha ha! ...
 My determination tells me my destination:
 I "go to die" "go to die" "go to die"...
 Returned to my "life"! Returned to my "life"!
 "Death" teaches me the new life! "Death" teaches me the new life!
 We fight everything with death
 We have "new life", "new life" (329-330)!

As David Der-wei Wang notices, Yuelin's dying remarks are directly addressed to the audience, "as if the surplus of anger, madness, and pathos can no longer be contained by the enclosure of the stage, but must spill over into the audience" (*Monster* 57). It is ironic that Xiao Yuelin fights her way out of the ghost tower only by way of death. Her fight against the cruel power of the patriarch is initiated by a desire to live better, but ends up becoming a pure celebration of the death drive. Xiao Yuelin's final struggle has no real object other than death.

At the end of the play, Xiao Sen tells Xiao Yuelin that she is her real mother. The identification of Yuelin's origin (mother) is closely connected with her end (death), making what is in-between – the woman's life – a terrifying emptiness. Although Bai Wei changed the title of the drama from *Go, Die* to *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*, her obsession with death persisted. However, this time, death is not the silent shadow that devours people's lives, as in *Linli*; in *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*, Bai Wei has found a way to convert the destructive power of death into a restructuring power that leads to new life. *Linli* is devoured by death, but Xiao Yuelin celebrates death.

Although throughout the play Xiao Yuelin only shows concern for herself and her lovers, at the end of the play she is speaking on a level above this limited personal perspective. The pronoun of Yuelin's last words shifts from "I" to "we" – therefore the new subject brought about by her death is not herself, but the collective subject of oppressed sons and daughters, women, and the proletariat. If madness can be regarded as a form of death, which can undo all the identities that constrain the individual's free will

and actions, death is the ultimate realization of this freedom that transcends the limits of any individual identity. Therefore, the dying Xiao Yuelin does not have a specific or finite self, but speaks in a collective identity, be it the women, the proletariat, or the masses. In this way, death is evoked as a revolutionizing force that liberates the individual from his limited self-consciousness.

Bai Wei called *Fighting out of the Ghost Tower* a “social tragedy.” It is likely that she consciously extended the formidable power of death to the bigger stage – the social field. Critics in the leftist camp praised *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* as a model drama for women’s liberation. Furthermore, the theme of class struggle has been highlighted, in view of the deadly conflict between landlord and proletariat, father and children, man and woman (D. Wang, *Monster* 58). The flow of the death drive into the social field helps to reconstruct a collective agency of the revolutionary subject. This explains why the play attracted much more attention in leftist literary circles, even though artistically it might have not surpassed the previous play *Linli*. However, the success of *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* consists not only in its social connotations, but in the combination of the social content and the death drive. The revolutionization of the death drive in *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* carved out a way for Bai Wei to pursue self-representation in a society dominated by masculine discourse.

The Prenarrative

Although *Linli* is a personal testimony and *Fight out of the Ghost Tower* is a

social tragedy, both of them are heavily branded with Bai Wei's "hysterical" mode of writing. Bai Wei's writing style appears disconcerting to many literary critics. As Liu Jianmei observes: "Bai Wei's narrative language is extremely emotional, lacking basic logic and reasonable connections between events, freely jumping from one protagonist to the other, from interior monologues to exterior reality, from the heights of excitement to the depths of depression" (J. Liu 115). Her writings show no clear motive for the representation of a transparent truth or the reorganization of a fragmented self. Instead, her writings' most outstanding function was that they afforded the writer "a world of human companions with whose passion she sustained herself" (Yan 126). Rather than a site of meaning, Bai Wei's literary works created a site of affective responses – "from neurosis to catharsis, and from paranoia to euphoria" (D. Wang, *Monster* 97).

Filled with "political, ethical, and emotional irrationalities" (D. Wang, *Monster* 58), Bai Wei's writings can hardly be regarded as examples of mature works of literature; on the contrary, the characters and plots of her stories are almost identical, and repetitive. The unfaithful lover, for example, is the constant male protagonist in her writings. The plot always contains a failure of love and proceeds to destruction at the end. And the narrative voice behind the characters and plots is so unstable that sometimes it is "calm, tender, romantic and fine," and sometimes it is "firm, unyielding, or even passionate and grief-stricken to the extent of madness" (*Beiju shengya*, 165). The self-contradicting narrative voice creates discrepancies in her writings and blurs the boundaries of reality and fantasy. In a certain way, all of Bai Wei's writings are autobiographical – they reflect

the writer's subjective experience, as well as her inability to dissociate herself from personal experience. This style of writing, therefore, is heretical in comparison with the realistic mode of writing acclaimed by the leftist intellectuals – Bai Wei's sympathetic supporters – from the mid-1920s onward. As Marston Anderson points out in *The Limits of Realism*, the objectivity of realism “elevates the subject (as an independent platform of observation) while censoring those emotions and prejudices that we usually think of as an individual's subjectivity” (11). Even in the “revolution plus love” fiction, love and passions were never granted the supreme privilege of breaking out of the teleological scope of the narrative. The famous practitioners of the “revolution plus love” formula, such as Mao Dun (1896-1981) and Jiang Guangci (1901-1931), never gave up the claim of “authorial objectivity” and the concern for the integrity of their works. However, as Bai Wei's subjective experience is marked by its self-destructive tendency, her literary subject is by no means an integral individual. Her “emotions and prejudices” are so violent that they have paradoxically erased the boundary between the individual and the collective. Therefore, Bai Wei's narrative subject, in a way, is an elevated subject which transcends the “emotions and prejudices” of any individual subjectivity.

In this way, Bai Wei's writing “brings one to an aspect of revolution plus love that male writers fail to address” (D. Wang, *Monster* 97). Her writings are filled with the “nightmarish fear and fantasy shared by revolutionary youth, so haunting as to be denied by many,” and “bare subjects so raw as to offend the decorum of verisimilitude” (D. Wang, *Monster* 97). Bai Wei's writing style exhibits a “neurotic and melancholy” mode

which was disapproved of by many of her male colleagues. This writing mode is closer to a kind of “prenarrative” – a quasi-narration, which articulates the drives and desires in order to sustain the writer’s endangered self.

Psychoanalysts have found that children under one year old can observe “generalized event representations,” “story schema,” or “cognitive affective models” that, from the beginning, adopt the form of a “prenarrative envelope” (Kristeva & Guberman 144). In interpreting the British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s theory of the “prenarrative,” Julia Kristeva and Ross Guberman explain that the prenarrative envelope

...reflects a subjective reality that is primarily affective and that displays the logical properties of the drive: desire (or motivation), an aim, its realization, an unraveling in time, repetition, an association of memories, a line of dramatic tension tantamount to a primal story, and so forth. As an emotional, physical, and already subjective experience that bases itself on drives that function in an interpersonal context, this prenarrative envelope is thus a mental construction that emerges from the “real” world; it is an “emergent property” of thought. Under this framework, various “centers” tasked with controlling a host of mental processes (sensations, the need of the drives, motility, language, place, time, and so forth)...are able to coordinate themselves at a higher level by integrating with a unified event whose structure is similar to the structure of narration (144).

In other words, prenarrative is a narration based on drives. It is not coordinated by a unifying and conscious ego, but by various processes of mental activities, which all try to “recount” a “real” event. But this “real” is not reality, because what is “real” for the self is the fragmented raw materials interwoven with fantasy. The fantasy is inscribed in an emotional context and is itself a basic, if not innate, narrative structure. As a drive-based narration, the prenarrative is “neither a pure experience nor a pure abstraction but

intermediaries between the two” (145).

It is not difficult to notice that Bai Wei’s writings exhibit the very characteristics of the prenarrative. The overwhelming strength of Bai Wei’s writings is her devotion to the recounting of two “real” events that caused endless frustration and anxiety in her: the forced marriage arranged by her father and the love betrayal of Yang Sao. Of the two events, her failed love with Yang Sao probably was the incident that directly triggered the prenarrative mode in Bai Wei’s writings. Bai Wei’s first dramatic play, *Su Fei*, was written in 1922. It portrays the conflict between a dominating father and his daughter over the latter’s marriage. But the conflict between father and daughter turns out to be a minor one in this play, because the whole family of *Su Fei* later is framed and destroyed by an evil son of a warlord. *Su Fei* becomes a nun and finally uses her power of forgiveness to reform her family foe into a pious religious person (Bai & He 64-66). This first play of Bai Wei still contains a naive will and a strong teleology. *Su Fei* turns down the option of revenge through violence when she has the chance, and finds peace in religion. She is drastically different from the “mad women” characters in Bai Wei’s later plays. Moreover, the play is compactly structured, and the language is fine and lyrical. There are no intense emotional eruptions and irrationalities of the sort that characterize the drive-based prenarrative mode.

Bai Wei’s prenarrative mode of writing must have taken shape between 1923 and 1924, after Yang Sao’s first betrayal. In Yang Sao’s autobiography, he writes that the 1923 Tokyo Earthquake “gave me the first taste of failure in love; because of this, I came to

know another woman, and got so entangled that my life in the next ten years was passed in meaningless afflictions” (Qing 50). The woman who gave Yang Sao the first taste of failure in love was a sister of Yang Sao’s friend, whom Bai Wei referred to as Sister A (*A mei*) in *Tragic Life*; the “another woman” who gave Yang Sao ten years of meaningless afflictions was Bai Wei. After Sister A married another man, Yang Sao accepted Bai Wei’s love, but soon returned to Sister A’s arms. Bai Wei was heartbroken over this incident; she changed her penname from Su Ru³⁷ to Bai Wei, “the non-entity” or a “void,” under which she wrote the second drama, *Linli*.

Many critics of *Linli* have read the play as Bai Wei’s own failure in love (He 201). The love triangle in *Linli* is a duplication of the love affairs between Bai Wei, Yang Sao, and Sister A, which is the “primal story” for many of Bai Wei’s literary works. In *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*, Xiao Sen and Zhen Shaomei are possessed by but betrayed by Hu Rongsheng. In another play of Bai Wei, *The Revolutionary God in Distress* (*gemingshen shounan*, 1928), the lascivious general instantly betrays his new lover when he sees a more beautiful girl. In the novel *The Bomb and the Expeditionary Bird* (*zhadan yu zhengniao*, 1928), one man falls in love with two sisters in turn. And the autobiographical novel *Tragic Life* is an unprecedented effort to recount this primal story. Of course, Bai Wei also wrote some short one-act social plays that have nothing to do with her failure in love, such as *A Fake Foreigner* (*jia yangren*, 1931) and *The Concubine* (*yiniang*, 1931).

³⁷ When Bai Wei published *Su Fei* her penname was Su Ru. *Su* means native or plain; *ru* means as or like. They are both very common characters for a woman’s name.

But these works certainly are not her most representative works and do not occupy a significant position in her oeuvre. Bai Wei's most expanded and famous works were written without exception in the shadow of the primal story.

The formidable power of the death drive that erupts from the dramatic language of *Linli* echoes the crazy love confessions Bai Wei made to Yang Sao in their personal epistles. In her love letters to Yang Sao she called herself a “madwoman” (Bai & Yang 41); she vowed that she would “sacrifice everything” to become a lifetime “maid” of her lover (Bai & Yang 59). When Yang Sao proposed to Bai Wei that they should become “eternal friends,” she responded violently: “Death? Death? Beloved bother! I’d rather cut out my tongue, chop my hands off, gouge my eyes out...let the blood shed from the wounds, bleed, bleed, bleed. Bleed to life. Live, live” (Bai & Yang 53)!

The hysterical and convoluted rhetoric in Bai Wei's epistles extended to her literary creations, especially to her dramatic works. In an article called “Why I Started a Literary Career” (*wo toudao wenxuequan li de chuzhong*), Bai Wei confessed that literature was her only weapon to fight against the society that almost ruined her; with literature, she could anatomize human society and inscribe her pains (5). Literature not only provided a way of asserting her existence, but also a medium where her overflowing love and hatred could be ventilated. Bai Wei's mentor in literature is Tian Han (1898-1968), the famous modern dramatist.³⁸ And her first encounter with Western literature was Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Moreover, for a woman with such strong desires, intense

³⁸ Bai Wei met Tian Han in Japan. She called Tian Han her “only mentor in literature.” In *Bai Wei Zuopin Xuan*, p.4.

emotions, and a traumatic past, it was almost inevitable that Bai Wei would choose drama as her main tool of expression. As Yan Haiping points out: “Dramatic performance, as a medium to set eruptive imagination in actual human movement, meant something more than another institutionally available way of making a living as a modern professional or of attaining status as a female power player in the given structures of a modern nation state and its forming hierarchy” (Yan 126). Drama’s performative perspective and the dramatic focus on contradiction offered Bai Wei the best field on which to express her innate destructiveness. Music and dance are vehicles of a kind of Dionysian power that underlies her madness, and dramatic characterization is achieved through direct dialogues and actions, so as to minimize authorial intervention. The imaginative elements and surging emotions in her dramatic plays also defy the tenet of rationalism promoted by other May Fourth writers.

When talking about modern Chinese drama, Jaroslav Prušek asserts that the dramatic subjectivism “is not self-centered; it is not meant as an expression of any of the author’s private moods and feelings but it voices the author’s revolutionary thinking, it is a battle-call mobilizing the audience” (59). Bai Wei’s dramatic writings demonstrate the transcendental mode of revolutionary thinking. No longer obsessed with the limited self-consciousness, Bai Wei’s prenarrative mode creates a vast field which attracts the audience to join this powerful collective revolutionary subject.

The literary critic Wang Yao praises Bai Wei as “the most successful and influential modern female dramatist,” whose status in Chinese drama history is

comparable to Ding Ling's status in fiction writing (Chen & Dong 200). Apparently, Bai Wei does not owe her success to the limited subject matter she covers in her dramatic plays; her success is the success of the prenarrative, or, to be more precise, the success of drives. Behind the turbulent rhetoric and de-centered narration of her stories, one can identify a process of undoing the conscious ego of the self. The undoing of the ego is necessary for the setting free of the fantasies and emotions based on the drives, which are the only forces that affirmed and sustained the writer's self-existence.

As a woman, Bai Wei's attitude toward consciousness is ambiguous. On the one hand, she was an active supporter of feminist movements and an ardent advocate of women's education and rights. Her ideal female figures, like Lili in *Linli* and Xiao Sen in *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*, are exceptionally beautiful and educated women. On the other hand, she seemed to prefer an image of woman as a mindless but beautiful object. In *Linli*, Bai Wei's characters repeat the statement: "A woman with education is not lovable" (73). In the beginning of *Tragic Life*, the female protagonist Wei is doing modeling work for a Japanese painter. Bai Wei always uses the metaphor of flowers for woman, as if these mindless beautiful objects are the best embodiment for her ideal femininity. It is as if Bai Wei could not decide whether a developed consciousness should be associated with her ideal image of woman. And this irresolution prevented her from developing a coherent and clear image of her self.

It is understandable why Bai Wei would assume this stance of anti-consciousness. For her, self-consciousness is the source of endless pain and suffering, and the only

remedy for her is to regress into the pre-conscious mode of existence. Just as she could regress into the prenarrative mode to deal with her traumatic personal history, she also debuted on the social field with the same stance. For her, social revolution could only be carried out by those who have gotten rid of the encumbrance of self-consciousness. Therefore, in *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*, her character cries out that only sucklings, who have no self-consciousness at all, are qualified to carry out the revolution: “People over twenty years old, go to die! People over ten years old, go to die! Go do die! Go to die! ... Revolution is now the mission of the sucklings! Only the sucklings can manage the revolution” (303)!

Woman and Revolution

Although Bai Wei was recognized for heightened emotional power in her writings, she was regarded as an inconsistent feminist revolutionary by her male colleagues. Bai Wei grasped the notion of revolution after Yang Sao’s first betrayal. In *Tragic Life*, she wrote that at that time she was immersed in the bitter sea of failed love, and desperately wanted to find a substitute so that she could rise out of her sufferings. The substitute she found was “the most stimulating revolutionary ideas” (155). Apparently, here “revolution serves as a dubious *deus ex machina* when her romance reaches a dead end” (D. Wang, *Monster* 96). Because of this, some modern critics question the sincerity of Bai Wei’s revolutionary passions. Although the Marxist critic Qian Xingcun (A Ying) regards Bai Wei as the most revolutionary woman writer of her generation, he still concludes that Bai

Wei behaved just like those jaded bourgeois women in Mao Dun's stories, who found in revolution a substitute for lost objects of love (D. Wang, *Monster* 96).

From *Linli* to *Fight out of the Ghost Tower*, Bai Wei had managed to convert the death drive into a liberating force and gained herself a position among the leftist writers. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Bai Wei consciously wrote in the mode of "revolution plus love," incorporating class consciousness into her habitual subject matter of the love between man and woman. She was known for "living up to the aesthetic challenges of the new era, having transcended the allegedly narrow personal focus that was now seen to limit other 'women writing,' and assuming the responsibilities of the socially engaged writer" (Dooling 103). The publication of her autobiographical novel *Tragic Life* in 1936 thus confused her leftist colleagues: at a time when most of the leftist writers had shifted from romanticism to revolution, why did Bai Wei regress from revolution to romanticism? Why did she "revert to the project of writing the (feminine) 'self' at the very moment when so many of their leftist colleagues were now repudiating autobiographical content as complicit with the (now suspect) May Fourth ideology of individualism" (Dooling 104)?

In her preface to *Tragic Life*, Bai Wei apologizes to her readers for not having incorporated social content into this book, thus failing to make the book "a mirror of the time" (Preface 9). She explains that she was unable to do so because her pain (both psychological and psychic) was so overwhelming and the need for money and food so pressing (Preface 9). But these reasons could not prevent some of her critics from

concluding that the association between woman and revolution was contingent and untenable. In Hong Ruizhao's analysis, Bai Wei serves as a perfect illustration of women's revolutionaries' changeable inclinations (qtd. In D. Wang, *Monster* 96).

Despite Bai Wei's conscious effort to revolutionize her writings, however, her own life and writings in fact challenge the leftist bifurcation of love and revolution, or of the personal and the political. For Bai Wei, romantic love is the key to personal, political, and artistic fulfillment (Dooling 125). Conversely, the destructive force set off by love or the lack of love was her most powerful weapon of revolution. For Bai Wei, revolution was the reification of the metaphysical question that constantly troubled her: life or death. In this sense, her belief in revolution was consistent because the question of life or death never ceased to haunt her. In *Tragic Life* she bursts out: "Humanity loses its heart, and the universe is in chaos. I can no longer stand the blows of a stormy life. I am going crazy. I feel suffocated, I weep, I jump, I want to die. Death, no! I want to declare war against all the evils in the world. I want revolution!"³⁹ The transition from personal suffering to revolution appears to have been smooth and natural for Bai Wei; apparently she hardly perceived any barriers between the two. Indeed, one needs to transcend the bifurcation of love and revolution, or the personal and the political, to understand Bai Wei's revolutionary passions. The questions raised by David Der-wei Wang are thus thought-provoking: "What is revolution if not an action propelled by one's innermost desire to break through established boundaries? What is revolutionary literature if it cannot

³⁹ *Beiju shengya*, 217. Translation from David Dewei Wang, *The Monster That is History*, 96.

mediate between one's yearning for bodily fulfillment and one's aspiration for the public good" (*Monster* 96)?

The most powerful works of Bai Wei were written when she was suffering from severe poverty and disease. Physical pain, together with her mental agony, almost destroyed her consciousness and brought her to a state anterior to consciousness. The notion of the self is very weak, if not absent, in her prenarrative mode of writings. In the process of translating her pain into power through writing, she undoes her self and conflates with the world. The hysterical and melancholic writing style may fail to carry the rationality of revolution, but it indicates "a grammatology of her own, which defies any truth-claims, including the truthful representation of reality" (D. Wang, *Monster* 98). The prenarrative mode of writing itself can be regarded as a revolution, because it serves as "a discursive strategy to displace and erase the social inscription on her body" (J. Liu 110). Therefore, Bai Wei's special mode of writing, rather than illustrating women's revolutionaries' changeable inclinations, demonstrates women's innate inclination to revolution.

The novel *The Bomb and the Expeditionary Bird* (*zhadan yu zhengniao*), which was written in 1928, reveals Bai Wei's feminist reflections on the relationship between woman and revolution. "The bomb" and "the expeditionary bird" are two ideals for the two sisters – Yue and Bin: the bomb represents the explosive revolutionary power that can destroy evil and darkness; the expeditionary bird represents freedom and continuous motivation. But the two sisters' journey along the revolutionary road is full of setbacks,

confusion, and disappointment. Yue forsakes love for revolution, but is sunk in regrets over the loss of love. She finally agrees to utilize her body under the pretense of revolution. Disappointed by the reality of the Nationalist Revolution, Yue's younger sister Bin lets her sensual enjoyment override her political volition, and turns into a prostitute-like figure in the end.

Bai Wei's reflection on the relationship between woman and revolution touches something more existential than what is promised by revolution and romance. First of all, she demonstrates that woman's relationship with revolution is not bestowed, but inherent. Dai Jinhua and Mengyue assert that what propels a woman to revolution is more than the impetus of social responsibility; there is a pertinent impulse inherent in femininity, which is given birth to by the contradiction between the female self and her socialized self, oppression and anti-oppression (Dai & Meng 166). At the beginning of the novel Yue thinks to herself: "The only way to get rid of the shame of distress and fragility is to tear myself up and end the heavy burden of living. Otherwise, I have to become a bomb myself!!" (23) When she knows that she has been forced into an arranged marriage, Yue's revolutionary passions explode: "Life's got to be like a bomb! The time is pressing up to us, we should light the fire of revolution, blast, blast, blast all of the darkness!" (27) On her wedding day, Yue feels that "every cell of her body is filled with furor and fire;" she hopes that the fire can burn down the prison, so that she can escape to dive into the revolutionary cause and destroy all the oppressive forces (28). The soul of a bomb is "killing" (176), so Yue imagines that blood spatters all over in the house that imprisons

her (29). Yue's destructiveness grows in direct proportion to the sufferings that she experiences in society. Bin, on the other hand, always regards herself as a bomb; so her life philosophy is a kind of "momentarilism" (*shunjian zhuyi*) (175). Because of this, Bin seeks a life which is built on temporary sensual stimulation and the lack of belief in any enduring values. For her, revolution is an outlet for her inner impulses as a bomb; love is another way to conquer the natural enemy of woman – man. Compared with Yue's, Bin's life is rather blessed. What constantly bothers her is that because she is a woman, she cannot find a use in society for her "vast and endless desires" and "striving and aspiring courage" (78). So she indulges in desires, passion, fantasy, and luxury. Either way, revolution serves as an outlet for the two sisters' feminine impulses, while oppression further strengthens the explosive power of the inherent energy source. Because the social oppression of woman is not limited to some visible crimes of paternal power, but is pervasive in all social institutions, no woman can be exempted from this oppression. Revolution, therefore, is always a pertinent impulse, as it means the liberation of the feminine self from the oppression in society.

Secondly, *The Bomb and the Expeditionary Bird* also conveys a subtle message: the exclusion of the feminine impulses for the sake of revolution would finally undermine the project of revolution itself. Yue used to think that only the more masculine qualities, such as self-awareness, rationality, and the abstention from sensual life, are essential for the revolutionary cause. So she decides to repress her feminine impulses and breaks off with Shaofang, the man she loves. However, the effect of the loss of love is paralyzing

for her; in the end she even loses the ability to judge and becomes a puppet of the Nationalist Party. Yue's instinctual fighting spirit against the oppression of women used to serve as the lighthouse in her revolutionary journey. By giving up her feminine impulses, she also loses her body, self, and her political savvy. Bin, on the other hand, is allocated a position as a social butterfly in Wuchang. Deeply disappointed by the stark contrast between her ideal and her real situation, she diverts her passions to the sensual enjoyment in life. Her decadence, in this way, is not defiance of revolution, but defiance of the pseudo-revolution led by the Nationalist Party. Bin writes to Yue: "The news of revolution appears as lovely as a beauty under the rose flowers. Yet in reality, it feels like your mother-in-law biting your flesh... Although I am freer than the doves on the cliff, I too feel my wings have been shot by the hunter's poisonous arrow." Although Bin has dissociated herself from revolution, she preserves a keen perception of the corruption and inequality that sabotages the revolution, and chooses to fight against such phenomena by alienating herself from revolutionary activities. Precisely because Bin keeps her philosophy of "momentarilism," her view of politics and revolution is more penetrating than that of Yue, so she can choose not to cooperate with the Wuchang government. Therefore, in *The Bomb and the Expeditionary Bird* Bai Wei actually shows the insurmountable gap between woman's self and her social role, but not between woman and revolution. In fact, Bai Wei seems to suggest that the unconscious feminine impulses and the conscious revolutionary spirit should not be separated, because the inherent feminine impulses are a natural guide for the female revolutionaries, without which

woman cannot do revolution in the right way. If Bin's tragedy is inevitably caused by society, Yue's tragedy is caused by both the society and herself.

Bai Wei's *The Bomb and the Expeditionary Bird* is not only a gendered reflection on the National Revolution of 1926-27, it is also about woman's discourse of despair. As I discussed in Chapter One, the "discourse of despair" is Stephen Chan's term to describe the crisis of consciousness of the post-May Fourth intellectuals. Despair is often projected onto the new woman, who becomes the carrier of the masculine crisis. In Mao Dun and Jiang Guanci's literary works, the new women in crisis were always portrayed as romantic and vigorous revolutionaries. But these female characters are no more than an allegory of the male writers' gender politics, instead of a truthful representation of Chinese women.

Bai Wei's reflection on the relationship between woman and revolution, therefore, indicates "a narrative stance of 'despair' twice removed from the position occupied by her male colleagues" (D. Wang, *Monster* 98). Even the two female protagonists' outrageous and lunatic actions express a fundamental despair about men and revolution that is more real than what is contained in the male writers' allegories. It is true that Bai Wei's representation of the feminine self is still full of ambiguity and contradictions, yet it precisely demonstrates the destructive power of the despair that can destroy all language and identities. Chan extols despair "as the only remaining powerhouse in the twilight of history" ("Despair" 22). If that is true, then what Bai Wei offers to revolution is a discourse of despair that is unprecedentedly real, and thus more powerful, than any

existing discourse dominated by males.

The Self as Nihil

Modern Chinese revolutions had encouraged women's representations in the social field, including the self-representation of female writers. However, the representation of the feminine self has been an inveterate problem. It is true that for women writers, the demand for self-representation is simultaneously a demand for power. The problem is whether the power is indeed acquired for the feminine self or for a false surrogate of the feminine self, depending on the veracity and effectiveness of the self-representation. In order to associate themselves with the revolutionary cause that serves as an empowering political tool, some women writers had paid the dear cost of forfeiting the gendered self.

The prominent female activist Qiu Jin (1875-1907), for example, openly put herself in Western-style male attire and rode on horseback, in order to overcome woman's gendered aporia and social impasse (Yan 39). She also tried to reshape her body through physical exercise, so it "can endure what must be endured" (Yan 42). While Qiu Jin was among the first Chinese women to liberate themselves from the patriarchal control and boldly assert their new identity as a female revolutionary, her strategy was to discard the preoccupation of gender differences and compete side by side with men. In a letter she wrote to her elder brother in 1905 Qiu Jin confesses:

...to my mind, the most painful of all human pains is what your sister now endures, one which cannot be spoken let alone heard. Staying indoors without the delight of a family; stepping outside only to find a wandering life, roving across the world with neither friend nor kin to help, with an ending somewhere or nowhere in a future that simply cannot be predicated or discerned. You, my brother, are faring slightly better than I; but you share my pain in that you cannot be heard and you have no help in this world either. Fortunately, you were born a man; your ending will likely be ten times better than your sister's (qtd. in Yan 47).

In order to fit herself into the model of a glamorous revolutionary, Qiu Jin had consciously silenced herself as a woman. Only by silencing herself as a woman could she get rid of the repression laid on women by the patriarchal society. Her success in terms of revolution consists in a kind of strategic imitation – only by following man's way of doing revolution could she rise to such a prominent position.

Qiu Jin's strategy represents the choice of many other female revolutionaries. In prevalent views, the revolution of modern Chinese women is always associated with loosened feet, bobbed hair, education, and bold public appearances, all of which indicate women's desire to fight for a position in the masculine discourse. Another modern Chinese woman writer, Xie Bingying (1906-2000), joined the Northern Expeditionary Army after she escaped from an arranged marriage. Like Bai Wei, Xie Bingying also suffered bitterly under paternal oppression, but her attitude toward gendered representation is drastically different from that of Bai Wei. In Xie's autobiographical *War Diary (congjun riji, 1927)*, she put forward the theory of "Three Removes" (*san qu*), in which she asked women to remove their romanticism, vanity and femininity for the sake of revolution (162). The sacrifice of the feminine self becomes the prerequisite for

revolution.

Ding Ling (1904-1986) is known for her keen feminine experiences and perceptions. Her blockbuster story “Miss Sophie’s Diary” (*shafei nüshi de riji*, 1927) firmly puts the psychic/sexual life of the female protagonist/narrator, Sophie, in the foreground (Chow, *Woman and Chinese modernity* 164). However, while “Miss Sophie’s Diary” opens a window for woman’s self-representation, it does not significantly challenge the existing power structure. Sophie acquires power in her love relation with Ling Jishi by merely reversing the gender politics between man and woman. In a way, she remains acquiescent to the patriarchal institutions. Sophie’s rise to power over Ling Jishi only represents an individual abnormality; it is gained at the cost of her own alienation from woman as a group. And because the center of Sophie’s world is her self-consciousness, which is in conflict with her feminine experiences and perceptions, what Sophie feels is an “overwhelming sense of paralysis” (Chow, *Woman and Chinese modernity* 164), which stifles her sexual impulses and revolutionary motivations. What Sophie writes in her last diary entry indicates her surrender to the patriarchal society: “Quietly go on living, and quietly die. I’m sorry for you, Sophie” (64).

Other women writers also evaded the subject of sexual love as a way to transcend their gendered limits. Bing Xin (1900-1999) promoted motherly love; Lu Yin (1898-1934) endorsed the love between women; Feng Yuanjun (1900-1974) touted platonic love as a revolutionary belief. No matter whether it is a refusal of the objectivation of the self or a compromise with the remains of feudal ideas, the avoidance of sexual love is

simultaneously the avoidance of woman's sexuality, woman's will, and woman's entirety as an agent of experience in sexuality (Dai & Meng 56). Such gestures are thus complicit with the dominant masculine discourse that puts the feminine self under erasure.

Therefore, those modern Chinese women either blatantly eliminated the femininity or silently abandoned the femininity, in order to earn an empowered position in the course of the modern Chinese revolution. By contrast, Bai Wei seemed to have been trapped in her feminine self, and to have exerted her utmost efforts to empower this disenfranchised self. Compared with other women writers who actively sought self-transformation to change the *status quo*, Bai Wei confronted the *status quo* in an extremely daring manner. In his article "Women and Literature" (*Nüzi yu wenxue*), the sympathetic male writer Zhou Zuoren writes:

Because of the many restrictions of the past, women have a major disadvantage: they are misunderstood by others and they generally do not understand others themselves. In this regard the study and writing of literature could have a great effect. There are quite a few women poets or women novelists in the world, but we can say there are almost none who can truly express women's sad song (qtd. in Larson 126).⁴⁰

Zhou's article was written in 1921, and it is thus impossible to know if Zhou Zuoren would have altered his statement if he had read Bai Wei's plays and novels a couple of years later. But Bai Wei indeed identified herself with the "sad song" of women and struggled to truly express it.

⁴⁰ Zhou Zuoren, "Nüzi yu wenxue" 女子与文学 ("Women and Literature"). *Funü zazhi* 8:8, August 1921, p.8. See Wendy Larson. "Female Subjectivity and Gender Relations," 126.

The truth Bai Wei discovered, however, is that there is no truth for woman – her symbolic absence. The only truth of woman is the void, the nothingness – “the formless and colorless song of sorrow” (W. Bai, *Linli* 152). Bai Wei denounced all kinds of false truth that the male-centered society imposed on woman, yet she lacked a language to represent her version of “truth” in the masculine discourse. In Bai Wei’s writing, one can find a profound disbelief in the symbolic function of language. She never wrote in a consistent or transparent fashion. The truth she wanted to present is not in meaning, but in the intense emotional outbreak that disrupts the symbolic coherence of language. It is a nihilistic version of “truth” which threatened to overthrow the “fictional” construction of truth in the masculine discourse.

Precisely because Bai Wei identified herself with the symbolic absence, she had found a new way of self-representation. Bai Wei’s exploration of the self had driven her into an unrepresentable domain of experience. Bai Wei had found a way of self-empowerment via short-circuiting her identity and her unconscious agency. In her writings, she had developed a persistent fixation on the unconscious drives as the locale of self. The prenarrative mode of writing, which exhibits the properties of drives by creating a site for emotional responses, is closely linked to Bai Wei’s exploration of the feminine self. Her narrative style powerfully challenges “the fiction of autonomous, authentic subjectivity which underpinned the self-centered writings of May Fourth intellectuals in the 1920s” (Dooling 125).

According to Andrew Hewitt, the political potential of women resides in

“experience” (157). The two constant themes in Bai Wei’s writings, sexual love and the sufferings of women in the patriarchal society, both centered on women’s experience. The heightened awareness of her feminine identity runs through her narratives. Although, as a woman, Bai Wei’s own life was filled with tragedy, she seldom showed uneasiness toward her female identity, as Qiu Jin did. All of her fury was directed at society, and not at her feminine self. Bai Wei never wanted to become a man. When she encountered failure in love, she even hoped her lover could become a woman so they could always be together.⁴¹ Moreover, Bai Wei was never afraid to reveal her sexual desires or to write about her venereal disease, as she thought they were an essential part of her feminine truth. In real life, Bai Wei was a good-looking woman; existing photos of her reveal that she wore medium-long hair and delicate feminine dresses. Both her writings and her personal image were very feminine, which makes her unique among the leftist writers. Her literary colleagues even called Bai Wei “fairy” (*xianü*), because of what they thought of her outstanding feminine qualities.

Bai Wei joined The League of Left-Wing Writers in 1931. She was known for her heightened and tenacious revolutionary spirit (Bai & He 103). Bai Wei’s success in the revolutionary literary circle is inseparable from her fixation on the feminine experience. Bai Wei’s “marriage” with revolution creates a double-win situation: Bai Wei found an outlet for her unconscious feminine impulses in the field of revolution, and revolution found in Bai Wei’s feminine self the destructive power that could serve as its driving

⁴¹ See *Linli*, 98.

force. Bai Wei's nihilistic self empowered the revolution, while her association with the revolution empowered her.

Precisely because for Bai Wei the truth of the feminine self was *nihil*, she could easily transcend the limit of the individual self and speak on behalf of the collective body of women – for their desires, needs, and sufferings. In Bai Wei's writings, women are always affiliated with each other, as sisters, as mother and daughter, or as victims of the same tragic fate. Even though sometimes in her stories the female characters are rivals in love, they never break with each other over the competition for one man and always remain mutually sympathetic. For most of the time, Bai Wei's female characters confide in each other, encourage each other, and care about or even love each other. Unlike Ding Ling's, Bai Wei's feminist ideal consists in an imaginary bond of women, who serve as the major revolutionary force in her writings.

Conclusion

My study of the *nihil* in modern Chinese subjectivity suggests that the anti-rational and anti-historical spirit is inherent in Chinese modernity from the very start. The *nihil* in modern Chinese subjectivity creates a *Zeitgeist* – a mixture of disillusion, despair, obsessive desires, groundless aspirations, self-aggrandizement and self-annihilation. Such a psychological tendency will inevitably seek an outlet in literature and culture, creating a new writing mode and aesthetic style that favors darkness, emptiness, death, destruction, sexual love, moral degradation, violence, radicalism, and anarchism.

The trope of woman emerged out from these socio-historical conditions. On the one hand, the trope was filled with masculine interest and desires; on the other hand, the very trope registered the masculine anxiety, or even the masculine trauma, of modernity. It is for the latter reason that the trope of woman can serve as an analytical object capable of laying bare the unrepresentable *nihil* at the core of modern Chinese subjectivity. The texts I work with in my dissertation are culled from a diverse collection of literary works produced in the period of 1915-1936. They represent the awareness or efforts of a group of modern Chinese writers in exploring the hidden agency in each individual and reevaluate Chinese modernity. What they had done, in short, was to represent the unrepresentable. Most of the texts I work with are not considered as canonical works of modern Chinese literature; and some of the writers I discuss in my dissertation are

marginal figures in the literary history of modern China. My gauge of selection here is not their artistic achievement, but the very avant-garde quality of their literary works in that they serve as a register of the modern revolution from inside out.

The trope of woman was first of all a translated one. Western conceptualization of woman was translated and accepted as the dominant truth of the female gender; and its assumptions began to seed into the discourse of social politics and modern revolution. In this way, gender relations, man and woman's self-perception, as well as man and woman's political roles are reshaped by the imported discourse. However, it is also interesting to see how these literary works added richness and complexity to the trope of woman. Chinese intellectuals did not merely receive the trope of woman as a transparent discursive construction translated from the West; they also infused their individual experience, anxiety, desires, and traumas, which were particular products of Chinese history, into the figurative trope. The intervention of the writers and intellectuals had transformed the trope of woman into an extra-linguistic object of Chinese modernity. This object was a mixture of Western concepts and ideas, as well as experience and feelings that sprang from the innermost heart of the Chinese individual. It crystallized the psychological tendency associated with modernity by personifying and symbolizing the *nihil* in the formation of modern Chinese subject.

The prevailing explanation of the leftist turn of Chinese revolution in the late 1920s and early 1930s emphasizes on the external cause: the deepening national crisis. My discussion on woman and *nihil*, however, aims to offer an insight of the internal

cause of modern Chinese revolution. From the perspective of the *nihil* in the formation of the subject, modern Chinese revolution appears to be a continuous and consistent movement toward the ultimate “completeness”⁴² of both the nation and the individual. The individual psyche was invaded and eventually engulfed by the *nihil*, which emerged as a positive condition for the on-going modern revolution. Therefore, the seed of the leftist turn was already sown as early as in the beginning of the twentieth century, if not earlier. Although Chinese intellectuals in the 1910s and early 1920s were obsessed with individualism and rationality, their enthusiasm of western science and culture and the subsequent abhorrence of traditional Chinese culture had deprived them of a solid subjective position, hence impairing their claim of individuality and rationality. In a way, the existence of *nihil* in the formation of the subject is an inseparable experience of modernity.

It also helps to explain why Marxism was able to gain a steady foothold in modern China among all various competing western theories. Marx’s dialectical materialism presumes a collective historical subject whose agency is unintelligible for the individual subject. The Marxist historical materialism is analogous to the unconscious in that both of them operate without following the human psyche. It was, therefore, a natural alliance of the nihilistic subject in modern China. According to the Chinese philosopher Li Zehou, in modern China, Marxism was received first of all as a guideline for

⁴² Here, the notion “completeness” refers to a state in which subject and object, individual and world have no distinct boundaries.

revolutionary practice, rather than a conceptual theory for legitimacy (2). As such, Marxism directly appealed to the hidden agency that must find an outlet in revolutionary actions and euphoric celebration of the unrepresentable power.

However, the celebration of the *nihil* also dislodged the subject from its exalted status anticipated by early modernist reformers. The autonomous, progressive, and rational “new youth,” as the ideal subject of modernity, was never successfully born in China. This failure to construct an ideal masculine subject was compensated by the “flourishing of yin”⁴³ – the emergence of the trope of woman. The Chinese literary critic Wang Ning suggests to view Chinese modernity as a project that has not been fully accomplished before postmodernism came (“Rethinking Modern Chinese Literature” 5). However, based on the concept of the *nihil* in modern Chinese subjectivity, a reevaluation of Chinese modernity and postmodernity is possible. As a countermovement to modernity in the 1960s and 70s, postmodernism challenges the validity of human subject and the truth claim of the world. It is true that the influence of Western postmodernism did not arrive in China until the mid 1980s. However, the early period of Chinese modernity already exhibited the postmodern tendencies that challenged the presumptions of modernity; perhaps because the legitimacy of Chinese modernity was founded largely on its ideological rebellion to all existing conditions, rather than on an industrialized substructure, like the West. A Chinese modernist can only become modern if he negates his own self; and he can imagine the birth of Chinese modernity only from the lacuna of

⁴³ The phrase is used by Charlotte Furth in her book *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History*, 1999.

history.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern as what “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself;” the postmodern is driven by an inner urge to search for “new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (81). Lyotard suggests that we can view the postmodern as the embryonic form of the modern. “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (79). In this sense, the subject of my dissertation, woman and the *nihil*, also offers an insight into the “postmodern condition” of modern Chinese literature. Although the postmodern theory was translated into China in the late 1980s, a few Chinese modernists already took on the postmodern practice in their literary creation in the early twentieth century. Driven by a strong urge to represent the unrepresentable, the postmodern practice in modern China is part and parcel of the modern revolution. Chinese modernity, therefore, should not be considered as a failed or unaccomplished project, because Chinese modernity cannot be imagined without such failure or incompleteness.

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