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A Space of Her Own.
Configurations of feminist
imaginative spaces in five
post-May Fourth Chinese
women writers: Ding Ling,
Xiao Hong, Yang Gang,
Zhang Ailing, Fengzi.

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前言

本论文主要分析五位后五四文学运动的中国现代女作家对自我空间的追求。这五位女作家是丁玲、萧红、杨刚、张爱玲和凤子。她们的生活和创作活动跨越了国民党政权(1927-1945)、日本的侵略(1937-1945)和内战(1945-1949)的时期，因此动乱和战争是那个时代背景的主要特点。

在二十世纪一十年代至二十年代中，无论是女作家还是男作家，他们都公开指责：在两千年的父系社会历史中，女性是一个处于被统治地位的性别。作家都提出一些为女性获得解放的办法，但是在三、四十年代中女性都还没有获得一种真正的解放，也还没有获得在文化、社会中符合她们性别的特殊自我的空间。

从语言的、哲学的、象征的意味来说，在三、四十年代中女性性别群体还被定义为“妇”、“女儿”、“女子”、“母子”、“妻子”，而非“女性”，所以她们都不能体现一种在父系社会秩序外的主体地位。

五四文学运动时期，女男知识分子都以“女性”的观念为表现中国现代女人文化、社会和政治的觉醒。另外，她们和他们都相信女性群体的解放与中国国家受外国规定的解放有联系，所以一十年代的、二十年代的女男知识分子都认为女性对自我空间的追求是一种国家最主要的革命之一。

但从白色恐怖(1927)到内战结束时(1949)，因为历史情况始终地威胁中国全国的存在，所以男知识分子都决定了文学所有的目标只应该表达救助国家的愿望或中国人民的反抗。因此，三十年代、四十年代文学的主要意识形态一直表达以男性为中心的、好战的、爱国的意象。如此，历史、文学都迅速地代表起来了一种男性的空间，也就是以女性为中心的意味突然被抹煞。一瞬间，“女性”变成了一种以资产阶级为中心的、非政治的观念，因为不能被与共产党人反对国民党败坏性和国民党的粗暴行为有联系，也不能与国家抗日战争有联系。因此，女作家表达她们自我的意见除了一些在历史地表上零星的残片以外，它们还是文学无声的、无形的空间。

本论文主要分析以下的问题：不管夫权制、男性、历史还是战争，都不断地抹煞女性群体的特异性，女作家都能不能创作一种既是想象中的，而又含一定真实性的以女性为中心的地方，所以她们和作品中的女主角会代表女性自我的、独立的和自由的存在？

本论文特别分析这五位女作家在五部短篇小说中对于女性立场的追求。这五部短篇小说是丁玲所著的“阿毛姑娘”(1928)、萧红所著的“弃儿”(1932)、杨刚所著的“肉刑”(1936)、张爱玲所著的“倾城之恋”(1943)和凤子所著的“画像”(1947)。这五部短篇小说都注重特定以空间为中心的象征,另外每部短篇小说的内容都描述一位女主角面对女性群体在中国现代社会上的空间限制,还面对心理的、真实的空间障碍,也追求一种有可能的空间自由。在每部短篇小说里,女主角还需要吸收每空间限制和障碍,然后她需要找到在这些障碍里可能有的裂缝,以致使她可以穿过所有的空间,所以她会挣脱由文化、社会 and 传统强加于女子的枷锁,终于她可能变成一种解放新女性或只能承认她在国家空间上的边缘化。

比如,在丁玲所著的“阿毛姑娘”里,女主角阿毛是一位无经验的农村姑娘。她先从农村搬进一种小的城市,然后日趋渴望起来将搬进一种又大又流行的城市。尤其,她一见大城市的女性,就承认她自身的空间限制,因此开始渴望住在别的空间。这样做她可能变成一种解放的女性。她的渴望表现一位从素朴的农村姑娘到摩登狗儿立场的变化。在这部短篇小说里,空间限制、空间障碍与空间觉醒的象征是雾霭和优雅的女邻居;它们都起阻碍女主角进入或者实现自身渴望的作用。

在萧红所著的“弃儿”里,女主角芹是一位独自、有孕的女性。她极端贫困,被困于一座饭馆房间,同时饭馆外边有水灾快要来临溺死城市所有的人类、动物和建筑。房间的空间、水灾临头都表现女性自身的空间限制,因此芹首先需要承认这些空间限制,然后她就有可能承担一种女性特定的斗争。她需要找寻多种的空间,以致她表示对水灾、社会和文化一种女性自我的反抗、残存也胜利的立场。在这部短篇小说里,空间限制、空间障碍与空间觉醒的象征是水灾和墙壁,它们都起阻碍或者进入女主角、自然生活内在关联的作用。

在杨刚所著的“肉刑”里,无名的女主角是一位有孕的革命女性。她在床上有病,不断想最好的作用是什么:产仔或流产。她生病的地位表现女性自身的空间限制也表现政治的、物质的空间障碍,因为她是一位反对国民党的共产党女性,所以她有孕的地位可能变化一种为革命成功的障碍,以致女主角就可能积极参加革命。尤其,在这部短篇小说里,空间限制、空间障碍与空间觉醒的象征都特别在女主角肉里与在肉体里;她的肉与肉刑都表现女性对空间障碍的政治反抗,但还表现女主角终于实现空间的解放,因为她最后决定将流产,所以她可能实践女性的自由和女性参加革命的立场。

在张爱玲所著的“倾城之恋”里，女主角白流苏是一位离婚的女人。她离婚的地位表现女性自身的空间限制也表现由传统文化、传统社会与传统家庭对女性的空间障碍，因为大家都认为一个无丈夫的女人是一位失败者。因此，白流苏先需要承认她的倒霉情况和人类联系的残酷基础，然后她承办一种女性自我的空间追求。所以，在这部短篇小说里，人类联系的残酷基础与白流苏离婚女人的地位都表现女性自身的空间限制、空间障碍的象征。另外，空间觉醒的象征特别是上海与香港城市的切换和白流苏地位的变化。它们都起阻碍或者进入女主角表示稳定的作用。

在凤子所著的“画像”里，女主角紫薇是一位忧郁年轻的妇女。她先好像对生活很满意：有一座很漂亮的房子、一位热情的丈夫和很多朋友，但是事实上，她渴望起别样的生活，就是一种在内战中的生活：她想参加全民反对国民党暴政的解放斗争。因此，她住在一种无战争南方城市里、这个城市的窒息空气、紫薇战利品妻子的地位与一幅描述她的画儿都表现女性自身的空间限制与空间障碍。在这部短篇小说里，空间觉醒的象征都起障碍女性需要战胜的作用，所以她终于可能获得独立和体现一种解放女性的立场。

本论文还主要分析这五位女作家对国家中心、边缘的空间的自身地位与她们对革命文学的自身位置，还分析男知识分子对她们追求一种女性的空间的战略。因此，本论文主要分析丁玲、萧红、杨刚都由男知识分子被推到文学的边缘，所以她们以女性为中心的文学、女性特点的地位都被改变、禁止或排斥，因为她们的文学与地位没表现一种以男性为中心的、爱国的清楚宣传。然而，本论文还分析张爱玲的地位：因为所有的男作家认为卷入政治的文学代表一维合法的文学内容，就是代表文学的中心立场，所以张爱玲有意识地选择分开了文学的中心立场。她自觉自愿地选择占据了一种在边缘的、隔离的地位。最后，本论文分析女性第三个的特点地位，就是凤子的。她拥护也庆祝左派的国家革命，但同时她要求一种以女性为中心的地位，以致她可能变成一种共产文学写的独立妇女。

最终这五位女作家都在主流意识形态的边缘，所以都是革命女人，因为都要求一种在以男性意识形态为中心边界里的远外。另外，她们的短篇小说都表现一种女性独有的想象方式，还对中国女性的空间、政治与性别范围提出疑问。这样做，在这五部短篇小说里女作家除了批评女性的空间缺乏以外，她们都明确表达了女性自我政治、语义与生存的立场。

INTRODUCTION

The spatial quest of post-May Fourth Chinese women writers (1927-1949)

我是我自己的, 他们谁也没有干涉我的权利!

(I am my own mistress; none of them has any right to interfere with me!)¹

Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Shangshi* 伤逝 (Regret for the Past), 1925

1. Modernity and the new (male) subjectivity

Late Qing (1895-1911) and Beiyang China (1912-1927) were characterized by the formulation of modernity by “the gendered, class-stratified, male-dominated treaty port elite. This class shaped its peculiar national political position through a strategy of appropriating knowledge from the colonial powers.”² In particular, the new social category of *zhishi fenzi* 知识分子 (intellectuals, predominantly male) was interested in the formulation on a new form of subjectivity which could extricate itself from the “hyper-static”³ Chinese culture and society while simultaneously building that same culture and society anew by importing specific Western categories into China:

Along with electricity and moving pictures, for instance, professional elites took over social Darwinian discourse on elementary sex differences. Scientific notions, including the dictum that

¹ Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Shangshi* 伤逝 (Regret for the Past), in Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Lu Xun jingdian quanji* 鲁迅经典全集 (The Complete Collection of Works by Lu Xun), Beijing, Huawen chubanshe, 2009, p. 125. Original story published in 1925.

² Barlow, Tani E., “Introduction”, in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics in Modern China. Writing & Feminism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 1.

³ Chan, Ching-kiu Stephen, “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the ‘New Woman’ by May Fourth Writers”, in Barlow, T. E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p.15.

male versus female constitutes the originary difference in nature, fed into discourses of semicolonial modernity in China, as a constituting element of modernist codes.⁴

In their search for a new subjectivity, male intellectuals started focusing on *funü wenti* 妇女问题 (the woman's question, sometimes also rendered as 'the problem of women' or 'the women's problem'), more specifically by questioning women's role as objects and victims in traditional Chinese culture and society. To them, this constituted both a reaction to China's identity crisis after the Opium Wars' defeat and a subversive act, as it fostered "possible formations of female subjectivity that contributed to the aesthetic dimension of modern Chinese representation,"⁵ thus positioning the so-called *xin nǚxing* 新女性 (new woman) as the epitome of modernity in her essential biological difference with man.⁶ Yet the definition of 'new woman' as a concept shaped by modernity and shaping modernity in its turn "was everywhere disciplined by the intellectual (male-centered) self"⁷; consequently, defining what a woman should or should not be ultimately resulted in the construction of 'man' as subjectivity and of 'woman' as alterity to this subjectivity.⁸ Women, in other words, functioned only as the "empty site"⁹ against which intellectual men could construct their own modern subjectivity, the only one that really mattered, as power and representation of power never stopped being an exclusive male prerogative.¹⁰

Modern literature was no exception to this prerogative, as it mainly consisted in "gendering the modern literary text"¹¹ seen as the site of a new male subjectivity. So all the while ruminating on the national identity crisis and on the formation of their male self "within a 'new' sociocultural

⁴ Barlow, Tani E., *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 1.

⁵ Chan, Chin-kiu Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁶ I will return to *nǚxing* as a category conceived and constructed by late Qing and May Fourth male intellectuals and analyse its implications more in detail in Chapter Two.

⁷ Chan, Chin-kiu Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 20.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Late Qing and May Fourth male authors depicted female suffering as "the image of their own struggles as young men in a culture that privileged the authority of the old." Yet, "sympathetic male depictions of female suffering did not necessarily imply male willingness to give up gendered hegemony." Brown, Caroline T., "Woman as Trope: Gender and Power in Lu Xun's 'Soap'", in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 2.

¹¹ Barlow, Tani E., "Introduction", cit., p. 3.

space”¹², from 1895 to 1927 Chinese male writers of modernity simultaneously denied women this space – as it happens in Lu Xun’s story *Shangshi* 伤逝 (Regret for the Past), where the female protagonist’s initial cry for self-assertion “I am my own mistress. Nobody has any right to interfere with me!” is erased by her final suicide.

2. May Fourth (1917-1927)¹³ Chinese women writers, or modernity denied

Denying women a sociocultural space did not imply a lack of participation of women in the project of modernity *per se*. Actually, both the late Qing and the early modern period¹⁴ witnessed an unprecedented presence of women writers in Chinese literature. The 1917-1927 May Fourth era, in particular, saw the emergence of what male critics alternatively defined as *funü wenxue* 妇女文学 or *nüxing wenxue* 女性文学 (women’s literature), that is literature created by women on women and for women, meaning a kind of

¹² Chan, Chin-kiu Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹³ My choice of dating the first period of Chinese modern literature, more specifically May Fourth-influenced literature, as beginning in 1917 and ending in 1927 follows Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue’s dating of modern Chinese literature phases in their book *Fuchu lishi dibiao. Zhongguo xiandai nüxing wenxue yanjiu* 浮出历史地表: 中国现代女性文学研究 (Emerging from the surface of history: researches on modern Chinese women’s literature). Although Western scholars like Wendy Larson tend to refer to the first period as comprised between 1915 and 1925, taking the insurgence of new literary trends as their main point of reference, I think Meng and Dai’s choice is more consistent with my analysis, as it takes historical events like the White Terror into account in the insurgence of new literary trends specifically aimed at erasing women from 1927 onwards, and thus from the second period (1927-1937) of modern literature and into the third (1937-1949) one as well. See Dai Jinhua 戴锦华· Meng Yue 孟悦, *Mulu. Fuchu lishi dibiao. Zhongguo xiandai nüxing wenxue yanjiu* 目录·浮出历史地表: 中国现代女性文学研究. (Table of Contents. Emerging from the surface of history: researches on modern Chinese women writers’ literature), Zhengzhou, Henan renmin chubanshe, 1989. I deliberately chose to translate 地表 as ‘surface’ instead of ‘horizon’, as it is usually rendered in English by Western scholars, because of the idea of women’s life and contribution to literature as ‘hidden’ lying beyond the whole analysis Dai and Meng develop in their book.

¹⁴ For more details on both Late Qing’s radical women writings, May Fourth and early modern Chinese women writers, see Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., “Introduction. Writing Women in Modern China”, in Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M. (eds.), *Writing Women in Modern China. An Anthology of Women’s Literature from the Early Twentieth Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 4-10; pp. 10-23 respectively.

writing [which] through style, topic, and structure was gendered as female. *Funü wenxue* not only meant that women could participate in literature as they could in politics or education, but that they would infuse their unique subjectivities, histories, and experiences into the literary text, and change how writing functioned, what and who it represented, in essence what writing was.¹⁵

Until 1927, *funü wenxue* was saluted as a necessary form of rebellion in literature because it was part of a general (and male-driven) “rethinking and redefining what being a woman meant or could mean as China sought to reinvent itself in terms of evolving definitions of modernity.”¹⁶ Thus, *funü wenxue* was considered to be a legitimate part of a collective debate because “literary women expressed the experience of gender at a moment when the category of woman itself was in the process of being radically rewritten.”¹⁷

The gradual shift in literary trends from *wenxue geming* 文学革命 (literary revolution) to *geming wenxue* 革命文学 (revolutionary literature)¹⁸ in the post-1927 period, though, ultimately proved women’s participation in the project of modernity to be tampered with by male intellectuals, as men continued to be the only ones able to decide what could be considered literature and what could not.¹⁹ So *funü wenxue* came to be both crystallized *and* criticized in the late 1920s, eventually being dismissed altogether in the late 1930s with the (male-centered) emergence of the *Kangri Zhanzheng* 抗日战争 (national war of resistance against Japan), because of a general “retheorization of the ‘women’s literature’ of the past as deficient” and because of the founding of a new “literary ideology” which left no room at all “for a gender-specific literature”,²⁰ as it was seen as individualistic and ‘bourgeois’.

It is true that men as literati had always dominated the cultural and political debate in imperial China, their supremacy over women seen as part of the ‘natural’ order of organic life and necessary to the ‘harmonic’ development of the individual as part of a hierarchy-based society and of Chinese

¹⁵ Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing in Modern China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 134-5.

¹⁶ Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ Goldblatt, Howard, *Hsiao Hung*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1976, p.13.

¹⁹ In particular, there was “a protracted cultural debate over what and how women should and could write.” Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, *cit.*, p. 1.

²⁰ Larson, Wendy, “The End of ‘Funü Wenxue’”, in Barlow, Tani E., *Gender Politics*, *cit.*, p. 59.

civilization as such.²¹ What really changed in the modern era was that the new sociocultural category of male intellectuals incorporated the woman's question in their work as part of a 'national' political debate²² and consequently legitimated all literary discourse concerning women and their fight against oppression, including women's own version of this discourse, provided that it fell within the code men had established as acceptable for that specific time frame.²³ As the first half of the twentieth century in China was characterized by "a painful dialectic of revolutionary breakthrough countered by reactionary backlash and bloodbaths"²⁴ both in terms of history and socioculture, precariousness became the only constant in a world on the verge of collapse while facing such major and multiple disasters as the warlords' feud between 1916 and 1926, the Nationalist party turning into a dictatorship in 1927, the Japanese mass-scale invasion of China in 1937 and the emergence of the civil war in 1945. Consequently, the code men established for themselves in writing constantly shifted, gradually driving away from modernism to let socially-committed popular literature eventually prevail, all the while erasing generations of women writers in the process of creating an all-male version of modernity.

Despite men's power and control over Chinese literature, contrary to the May Fourth-generated myth of women starting a brand new female tradition literally from scratch, writing women were not a novelty of the twentieth century.²⁵ One of the main differences with the past was that, while writing women of imperial China were very scant in number and exclusively coming from the elite,

²¹ Yin/Yang theory and Zhu Xi's version of Confucian doctrine, in particular, were the cultural codes male literati used to justify a *nei/wai* 内/外 (inner/outer) division of space, forcing women into the confinement of the household's inner chambers. See Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., pp. 2-3. I will delve into this concept more later.

²² "the subcategory of women writers in modern Chinese criticism has itself been invented and legitimized in the name of a 'national' literature that, however, fails to name its own gendered condition as male. The subcategory allows male critics to patronize women's writing and subsume it under the larger category of the nation in much the same way as the state deploys the category of *funü* for political mobilization." Liu, Lydia.H., *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China, 1900-1937*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 212-3.

²³ "女性获得理想中的平等，如民族群体获得了理想的'安顿' (Woman could fulfill her dream of equality [with man] only if the whole nation's dreams were fulfilled undisturbed.) Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun* 绪论 (Introduction), in Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 32.

²⁴ MacKinnon, Steve; MacKinnon, Jan, "Introduction", in Smedley, Agnes, *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*, New York, Feminist Press, 1976, p. xx.

²⁵ For more information on the diverse tradition of writing women of imperial China (221 BCE-1911 CE), see Idema, William I.; Grant, Beata (eds.), *The Red Brush. Writing Women of Imperial China*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2004. For a comprehensive study on the life of eighteenth-century women and on women writers of the time in particular, see Mann, Susan, *Precious Records. Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, pp.45-120; pp. 229-232. For a view on women and culture in seventeenth-century China, see Ko, Dorothy, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers. Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994.

the number of women authors of the modern era was comparatively higher, though they also belonged to an elite, that of urban-based, school-educated young women. More importantly, modern women authors

wrote in an era of tremendous social, political, and cultural turbulence and transition. There had always been a minority of educated women who wrote in China, including courtesan poets, Confucian moral handbook authors, and gentry woman lyricists, but the early twentieth century brought profound changes in both the material conditions and the cultural conceptions of women's writing. The rapid expansion of female education, the emergence of professional literary opportunities for women, and the conceptualization of women's writing (*funü wenxue*) as a gendered aesthetic category are just a few of the factors that helped transform the roles of 'writing women' in modern China.²⁶

The writings of early modern women authors didn't come out of nowhere; important precedents in Late Qing and pre-modern (1898-1911) radical women writers' essays and experimental writings, in particular, paved the way for the development of a fully formed generation of 'writing women' from the 1920s onwards, though no real connection between past and present generations of women using writing as their political and/or ontological tool was never established, because of men's exclusive prerogative in establishing literary codes and because of His-tory²⁷ functioning as a male-centered leveller:

Despite the relatively brief span of time that separates the women writers of these two periods [the late Qing and the 1917-1927 period], the dramatic historical events that took place – the fall of the ancient dynastic system, the failure of the newly established republican government, the harsh suppression of the women's suffrage movement, the patriotic demonstrations following World War I – created a sense of enormous historical distance. As a result, the iconoclastic leaders of the May Fourth Movement saw themselves as rebellious pioneers of the modern era who were breaking with 'tradition' for the first time. Indeed, the mythologies of the May Fourth

²⁶ Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁷ I deliberately write 'History' with a capital H to refer to the male-centered 'universal' his-torical narrative, as opposed to what Felicia Ho defines as "history with a small 'h'", specifically referring to the woman-centered 'domestic' her-storical narrative. Ho, Felicia Jiawen, *Full Spectrum of Selves in Modern Chinese Literature. From Lu Xun to Xiao Hong*, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Phd Dissertation, 2012. [online]. URL: <https://escholarship.org/content/qt5022k8qv/qt5022k8qv.pdf?t=mi1vu6> (Last access: 2020-01-04, 17:20 UTC).

185. Also, His-tory can be described as a great leveler specifically referring to the post May Fourth era because of the way “她女性的声音封锁于历史凝滞不动的深层” (woman's *nuxing* voice was sealed within the depths of history's immobility and stagnation). Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dai biao*, cit., p. 199.

generation – myths that still dominate contemporary views of Chinese modernity – either overshadowed or simply repressed from historical memory the late Qing attempts at literary and gender reform.²⁸

The very fact that Lu Xun was universally saluted as the ‘father of new literature’ for his *Kuangren riji* 狂人日记 (Diary of a Madman, 1918), while the first piece of *baihua wenxue* 白话文学 (vernacular literature), *Yiri* 一日 (One Day, 1917), was actually written a year before by woman author Chen Hengzhe 陈衡哲,²⁹ denied women and literary history at large of the possibility of ever having a ‘mother’ as the first author of Chinese modern fiction.³⁰ Although the birth of the Republic (1912) and the ascent of *wusi wenxue yundong* 五四文学运动 (May Fourth movement, 1917-1927), gave women the opportunity to have a formal education and gain access to the public space of politics like they had never been entitled to do before in Chinese history, in post-1927 China up until the late 1940s “the majority of society still saw marriage and motherhood as the proper feminine destiny”³¹ – as if no woman had ever entered nor tried to enter the public arena of *wai*外, traditionally consigned to men only and also including the space of writing.

²⁸Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

²⁹ Bailey, Paul, J., *Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century China*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 64.

³⁰ Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 12.

3. Women, space and the *nei* 内/*wai* 外 dichotomy in China

Before the twentieth century, the spatial and ideological organization of patriarchal society in China had always been based on the *nei* 内/*wai* 外 dichotomy.³² This imposed a strict separation on the male and female genders in terms of accessibility and movement within and without a specific segment of space: whereas men were endowed with the possibility of moving freely in the vast public (social, political *and* literary) arena of outerness, *wai*, implying the ideas of power, authority and literary talent as inherently ‘male’ and visible, women were exclusively confined to the most secret part of the family mansion, the so called *guifang* 闺房 (lady’s chambers, or inner chambers), hidden from sight and constituting innerness, *nei*, implying the ideas of domesticity, obedience and disappearance as inherently ‘female’ and crucial to the functioning of the patriarchal structure of traditional Chinese society.³³ This meant that space was experienced by woman as associated to confinement, self-restraint (including chastity) as her sole virtue and self-effacement as her ideal (or desired) aspiration. Although this space of innerness was used by generations of women as a potential form of empowerment within a patriarchal system denying them any authority in the *wai* arena,³⁴ its ontological perimeter inevitably coincided with the semantics of prison, as there was no other alternative offered to them, no outerness to aspire to. This lack of any alternative space implied that woman merely functioned as a tool within the family order, the very naming of her subjectivity in the Chinese language reduced to a function and a rigid formalized set of correct behaviours. In their analysis on the power of discourse in imperial China, Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue focus on the entries referring to ‘woman’ in the *Shiming* 释名, a late Han dictionary; these included the expression *neizi* 内子, commonly used to refer to a woman as ‘wife’ (as opposed to *waizi* 外子,

³² As Zhang Enhua points out, “symbolic space is representational [...]. It represents how physical space is perceived and how social space is constructed through cultural apparatuses.” Zhang, Enhua, *Space, Politics, and Cultural Representation in Modern China: Cartographies of Revolution*, New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-2.

³³ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., pp. 2-3.

³⁴ For instance, the supposedly ‘barbaric’ practice of footbinding was actually conceived by many elite women as a site of female authority handed down from mothers to daughters and focused on the cultivation of beauty, culture and self-control. See De Giorgi, Laura, “Costume o Tortura? La fasciatura dei piedi in Cina.” *DEP - Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, 16, 7, 2011, pp. 55; 57; 59-60.

used to refer to a man as ‘husband’). *Neizi* literally translates as ‘the person inhabiting innerness’, thus it was used in order to explicitly signal patriarchal ideology as confining women within innerness both in the actual space of society and in the symbolical space of language.³⁵ Within the logics of this ideology of confinement, woman was consequently denied the possibility of becoming a literary subject, given “the public nature of literary display,”³⁶ thus functioning merely as an object and ultimately as an “空洞” (empty) site³⁷ within men’s poetry, used only to signal the male power to express desire³⁸ (and the implied impossibility for woman to express her own desire). On a symbolical level, before the twentieth century men used literary creativity to shape their own being out of their simultaneous “抹煞”³⁹ (writing off) and erasing women, thus positioning male creativity not as a neutral and de-gendered action at all, but first and foremost as determined by the political implications of their action⁴⁰ and effacing any possible form of ideological and symbolic resistance to the spatial and social order they had created throughout the centuries.

4. Who we talk about when we talk about ‘woman’ in traditional, pre-modern China

In its symbolical enforcement through language, the spatial and ideological organization of society in traditional China assigned an absolute power to relational (as opposed to individual) subjectivity in terms of human interactions. This implied the practice and enactment of an oppositional, war-like relationship between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ positioned as ‘ruler’ and ‘ruled’, ‘master’ and ‘slave’ respectively, within a system based on control and dominance for man and oppression for woman. Consequently, ‘woman’ as a subject and a signifier was virtually and

³⁵ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 13.

³⁶ Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., p. 47.

³⁷ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 15.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 16.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

literally non-existent: she was replaced by her function within the family system, thus alternatively defined as ‘daughter’ (*nüzi* 女), ‘mother’ (*mü* 母), ‘wife’ (*qi* 妻), a ‘female member of the patrilineal family’ (*fu* 妇) or a ‘daughter in law’ (*xi* 媳), but never as a ‘woman’ (*nüxing* 女性), that is as a gender-based signifier and a “精神立场” (conscious political standpoint).⁴¹ Through this symbolical naming of ‘woman’ as part of a social and familial system, ‘woman’ could be incorporated within the social and ideological order of innerness only if she turned into a simple but indispensable part of the whole set of rules this order was based on.⁴² The shift from ‘woman’ to any of the relational signifiers the ideological order had created for her determined a move from a condition of spontaneous existence to the socially-based patriarchal order of things.⁴³ Yet, in order to become incorporated into the Chinese social and familial order, ‘woman’ had to experience the erasure of her difference in terms of gender specificity⁴⁴ and thus be buried forever in the innerness of *nei*, so that man could emerge and shine relentlessly in the outerness of *wai*.

The *nei/wai* dichotomy was actually reproduced by twentieth-century male intellectuals within the spatial and ideological conceptualization of modern literature, more specifically in their strategy of discrediting modern women’s writings, especially from 1927 onwards: all writings by modern women came to be labeled as ‘immature’, ‘sentimental’ or simply associated to the idea of ‘domesticity’ carrying a negative connotation, without ever implying the possibility for women to create a different form of literary aesthetics all together.⁴⁵ Not only men kept deciding what women

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 28. In this respect, Meng and Dai’s use of *nüxing* does not necessarily coincide with early modern male intellectuals’ use of the same term, as we will see while analysing Ding Ling’s story in Chapter Two; it rather echoes a poststructuralist definition of ‘woman’ as “hors scène, hors représentation, hors jeu, hors je” as somebody whose history has to be stopped “pour se laisser prescrire par celle d’un autre: celle de l’homme-père.” It is precisely by reinventing herself “pour éviter le vide” and by creating a “passage entre,” that is through the crevices of culture, matter and His-tory, that ‘woman’ can re-emerge to the surface and finally become a woman-subject. Irigaray, Luce, *Speculum. De l’autre femme*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1974, pp. 21; 47; 283; 439 respectively.

⁴² Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 7.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁵ “One of the functions of the patriarchal organization of society – in particular traditional Chinese society – is the consignment of women to domesticity. Domesticity should therefore be seen as a predominant, if not the only, paradigm under which many Chinese women’s thinking operates. This being so, why should the domestic space and the associations that accompany it – such as personal frustrations, unmitigated grief, or extreme emotionalism – not be one to which women writers obsessively return? And if they do, why should it be used to devalue their work as falling short of the kind of depersonalized aesthetic achievement from which women are, by virtue of their traditional confinement to domesticity, necessarily prevented? [...] Could the Chinese women writers of the 1920s and 1930s not simply be judged as ‘immature’, but as the producers of a different aesthetics and a different conception of writing that make idealist presuppositions such as ‘balance’, ‘mature detachment’, ‘finality,’ and the like useless altogether?”. Chow, Rey, “Virtuous Transactions: A reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua”, in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 91.

could or could not write; they even decided if women were entitled to write at all, causing many women writers of the first half of the twentieth century to fall into literary oblivion.⁴⁶ This meant that, for women writers of the late 1920s-late 1940s period, when living meant coming to terms with the Nationalist regime, the war with Japan and the civil war between Communists and Nationalists, the act of writing their own female subjectivity literally came out of multiple erasing strategies men had used throughout the modern era to diminish women's factual contribution to modern Chinese literature.

5. Late modern (1927-1949) Chinese women writers, or fighting against erasure

Coming after two generations of erased and/or diminished women writers, thus lacking any solid connection with their foremothers and with a possible female-centered literary tradition, women writers of the late 1920s-late 1940s period had a very challenging and difficult task to accomplish, as they didn't have anyone that mattered (read 'men') to lend a sympathetic ear to what they had to say, unless it proved functional to men's rhetorics on national salvation and/or politically-engaged fights against class-based injustice. Not only did these women writers have to reinvent a female literary tradition which men had erased by severing all possible connections between post-May Fourth women writers and their predecessors; they also had to literally wade through the constant ravaging of His-tory, threatening their presence with cultural annihilation and death. In conceiving their writing as a re-appropriation of the male written text,⁴⁷ these women authors proved to be eccentric (that is placed peripherally with respect to a male-constructed centre) and potentially *feminist*, as their stories were centered both on a critique of the oppressive semicolonial patriarchal social system of modern China and on the creation of a female subjectivity

⁴⁶ Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁷ "Insofar as the female subject is concerned, writing is always a matter of rewriting (the male text) and gaining authorial control". Liu, Lydia H., "Invention and Intervention. The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature", in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 43. Although here Liu specifically refers to post-Maoist woman writer Zheng Jie, I think "re-appropriating the male written text" and "gaining authorial control" in a context where women's specificity is denied may refer to all forms of Chinese female authorship, when it proves to be ontologically different from men's writing.

by women *for* women. In other words, late modern Chinese women writers fought hard to let woman find ‘a space of her own’, to paraphrase Western writer Virginia Woolf;⁴⁸ to do this, they first had to gain freedom themselves in a world overtly hostile to writing women and their *penchant* for ‘sentimentalism’ and for anything falling under the category of ‘the personal’ – which had to be transcended with ‘the political’, because this was required by revolutionary literature.⁴⁹ Yet it was precisely at the crossroads between personal experience and the shackles of His-tory that many women authors of the late 1920s-late 1940s period managed to reinstate a gendered space into literature and create their own passage in writing,⁵⁰ showing the limits of any social commitment devoid of personal (and *thus* political)⁵¹ contents.

Consequently, these Chinese women conceived writing as a way to explore the gendering of a possible ‘new’ woman subjectivity as a political, social *and* literary category, so as to make a feminine version of the literary text and “a *counterpolitics* of female self-invention”⁵² emerge. Like many May Fourth women authors, they engendered a kind of writing which helped “introduce gender difference into the production of text and write the female gender into the authorial

⁴⁸ “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One’s Own*, London, Penguin, 1991, p.6. Originally published in 1928. I here by no means refer to ‘women’ and to ‘modern Chinese women writers’ as a unified notion. I rather focus on their struggle to redefine ‘woman’, ‘femininity’, and ‘women’s literature’ as “decentralized and complex, informed by a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives and aesthetic tastes.” Dooling, Amy D.; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Suddenly, literature had to express a kind of “social commitment that denies the validity of individual experience and emotion, substituting for social and class awareness, knowledge and action.” Larson, Wendy, “The end of *Funi wenxue*. Women’s Literature from 1925 to 1935”, in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 64. “It has been observed that, owing to their preoccupation with private emotional experiences, Chinese women writers of the 1920s and 1930s were unable to move beyond the subjectivism and sentimentalism that were characteristic of a feminine mode of writing to a broader vision of reality. Their attempts to struggle for a new, liberated identity through writing, it is said, fell short of the requirements of great literature [...]. What is implied in this type of critical argument is the view that a writer must be able to ‘transcend’ the circumstances of his or her own life into a vision that is larger and only thus meaningful [...and fostering an] aesthetics of transcending-the-personal.” Chow, Rey, “Virtuous Transactions”, cit., p. 90.

⁵⁰ “intellectual women in early twentieth-century China were not waiting passively on the cultural sidelines while men battled over what role the New Woman would play in the shaping of Chinese modernity. Instead, women were actively engaged in the debates and reformulations of what it meant to be a woman in a modern cultural context.” Dooling, Amy; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op.cit.*, pp. 2-3.

⁵¹ Joan Kelly emphasizes how “*woman’s place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally*”, seeing “the relation of the sexes as formed by both socio-economic and sexual-familial structures *in their systematic connectedness*” and thus making the personal (sexual/reproductive, *nei*-related) sphere and the political (socio/economic, *wai*-related) sphere of experience no longer mutually exclusive but both expressing the historical existence of women. “In any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes (feudal, capitalist, socialist, etc), a sex/gender system and a system of productive relations operate simultaneously.” Kelly, Joan, “The Double Vision of Feminist Theory. A Postscript to the ‘Women and Power’ Conference”, in Kelly, Joan, *Women, History, and Theory. The Essays of Joan Kelly*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, pp. 57; 59; 61 respectively. Originally published in *Feminist Studies*, 5, 1, Spring 1979.

⁵² Barlow, Tani E. , “Introduction.”, in *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 5.

position”⁵³, thus being able, just like their predecessors, to once again “在文化的縫隙和松散之处避开一切已成系的东西而莫立起自己的传统” (initiate their own tradition and a whole new set of literary accomplishments in the cracks and crevices of their culture.)⁵⁴

If the quest for spatial imagination had already been initiated by modern women writers since the late Qing period, culminating in the May Fourth generation of *funü wenxue* writers, why did I choose to focus my work on the late 1920s-late 1940s period instead? Actually, the third period of Chinese modern literature was an extremely violent era characterized by multiple forms of political, social and cultural erasure against women, its first and most manifest example being the *Baise Kongbu* 白色恐怖 (White Terror) of 1927-1928, the *Guomindang* 国民党 (Nationalist Party)’s brutal and steadfast move towards dictatorship by persecuting anyone who wasn’t compliant with its repressive views. Women and feminists were especially targeted, publicly killed, raped and brutally mutilated⁵⁵ with the specific intent of silencing their bodies, minds and political wills to invisibility, so as to restore “the ‘natural’ gender order recently turned ‘upside down’”⁵⁶ by the entrance of women in the *wai* sphere of politics to obtain the right to vote. The *xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活运动 (New Life Movement) of 1934-35, also initiated by the *Guomindang*, was a further step towards a re-domesticizing of women through the promotion of ‘traditional’ feminine virtues like modesty, obedience and motherhood to better control their bodies and minds and erase once again all forms of deviation from the biologically-inscribed ‘natural’ feminine qualities (including the recrudescence of the late Ming saying *nüren wucai bian shi de* 女人無才便是德,

⁵³ Liu, Lydia H., “Invention and Intervention”, cit., p. 41.

⁵⁴ Dai Jinhua; Meng, Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 14. Here Dai and Meng specifically refer to May Fourth women writers; as late 1920s-late 1940s Chinese women writers experienced life and writing as a constant fight against the ruins of His-tory erasing them, I think this carving a passage for writing in the cracks of male culture and tradition applies to the third generation of modern women writers as well.

⁵⁵ Smedley mentions bodies of girl students in Canton “slaughtered and piled up like carcasses of pigs,” a woman being “murdered by impaling her on a huge stick driven through her body from the vagina” and rich people showing no sympathy but instead carving out “souvenirs of flesh from the dead bodies.” Smedley, Agnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-4.

⁵⁶ Bailey, Paul, J., *op. cit.*, p. 77. For a discussion on women’s political role in the 1920s and the *Guomindang*’s backlash, see *Ivi*, pp. 68-78. Norma Diamond also reports Cai Chang’s statement on how women “were stripped naked, nailed on crosses and their noses and breasts cut off before they were killed” by GMD soldiers. Diamond, Norma, “Women under Kuomintang Rule: Variations of a Feminine Mystique.” *Modern China*, 1, 1, 1975, pp. 3-45. See also Gilmartin, Cristina, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 198-9; 211-4 respectively. In particular, Gilmartin notes how “the outcome of the feminist political mobilization during the National Revolution was not revolutionary. No significant changes were effected in Chinese social structures that permitted a dramatic improvement in women’s status in either the public or private domain.” *Ivi*, p. 212.

that is ‘lack of talent is a virtue in women’).⁵⁷ Then with the Japanese invasion of 1937, the parallel countryside resistance movement, the post-Japanese occupation chaos in the urban areas between 1945 and 1949, the emergence of a Communist-oriented national literature in the late 1930s and its final affirmation in the 1940s, all traces of any women-centered discourse were seen as deviating from the norm established once again by male political rhetorics. It was a period during which History literally razed all memory of female forms of writing to the ground, all the while equating nationalist and national (this time Communist-oriented) politics with the preservation of the status quo and thus with conservative views on gender and social roles, though male leftist intellectuals paradoxically defined women writers as conservative for their ‘sentimental’ contents, twisting reality and the categories used to define that same reality to justify their own erasing strategy against women and their writings. The logic beyond this razing women’s writing and viewpoint to the ground was that only the party’s (GMD and CCP alike) all-encompassing male-centered narrative was seen as political in content, while no female-centered standpoint could be seen as political, implying that talking from a woman’s perspective wasn’t a legitimate political stance at all. Consequently, labeling women’s perspective alternatively as ‘sentimental’, ‘bourgeois’ or ‘limited in scope’ hinted at the fact that no female-centered discourse could ever be ‘serious’ nor ‘political’, because it was ‘limited’ to women *only* and thus seen as ‘frivolous’, less important and, most of all, not ‘universal’ as men’s perspective was supposed to be, because the latter concerned ‘more relevant’ and supposedly ‘neutral’ (but clearly man-centered) issues like saving the nation.

The polarization of writing towards political commitment (or the supposed lack of it) became a central feature of the 1927-1937 period in particular, which was

a transitional period when writers who had been ‘romantic’ or ‘realist’ in style and temperament were forced to make political and literary choices that generally placed them somewhere to the right or left of center within the literary circles. Events of 1927 further exacerbated this polarization. 1935 is the year when Mao Zedong and his forces were forced out of southern China and began their march up to Yan’an, where they established not only Communist political authority, but also the literary policy and practice that continues to influence the production of the arts in contemporary China. During the last half of the 1930s, writers chose one of the three courses: they followed the Communists to Yan’an, began a gradual process of moving inland with the Nationalists as they retreated from the Japanese, or established a difficult in-between position in Beijing or Shanghai. Thus the period from 1925 to 1935 is a transitional time when

⁵⁷ According to Larson, imperial Chinese literature implied the basic dichotomy of *cai* 才/*de* 德 (talent/virtue), the former conceived as transcendently male, the latter as essentially female. This long-lasting ideological and symbolical dichotomy was what prevented women from being fully accepted as writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., pp. 44-83 in particular.

both writers and critics aligned themselves politically and socially, for or against a ‘new’ kind of socially engaged writing, and willing or unwilling to follow an overt political cause in their work.⁵⁸

This attempt at initiating a new gender-specific form of literary tradition, which echoed early modern women authors’ (and late Qing ones’) similar attempts, paved the way for the spatial quest of late modern women authors under the Nationalist regime (1927-1945) and the civil war (1945-1949) period. In their constant fight for female authorial authenticity and rebellion against oppression, they searched for the land of writing and self-expression as a way to re-create “an alternative hegemony” for women “whose foreseeable future remained unknown, uncertain, and unreal,”⁵⁹ as the legacy of the women authors who came before them had been substantially erased by male intellectuals.

The present dissertation aims at tracing a possible trajectory of this ‘foreseeable future’ for women writers of the late 1920s-late 1940s period, in order to make it less ‘unknown, uncertain, unreal’. To do so, this work will focus on five different novellas written between 1928 and 1947 – *Ahmao guniang* 阿毛姑娘 (The girl named Ahmao, 1928); *Qi'er* 弃儿 (Abandoned Child, 1933); *Rouxing* 肉刑 (Torture of the Flesh, 1936); *Qing cheng zhi lian* 倾城之恋 (Love in a Fallen City, 1943); *Huaxiang* 画像 (The Portrait, 1947) – by five different women authors of the late modern era – Ding Ling 丁玲, Xiao Hong 萧红, Yang Gang 杨刚, Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 and Fengzi 凤子 respectively. The aim of my analysis is to see how these literary creations contributed to the creation of deliberate, self-conscious configurations of a gender-specific space, allowing woman “to represent her own identity”⁶⁰ instead of letting men writers do it and ultimately fail “to posit a concrete historical as well as textual place for the new women of China”⁶¹ opting to posit the female body “as the literal ground of the nation”⁶² instead. More specifically, this work aims at shedding light on the textual and imaginative space created by women for women, as well as at

⁵⁸ Larson, Wendy, “The End of ‘Funü Wenxue’”, cit., pp. 58-9.

⁵⁹ Chan, Ching-kiu Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 15. I will analyse *The Doll House*’s importance and its impact on Fengzi in particular in Chapter 6.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 16.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁶² Hershatter, Gail, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007, p.86.

exploring “the specifically gendered meaning of writing,”⁶³ so that the question raised by these novellas may shift from ‘what is the position of woman in history, society, culture, politics and sexual/emotional relationships?’ to: What is a woman’s space? How is it structured? How can we define space as gendered? In what ways can a late modern Chinese woman writer’s female leading character and the space she engenders (and is engendered by) through her choices, thoughts and dreams be defined as ‘feminine’, possibly ‘feminist’? To do so, I’ll focus on these writers’ preliminary step, that of voicing the possibility of creating a female subjectivity, so as to find possible answers to the question: is there a place, real and imaginal, where woman can live and exist and find “a stable sense of self”⁶⁴ despite patriarchy, war, and men’s bias constantly trying to tear her specificity down?

In other words, “the problem at hand is not simply that women writers’ contributions to modern Chinese literature must be recognized as having ‘equally’ profound meanings as men’s, but *how* they *can* be recognized in their specificity.”⁶⁵ That is, not simply by embracing their difference but by building a whole new space out of this difference and out of this specificity, and in doing so deliberately threatening “the stability of a patriarchal literary tradition”⁶⁶ first (in pre-Yan’an literature) and the omniscient, all-encompassing authority of the Party later (in post-Yan’an literature) by creating a “woman-centered writing, reading, and politics.”⁶⁷

To recognize the distinctiveness of Chinese women writers’ contributions, one would need first of all to recognize the duplicit nature of their undertaking, which can be described in terms of two different, if not incompatible, *existential spaces* these writers occupy. These are, first, the space in which they are ‘women’, complete with femininity’s historical and ideological baggage, of which *guixiu* represents an ideal; second, the space in which they are ‘writers’, who do not express their observations of the world casually but consciously, with a public literary language that is itself marked with the biases, restraints, and cruelties of history.⁶⁸

⁶³ Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., p. 2.

⁶⁴ Barlow, Tani E., *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 129. This stability of the self, however fragmentary it might be, is more consistent with *nüxing*’s subversive (and often contradictory) configuration than the concept of ‘identity’, given the fact that “the very subject of women can no longer be understood in stable or abiding terms” that is in terms of identity in a post-structuralist, transnational feminist context. Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Chow, Rey, “Virtuous Transactions”, cit., p. 92.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 93.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 104.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 93. Emphasis added. For an explanation on what *guixiu* is, see *Ivi*, p. 91.

As we will see, the gender-specific literary choices of the five authors we are going to analyse will prove to be either feminist (as it was the case for Ding Ling, Yang Gang and Fengzi), female-oriented, but not consciously feminist – at least not in the Euro-American notion of what ‘feminism’ should be – (as it was for Zhang Ailing), or apparently caught in-between a ‘universal’ (read ‘national’) fight against invaders and a potentially feminist fight against female oppression (as it was for Xiao Hong). Despite their differences, far from seeing things within the limits of their own personal circumstances, they all chose to face a world ravaged by war, violence and repression by deliberately moving beyond the incoming era of socially-committed literature and its imperative for women to “de-gender [...] their writing or be re-categorized as outdated and unprogressive” and ultimately as “negatively conservative.”⁶⁹

My analysis takes Ding Ling’s first literary phase (inscribed within the White Terror years) as its starting point, because of its feminist impact on literature and reality, in a time frame where speaking and writing about gender-specific topics was in the process of being erased all together. Hers was a bold and feminist-conscious attempt and as such it represents the ideal opening for a work focused on the re-emergence of a ‘hidden’ feminist perspective from the surface of modern literature. Although the use of the word ‘feminism’ tends to be highly problematic when used in the Chinese context,⁷⁰ Dai Jinhua’s and Meng Yue’s view on Western feminism’s achievements in a capitalistic society as a source of inspiration for modern Chinese women and their goal of revealing Chinese women’s culture as the “无意识” (unconscious)⁷¹ side of national history can be interpreted as a consciously feminist approach to ‘Chinese woman’. Actually, not only do they see her as the hidden but irrepressible Other of official Chinese His-tory, they also use Western-generated feminist theories for analysing Chinese writing women’s multiple visions and their possible re-emergence from national society, culture and His-tory’s surface.

Also, I believe a rigorous analysis should start from the author’s own choice of methodology in interpreting reality. As feminist theory is the vantage point I use in positioning myself in the world

⁶⁹ Larson, Wendy, “The End of ‘Funü Wenxue’”, cit., p. 69.

⁷⁰ See Liu, Lydia, H., “Invention and Intervention”, cit., pp. 35-8.

⁷¹ Dai Jinhua; Meng, Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 26.

as a political subject,⁷² my analysis of these five authors and of their works will consequently use a transnational feminist-oriented methodology,⁷³ more specifically taking the “multidimensionality of marginalized subjects”⁷⁴ into account, in order to avoid a potential Western/colonizer appropriation of Chinese women writers/scholars and their view on literature in their negotiating space and agency within a man’s world. I will also occasionally draw on Western feminist film theory to explain and analyse specific narrative symbols used by some of the authors in their stories (mainly by Ding Ling, Zhang Ailing and Fengzi) with windows/curtains and paintings functioning as lenses through which the male gaze (but also the female one) is constructed.

6. Negotiating space within a man’s world

For modern Chinese women writers of the post-May Fourth era, that is an era characterized by constant precariousness, the quest for existential space implied an inevitable negotiation with the nation’s space, marked by male-dominated symbols of anti-imperialistic emancipation from a feudal and semi-colonial past first and symbols of class-struggle commitment later. Within this national (and nationalistic)⁷⁵ space, marked by the White Terror and the New Life Movement as

⁷² I specifically refer to my own experiencing reality as a forty-something Italian woman and feminist caught in a historical time frame characterized by deliberate strategies of ‘cultural femicide’ enforced by the Italian national government through its political and ideological agenda in the last 25 years with the help of national mass media. The final aim has been that of erasing Italian women’s achievements in politics, culture and society completely from collective memory so as to raise new generations of obedient, undifferentiated, de-gendered and politically unconscious women, thus allowing the patriarchal, phallogocentric, ultra-conservative Catholic status quo to go on unquestioned by anyone, including the so-called leftists. I think my own experience as a politically conscious ‘Other’ in a context of cultural femicide and political erasure of women can be relevant in shaping my analysis of Chinese women writers of the late modern era from a feminist perspective, especially as far as the ideological and symbolical implications of erasure are concerned.

⁷³ My definition of the term ‘feminist’ implies the existence of ‘feminisms’ as a plural and pluralistic construct and as “a word that better accounts for the variety of experiences and expressions that fall under the category.” Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., p. 40.

⁷⁴ Liu, Lydia H.; Karl, Rebecca E.; Ko, Dorothy, “Introduction”, in Liu, Lydia H.; Karl, Rebecca E.; Ko, Dorothy (eds.), *The Birth of Chinese Feminism. Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 18. The authors specifically refer to the possibility of constructing a ‘transnational feminist theory’ in analysing non-Western literature and culture.

⁷⁵ My use of ‘nationalism’ here refers to the “movements of peoples to establish nationhood, or to re-establish it against imperialism, and the development among nations and would-be nations of markers of national identity and the building of solidarities among

well as by anti-Japanese/anti-*Guomindang* war rhetorics, women could only function as commodities and/or as de-gendered elements, not as substantial signifiers. In other words, both the production of space in the capitalist-oriented modern nation of the Republican years of 1912-1937 and the reconstruction of a whole “spatial consciousness” and of social space through a rebuilding of social relations in the Communist-oriented political (and symbolical) discourse of the 1937-1949 period⁷⁶ reduced women to empty tokens left in the margins and devoid of any symbolic power with respect to a centre endowed with all possible meanings, political and cultural alike. Consequently, women writers had to start their quest from the fissures of this nation-sized centre, in order to acknowledge their own presence so as to articulate their eccentric position and difference from the centre itself. Being ‘woman’ a paradoxical symbol of displacement in pre-PRC China, constituting both “modernity’s exemplar and Other”⁷⁷ and being ‘Chinese feminism’ and ‘nation’ two concepts mutually embedded with one another right from the very start of the modern era,⁷⁸ late modern Chinese women writers often displayed a strong ambivalence towards the dominant political narrative of His-tory, power, national crisis and/or salvation on the one hand and the actual possibility of finding their own personal space inside this dominant political and ideological narrative on the other. The quest for ‘a space of her own’ and for a woman-identified self which could be simultaneously political *and* detached from the dominant narrative of the nation proved to be really problematic for post-May Fourth women writers, also for their internalizing the male/female separate spheres division “not just [as] a separation of space, but an extensive and pervasive social and personal ideology sanctioned by a ubiquitous classical tradition of texts.”⁷⁹ As a consequence, their heroines’ quest for a new spatial perimeter in the outside sphere ideologically associated to men tends to unravel through ambivalent and/or imperfect symbols, conceived as

membership” which usually imply the construction of nationalism as masculine. In a semi-colonial country like pre-PRC China, aiming at decolonization, ‘nationalism’ also came to be associated to the concept of anti-imperialist “national liberation movements” which “have often provided fruitful soil for the emergence of women’s movements and for the questioning of traditional gender hierarchies and divisions, and of their subsequent reassertion”— precisely what happened from the 1927 backlash onwards. Both citations Andermahr, Sonya; Lowell, Terry; Wolkowitz, Carol (eds.), *A Glossary of Feminist Theory*, London, Arnold Publishers, 2000, pp. 177-8. For a thorough analysis on the problem of identity as connected to the ideas of ‘nation-state’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘imperialism’ in pre-PRC 20th-century China, see Duara, Prasenjit, *Sovereignty and Authenticity. Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, Lanham/Boulder/New York/Toronto/Oxford, Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, pp. 9-39.

⁷⁶ Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, pp. 2; 21 respectively. Zhang further explains: “Space is not a passive outsider of long history. Its power of mobilization is potent enough to direct and redirect the course of history.” As such, history always “entails a spatial definition,” thus different forms of “regional demarcation” both in physical and symbolic terms. *Ivi*, pp. 18-9.

⁷⁷ Hershatter, Gail, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁷⁸ See Liu, Lydia H.; Karl, Rebecca E.; Ko, Dorothy, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-48 for the general ideological and historical context; pp. 186-203; pp. 204-285 for Liang Qichao 梁启超 and Jin Tianhe 金天翻’s male contribution to the rise of Chinese national(istic) feminism.

⁷⁹ Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., p. 133.

potential obstacles to the quest's accomplishment. In all the short stories we are going to analyse, for instance, mirrors or mirror-like symbols (closed windows and/or curtains, thick fogs, bodies of water, walls, portraits of women) are used to simultaneously "allude to the classical motif of revelation in Chinese poetry" and "as a metaphoric locus for the heroine's pursuit of self"⁸⁰ seen as an alternative, gender-specific ideological space separating from yet unifying the protagonist to the bigger space of the semi-colonial, would-be modern nation constantly engulfing her difference and specificity. Through these symbols, the woman protagonist can learn how to negotiate her subjectivity and gender through space, while negotiating the possibility of building a space of her own within (and possibly beyond) the man-made national space, where she can only function as an objectified body on display (a devoted and filial daughter/wife like Ding Ling's Ahmao; a soon-to-be wife/mistress, like Zhang Ailing's Bai Liusu; a trophy wife, like Fengzi's Ziwei) or as an abject⁸¹ (an abandoned destitute woman socially stigmatized by pregnancy, like Xiao Hong's Qin; a revolutionary underdog chased by Nationalist police and fighting for abortion, like Yang Gang's anonymous character). Having been denied a female legacy of all kinds by His-tory and patriarchal symbolical order alike, Chinese women authors of the late modern era were all revolutionaries of a sort for the 'simple' fact of giving woman a singular, distinctive voice again after the tragedies of the White Terror and the war with Japan had befallen on all revolutionary women.⁸² For their female protagonists, negotiation was a fundamental issue and one fundamentally connected to the affirmation of their subjectivity and gender, meant as "something to be acquired and constructed through constant negotiation with other beings rather than as a fixed category of identity."⁸³ Thus their quest turned into a strategy of negotiating her-space within His-tory as a non-linear strategy;⁸⁴ though occasionally involving an implicit compromise in the transaction with the man-made

⁸⁰ Liu, Lydia H., "Invention and Intervention", cit., p. 50.

⁸¹ Kristeva's abject theory, as specifically associated to the maternal body, can be relevant in both Xiao Hong's and Yang Gang's short stories as being centered on two pregnant women and on their physical pain in particular. See Andermahr, Sonya; Lovell, Terry; Wolkowitz, Carol (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁸² "the 'I' as an autonomous female subject has hardly existed in traditional Chinese discourse." It was a specific novelty of late-Qing and early twentieth century literature. Liu, Lydia H., "Invention and Intervention", cit., p. 46.

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 50.

⁸⁴ My reference her is to Brown's theory on 'feminist history' as a possible non-hegemonic monolithic model if compared to the History male model. Brown, Victoria, *Feminism, Time and Non-Linear History*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 1-23 and 25-47 in particular.

space,⁸⁵ their writing always implied a female conquest of an imaginative, symbolic and cultural place reinterpreting, possibly re-inventing, physical space along the way.

Furthermore, in her struggle to become part of space and become herself a space of struggle, resilience and survival in a world where she was constantly denied or reified, the late modern woman writer often focused on the Chinese city in its multiple configurations of small rural town/semi-modern city/metropolis, as the site where her (and her female character's) struggle to become an independent subject might take place. Be it a small, semi-rural southern town as in Ding Ling's *Ahmao guniang*, a Northern town ravaged by the flood as in Xiao Hong's *Qi'er*, a noisy and crowded Beijing under constant Nationalist threat as in Yang Gang's *Rouxing*, war-stricken Shanghai and Hong Kong as in Zhang Ailing's *Qing cheng zhi lian* or the intoxicating town of the south as in Fengzi's *Huaxiang*, the city is both the site where woman needs to negotiate her own space within the man's world and a space of modernity potentially granted or denied to her. Given the fact that modernist male writers had already chosen the city as their main literary signifier for phantasmagoria, chaos and perdition, yet configuring this site as a masked woman "whose erotic body is delivered to the voyeuristic gaze while her mystery is investigated with narrative caution,"⁸⁶ late modern Chinese women writers needed to create an alternative view on the city, with woman no longer reduced to a commodity for male consumption but turning her into a subject, lost and found in the maze of the modern city which becomes a potential space for self-assertion.

Another important element all these women writers have in common is their taking inspiration from autobiographical elements, thus often choosing an autobiographical focus, as it happened with many May-Fourth women writers:

There the implied author identified with the viewpoint of the female protagonist and thus with a specific gender stereotype and gendered situation. This usually involved a young woman

⁸⁵ "femininity is a quality born in a social transaction whereby Chinese women 'learn to give up their own desires in exchange for their social place'." Barlow, Tani E., "Introduction", *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 6. See Chow, Rey, "Virtuous Transactions", cit., pp. 94-5. As we will see in Chapter Four, this is particularly true for Zhang Ailing, apparently a non-feminist writer and yet eccentric and marginal with respect to the male status quo-centre.

⁸⁶ Zhang, Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature & Film. Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 8.

seeking freedom and eventually making choices between her ideal and her gender role. In this tradition we find Ding Ling, [...] Eileen Chang, and others.⁸⁷

These ‘others’ most certainly included Xiao Hong and Yang Gang, whose short stories we are going to analyse are inextricably linked to their personal experiences, and also Fengzi, whose heroine marked by a gender-specific form of revolution clearly echoes the author’s preoccupation with the liberation from the yoke of both Japanese and Nationalist rule. Being autobiography an important element in understanding the content of their stories, I will also draw on these writers’ personal biographical data to give evidence to my analysis.

Furthermore, as it happened in many literary works by women writers of the Chinese modern era, these five authors were also interested in rewriting the *Bildungsroman* format,⁸⁸ more specifically by focusing on a female heroine who must face spatial and/or personified obstacles, absorb them and pass through their fissures to re-emerge as a ‘new’ woman, that is a woman free from constraints, or at least potentially endowed with the possibility to break free from them. In Ding Ling’s story, Ahmao’s move from the countryside to the small town and her yearning for the big city symbolize a young girl’s transformation from naïve peasant to modern girl, with spatial elements like the fog or the invisible city and personified elements like the glamorous woman-neighbour functioning both as obstacles and gateways to the articulation of the heroine’s desires. In Xiao Hong’s story, Qin’s status as a pregnant woman confined within the enclosure of a hotel room, enclosed in its turn within the city drowned by the flood, becomes the starting point of a struggle to find multiple spaces to stay and survive in not to succumb to imminent death by drowning; here water and walls are seen both as spatial obstacles and as potential gateways for interconnectedness between human and elemental life. In Yang Gang’s story, pregnancy constitutes the main obstacle the anonymous woman protagonist has to overcome in order to join the revolution, thus positioning her own flesh as a site of resistance and a space where female freedom and revolution can finally take place thanks to abortion. In Zhang Ailing’s story, the cruelty lying beyond all human interactions (reduced to mere economic transactions) and Bai Liusu’s status as a divorcée are the main obstacles to her self-affirmation, with the Shanghai/Hong Kong urban duality functioning both

⁸⁷ Meng, Yue, “Female Images and National Myth”, in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 126. Originally published in *Ershiyi shiji* 二十一世纪 (Twenty-first century), 4, April 1991.

⁸⁸ “In Chinese literature, this subgenre generated many works expressing the lonely individual’s mental exile against the broad back ground of the national crisis, and this genre itself is informed by intellectuals.” Meng, Yue, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

as a personified obstacle and as a promise of stability for the female self. Last but not least, in Fengzi's story, the suffocating air of the privileged, war-free southern life and Ziwei's status of devoted, trophy wife, both personified by a portrait which reduces the protagonist to a reified object, function as the obstacles woman has to overcome in order to reach the infinite possibilities of independence.

7. Centre, margin and Chinese specificity in the global cultural context of modernity

In a way, these short stories and their authors may be seen as particularly appealing if interpreted from a Euro-American-centered feminist point of view, because of their apparent similarity with Western notions of 'gender', 'womanhood' and 'subjectivity'.⁸⁹ While I agree the modern period may appeal more than other eras of Chinese literature to Euro-American feminist scholars because of the similarities of ideas circulating in both parts of the world at the time, I am not entirely convinced the motivation of this interest exclusively lies in the anxiety of recuperating a supposedly faded 'glory' of the Western past. To me, the modern period of Chinese literature is particularly interesting because of its Chinese specificities, not because of its overt similarities to Western cultural and literary categories.⁹⁰ Actually, modern Chinese literature was created in a moment of genuine experimentation with form and content within a political and cultural framework characterized by internationalism and global modernity.⁹¹

⁸⁹ "Why is the Euro-American critic preoccupied with China's modern period? Does this particular segment of history thematically reify the Euro-American as superior, while the Chinese is made to westernize for the sake of survival? Given China's thousand-year history, might this focus on China's encounter with its 'greater' other –and its need to change to survive– express deep anxiety about recuperating the 'glory' of a now quickly fading Euro-American superpower?" Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁹⁰ "Women's writing of the period achieved new levels of technical mastery – most evidently in the work of urban writers of occupied Shanghai and Beijing of the forties, who employ highly sophisticated descriptive techniques and narrative perspectives in their fiction, drama, and autobiography." Dooling, Amy, "Introduction", in Dooling, Amy D. (ed.), *Writing Women in Modern China. The Revolutionary Years, 1936-1976*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 3. Although authors like Zhang Ailing or Fengzi may have borrowed these sophisticated techniques from Western authors or may have been inspired by Western literary tropes, their style, taste and content was distinctively Chinese because they spoke about China and to China.

⁹¹ Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing*, cit., pp. 137-140.

As far as 1927-1949 Chinese women's literature is concerned, in particular, what is both fascinating and problematic about it was its being generated in a country questioning its own past identity and spatial consciousness while literally trying to form the future out of a fleeting and vanishing present, constantly shifting from shadow to shadow, from modernity to tradition and back again to semi-colonialism, fighting against Japanese imperialism so as to make national identity emerge and never sink into wreckage. It was a country where modernity was made and simultaneously unmade, fragmented, collapsing and collapsed already, all the while being caught in a full-scale circulation of ideas in a *shijiehua* 世界化 (mondialisation) context – a term non-coincidentally used by Chinese woman writer of modernity and mother of the *baihua* literature, Chen Hengzhe, as mediator of cultures in-between English and Chinese, thus negotiating a space of her own within the crevices of both national and international discourse on global culture.⁹² More specifically, what appeals to me about these five late modern Chinese women authors is not their supposedly 'Western' literary taste (despite some self-evident analogies with Western literature in terms of style, especially as far as Ding Ling's, Zhang Ailing's and Fengzi's stories are concerned), but their questioning male hegemonic discourse in literature and the tyranny of His-tory in everyday social life on the one hand and their constant struggle in revealing the oppressive structure of the sociocultural fabric of the male-female interaction on the other. Also, what really makes these stories and their authors 'modern' (sometimes even post-modern in their emphasis on the fragmented self) in a specific Chinese sense, is their de-colonizing effort to step out of His-tory and their attempt at articulating a woman's speech in-between the fissures of an all-encompassing, man-made nation-space, itself constantly changing, crumbling and forming again amidst the chaos of war, but precisely because of that all the more violent and oppressive against women.

Actually, these women writers chose to deal with the possibility for women to reveal and affirm the space of their 'real' self (meaning not subject to men's cultural constructs and limitations), often in an exacerbated fragmented way, in a moment when men as the nation's perimeter and political conscience were still trying to come to terms with modernity and with a unifying notion of identity, thus with time's momentous impact on their ideological being. According to Duara:

The problem of identity, so characteristic of modern societies, is most fundamentally a problem of time. It is a quest to retain a sense of self when everything around is perceived to be in flux.

⁹² Bailey, Paul, J., *op. cit.*, p. 66.

[...] In other words, the search for identity is an effort to grasp, retain, and extend presence. Identity and authenticity become particularly salient in politics when *accelerating linearity* becomes the dominant mode of representing time and history.⁹³

In other words, modern male intellectuals of the 1927-1949 era were trying to redefine the (male) national and collective identity in politics and literature precisely because they were experiencing time and history as a traumatic erosion and potential erasure of the nation's identity; consequently, they applied this same logic of gradual erosion to women's space and agency in order to extricate themselves from the excessive acceleration of time and re-inscribe stability into reality and spatial consciousness again, by erasing women altogether as eccentricity and deviation from this stability:

Who are the agents involved in the process of selection and construction? Given the split time of the nation, the agents most interested in reconciling the demand for an unchanging unity of nationhood with a changing modern future are the representatives of the national community (such as nationalist intellectuals) or the state.⁹⁴

Once again, men acted as the sole agents that could select and construct the right markers of modernity, by appropriating time-space as a unified mono-cultural dimension where the centre allowed the invisible, unaccounted-for margins to exist only as long as they did not claim any actual influence on the time-space narrative for themselves.

Last but not least, the authors I chose are also particularly interesting to me because of their ambivalence as regards to this centre-margin dichotomy.⁹⁵ While Zhang Ailing stubbornly chose to diverge from politically-engaged literature precisely because this was considered to be the centre of any literary discourse, consciously opting for a marginal, isolated and apparently 'frivolous' position within national, anti-imperialistic literature, Ding Ling⁹⁶ and Xiao Hong were forced into

⁹³ Duara, Prasenjit, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, cit., p. 26. Emphasis added.

⁹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 31.

⁹⁵ "I am uncomfortable with the entitlement discourse that takes canonization as everyone's birth right. [...] my feminist approach departs from some of the revisionary feminist criticisms that concentrate mainly on women's absence from or marginalization in established literary canons [... as] the rhetoric of center and margin cannot by itself generate rigorous critical thinking. One cannot but face the fact that some people are historically relegated to the margins whereas others can willfully choose their marginal position, the better to launch attacks at the center." Liu, Lydia H., *Translingual Practice*, cit., p. 200.

⁹⁶ My reference here is to Ding Ling's first literary phase.

the margins by male intellectuals, who conveniently either dismissed, appropriated or censored their female-centered narrative for propaganda purposes. Yang Gang found herself caught in-between two centres fighting against each other: the GMD-oriented urban tyranny and the CCP-oriented rural epic; she apparently chose herself to erase the most eccentric and peripheral elements from her writing in order to escape the Nationalist tyrannical centre, yet all the while re-inscribing possible fragments of a *nüxing* discourse within the ‘manly’ CCP song of the revolution. Fengzi embodied yet another option, in her embracing and celebrating the national leftist revolution but simultaneously claiming a centre-stage position for herself as an independent woman within the Communist-oriented literary and political agenda. No matter how different their approach to the multiple dichotomizations established by men could be, all of them tried to go beyond boundaries by questioning the limits imposed on Chinese women by male-centered space, politics and gender discourse.

CHAPTER ONE

Dark mirage: Ding Ling's *Ahmao guniang* 阿毛姑娘 (The girl named Ahmao) and the opacity of woman's subjectivity

1. A feminist upbringing

Ding Ling was the first openly feminist writer of modern China as well as “a central figure in the intellectual history of Chinese revolutionary women.”¹ Born Jiang Binzhi 蒋彬芷 in 1904² in the county of Linli, Hunan,³ she lost her father when she was only three.⁴ Luckily, her mother Yu Manzhen 余曼贞 was “an outstanding member of that remarkable generation of prerevolutionary mothers”⁵ and a woman of “坚毅不屈” (unswerving determination), who fervently discussed about her ideas and opinions and looked like a “自然天生的领袖” (natural born leader.)⁶ This helped Binzhi grow a social, intellectual and political consciousness from a very early age. A true example of *xin nüxing*, Manzhen cherished education as the first step towards independence and self-reliance for all women⁷; after becoming a widow, in 1911 she decided to leave Linli to start a new life in Changde,⁸ where her brother lived with his family. There, she enrolled to the recently formed

¹ Barlow, Tani, *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 7.

² Zhou Liangpei 周良沛, *Ding Ling zhuan* 丁玲传 (Biography of Ding Ling), Beijing, Beijing shiyue wenshu chubanshe, 1932, p. 96.

³ Ding Ling 丁玲, *Wo muqin de shengping* 我母亲的生平 (My mother's life), in Ding Ling 丁玲, *Ding Ling zuopin jingxuan* 丁玲作品精选 (Selected works by Ding Ling), Wuhan, Changjiang wenshu chubanshe, 2003, p. 397. Originally written in 1980.

⁴ Zhou Liangpei, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁵ Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *Ding Ling's Fiction. Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature*, Cambridge Massachussets/London, Harvard University Press, 1982, p.4.

⁶ Shen Congwen 沈从文, *Ji Ding Ling* 记丁玲 (Remembering Ding Ling), Changsha, Yuelu shushe, 1933, p.48. Reprinted in 1992.

⁷ In 1909, Manzhen wrote in her diary: “并告诉社会上有先觉者欲强家国，首应提倡女学，因女师缺乏，特先开女子速成师范学校” (There are some visionaries in our society who say we have to encourage literacy for women if we want to become a strong country, yet as there is a lack of women teachers, we should first of all focus on establishing normal schools for young girls). Ding Ling, *Wo muqin de shengping*, cit., p. 396. See also Shen Congwen, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

⁸ Ding Ling, *Wo muqin de shengping*, cit., p. 397.

Women's Normal College as a student while simultaneously enrolling her daughter at the college's kindergarten – a revolutionary choice at the time, given the fact that colleges for women were still uncommon in China.⁹ She then moved to Changsha, the capital of Hunan, joined the First Women's Normal College and then became a teacher.¹⁰ Binzhi followed her, first attending school in Chengde then finishing elementary school in Changsha in 1916, at eight years old.¹¹ Later she moved to Taoyuan, where relatives could look after her, and entered the Second Women's Normal Preparatory School.¹² With the May Fourth movement spreading also in Hunan, Binzhi joined protests, made public speeches as a pre-eminent student activist¹³ and soon became a *zaizai xiansheng* 崽崽先生 (a little teacher), teaching Mandarin to urban women workers in a night school.¹⁴ In 1919, she left to study at the Zhounan Middle School for Girls in Changsha, famous for its progressive views. Encouraged by her literature teacher, who introduced modern vernacular literature and foreign authors to his students,¹⁵ Binzhi began writing poems and articles for the *Xiangjiang ribao* 湘江日报 (Xiangjiang Daily).¹⁶ A “pioneering woman educator in Changde”¹⁷ and a feminist leading an independent life, when confronted with her brother's decision to arrange a marriage for her daughter, Manzhen encouraged Binzhi to break free from familial constraints, helping her learn the importance of establishing a life for herself as a truly self-sufficient woman. So, supported by her mother, in 1921 seventeen-year old Binzhi moved to Nanjing and later to Shanghai to live her life independently with the company of schoolmate Wang Jianhong 王剑虹.¹⁸

⁹ See Bailey, Paul, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 33-45. “The school campus represented an unprecedented social space that afforded them a vast array of new experiences, including the opportunity to interact with peers outside of the mediating control of the family.” Dooling, Amy; Torgeson, Kristina M., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Ding Ling, *Wo muqin de shengping*, *cit.*, p.397-8.

¹¹ Yan, Haiping, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1945*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 170.

¹² Shen Congwen, *op. cit.*, p.50.

¹³ Ding Ling 丁玲, *Wo de chuanguzuo shenghuo* 我的创作生活 (My Creative Life), in Yuan Liangjun 袁良骏 (ed.), *Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao* 丁玲研究资料 (Research materials on Ding Ling), Tianjin, Tianjin Renmin chubanshe, 1982, p.109. Originally written in 1933.

¹⁴ Yuan Liangjun 袁良骏, *Ding Ling shengping nian biao* 丁玲生平年表 (*Chronological table on Ding Ling's life*), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

¹⁸ Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

This was another important influence in her life. Binzhi first met Wang Jianhong in Taoyuan in 1921.¹⁹ A strong-willed young woman who ardently embraced the role of student leader in the Taoyuan Second Women's Normal Preparatory School, Wang Jianhong's passionate and eloquent speeches against the traditional views of teachers deeply impressed Binzhi and were welcomed by all fellow female students with enthusiasm.²⁰ Unlike Binzhi, Jianhong came from a rich family, and both her father and stepmother disapproved of her struggle for women's emancipation.²¹ The friendship between the two girls was so strong that they became “相依为命的姐妹” (like sisters depending on each other for survival);²² together, they decided to move to Nanjing first then to Shanghai to improve their education and study foreign literature at university.²³ When Jianhong fell in love with professor Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, she suddenly disappeared on Binzhi, eventually dying of tuberculosis in 1924 and thus severing her life from her friend's forever.²⁴ Alone and embittered by the excruciating loss of a woman so dear she almost felt like a lover,²⁵ Binzhi decided to move to Beijing on her own and “persisted in searching for ways of learning and living as a ‘modern woman’ while her mother persisted in teaching women students, each under increasing hardship.”²⁶ As the White Terror came and the *Guomindang* had the feminist fighters publicly raped, maimed and executed to punish their ‘unnatural’ and ‘unfeminine’ spirit, many modern women lost their jobs (including Manzhen)²⁷ and were forced into the oppressive invisibility of *nei* again, sinking into the brutal darkness of His-tory.

¹⁹ Zhou Liangpei, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

²⁰ *Ibidem.*

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 129.

²² *Ivi*, p. 131.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 129-130.

²⁴ *Ivi*, pp.133-4.

²⁵ Zhong Daobi 中島碧, *Ding Ling lun* 丁玲论 (Discussion on Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

²⁶ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁷ “As one of the pioneers in Chinese women's education, Yu Manzhen was removed repeatedly from her teaching positions and forced into an isolated existence marked by material stringency and social exclusion.” *Ibidem.*

2. *Nüxing*, darkness and enlightenment

This experiencing darkness and its suffocating threat against women's existence led Bingzhi to a courageous quest for the affirmation of female subjectivity: her mother's (as well as other women's) influence on her strategies for everyday survival as a woman in a man's world made her realize a gender-specific subjectivity had to be her main quest in writing. In particular, finding a way to "pave out a passage for women writing"²⁸ and exploring all the ways a woman could exist in a man-made world became her primary goal.

'Woman' itself (*nüxing* 女性) as an ideological concept positioning female individuals as independent subjects in society outside the relational family structure was rather a new construct in China.²⁹ *Nüxing* was conceived by male feminist intellectuals of the 1920s as a 'revolutionary' category³⁰ coined with the aim of inventing modernity and genders as associated to Western anthropological, evolutionary and eugenic theories.³¹ According to these theories, 'woman' was part of a binary system based on the sexual opposition between male and female; consequently, her identity was primarily seen as a sexual one, positioning her as an inherently sexed subject, thus confining her to an essentialized and sexualized construct. Western biological theories also emphasized passivity and inferiority as typical intellectual features of the female psyche, as opposed to the activeness and superiority of the male psyche; consequently, woman was seen primarily as the Other of man³² and as absence, lacuna.³³ So, woman could become *nüxing* and be granted the same status of subject as man only if she accepted to comply with the self-effacing role anthropological and biological theories had tailored for her. Paradoxically, these theories were meant to pose woman as a 'liberated' and autonomous construct, not as a subject entirely dependent

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 171.

²⁹ See Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 15; pp. 37-8 respectively.

³⁰ "*Nüxing* played a particularly significant role in two separate textual streams: literary representation and the body of writing known as Chinese feminism. Historically, women writers did not predominate in either one." *Ivi*, p. 53.

³¹ *Ivi*, 64-7.

³² Woman "was foundational only insofar as she constituted a negation of man, his other." *Ivi*, p. 54.

³³ "Chinese women's lack of personality or human essence [...] is one of the distinguishing factors in the national traditions of Chinese feminism." *Ibidem*.

on man; however, this ‘liberation’ was possible only in case she accepted to impersonate somebody who had the imperative obligation to choose a partner for heteronormative reproductive purposes, her ‘free’ choice of a sexual partner paving the way for a rebirth of China in terms of natural selection and evolution of the Chinese species.³⁴ Yet, the final outcome of positioning *nüxing* as a (man-made) cultural and ideological concept was that of forcing woman into a stereotype, preventing her from actually becoming an independent being separated from man, so what *nüxing* could actually aspire to both in society and in private life was just to coalesce into a frozen yet still confused pattern, an echo of personality rippling to infinity without ever finding its true articulated self.

Being part of the intellectual uproars of the late 1920s as a woman who truly wished to find a way to articulate her real self in the outside world through art³⁵ and writing, Bingzhi chose to deal with these intellectual and cultural constructs in order to move beyond them. Even more than other women writers of the late 1920s, she realized that the affirmation of her own feminist self was the first step to attain freedom,³⁶ so that self-awareness necessarily had to come before any possible spatial quest both in real life and in literature. Even before choosing her pen name Ding Ling around 1924,³⁷ she soon realized she had to go against the grain of His-tory, culture and language and fight against men’s constant discrimination and silencing strategy against women. In particular, her late 1920s writings stem from the realization that, as defined by Western theories on biology and by Chinese male intellectuals’ discourse, woman could only function as the empty signifier of discourse,³⁸ because her position as a cast-off within the construction of language was never questioned by modern male intellectuals, just as their predecessors used to do in China’s feudal

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 64; pp. 78-9 respectively.

³⁵ She actually tried to become a film actress before turning to writing as her main creative tool.

³⁶ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 29.

³⁷ See Zhou Liangpei, *op. cit.*, pp. 149—151. The two characters 丁玲, interpreted by her male friends as a male name at the time, actually referred to the tinkling sound of gem-pendants clashing against one another, constantly reminding Bingzhi of the hardship her mother, Wang Jianhong and she herself had to endure throughout their lives as women. Mao Dun later on stated: “这个名字，在文坛上是生疏的，可是这位作家的才能立刻被认识了” (this pen name was unusual in the literary world, yet this writer’s talent was immediately recognized). Mao Dun 茅盾, *Nü zuojia Ding Ling 女作家丁玲* (Female writer Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 253. Originally published in *Wenyi yuebao* 文艺月报 (Art and Literature Monthly), 2, July 1933.

³⁸ Dai Jinhua; Meng, Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 43.

past.³⁹ Consequently, “她仍然是那个因为没有所指或所指物，因此可以根据社会观念、时代思潮、文化密码及流行口味时尚来抽出或填入意义的纯粹载体” (As she was still a signifier which meant nothing, *nüxing* could only function as a literary symbol and an ideological trend of the time, a concept society based itself on and a popular ‘flavor’ in literary trends chosen and encoded [by men] as the vehicle for a rigid, unchangeable meaning).⁴⁰ The fact that *nüxing* was still an empty signifier derived from the fact that male writers “绕开女性内在本质和神立场的女性观” (conflated the *nüxing* concept as immanent essence with the *nüxing* conscious political standpoint,)⁴¹ ultimately posing the former as the only possible site of subjectivity for women while erasing the latter. So, in order to truly liberate ‘woman’ from man’s discourse and ideology, women writers had to re-appropriate the *nüxing* political concept rewriting it within a different symbolical language – which is exactly what Ding Ling chose to do in her debut collection of short stories.

Actually, in her first literary phase Ding Ling’s heroines expressed the clash between *nüxing*’s quest for her ‘self’ and the new gender roles created by society at a much deeper level⁴² than the one explored by the women authors of the previous generation, mostly because she was a consciously feminist woman author. In particular, “确立‘我’与‘自己’的关系，意味着重新确立女性的身体与女性的意志的关系” (establishing a relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ implied building the relationship between *nüxing*’s willpower and her whole person anew), as well as building “女性物质精神存在与女性符号称谓的关系” (the relationship between the conscious and material existence of woman and the symbolical discourse referring to *nüxing* anew).⁴³ In other words, Ding Ling knew that *nüxing*’s liberation from essentialism had to be enacted through language, as traditionally language had been used by Chinese men (also in the modern era) to coerce woman into a reified position.⁴⁴ Thus, through her writing Ding Ling tried to go beyond man-made social and ideological constraints for woman in order to decode and emphasize her will to achieve self-determination and self-consciousness. Only this way could she manage to de-

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 29.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ As a reaction to this erasure of feminist women in real life and because of the growing unpopularity of the *nüxing* signifier to refer to ‘women’ in the imaginal world of literature, Ding Ling preferred using the terms *nüren* ‘女人’ or *nüshi* ‘女士’ in her collection.

essentialize woman and let her step out of darkness, while breaking free from frozen patterns and finally reach enlightenment.

Like *nüxing*, ‘enlightenment’ was another key concept in early 20th century culture, often associated to modern cities.⁴⁵ Yet for Ding Ling, enlightenment was first and foremost part of woman’s everyday struggle to achieve self-determination and social standing potentially *outside* the reifying framework society wanted to trap her into. As the cultural constructs of the time envisioned woman as “the equivalent of sexuality,”⁴⁶ this reification was the main obstacle *nüxing* had to face in order to reach the light, that is to reach an identity free from the binary imperative positioning woman as a possible subject *only* in relation to man – as his opposite and as his sexual partner.

In reaction to this, in becoming a writer Ding Ling decided to focus her attention on the quest for the woman subject and on the attempt to define her subjectivity as a possible site of coherence and illumination. Her first collection of short stories, significantly called *Zai hei’an zhong* 在黑暗中 (In the dark), aimed at emphasizing the dichotomy between the darkness women were forced into by man’s society and the light they had to find for themselves. Created right after the White Terror had smashed the *xinhai geming* 辛亥革命 (the Revolution of 1911) and the feminist women involved in it, the collection was literally born out of the darkest pit of His-tory erasing women: the first two stories, *Mengke* 梦可 (Mengke) and *Shafei nüshi riji* 莎菲女士日记 (The diary of Miss Sophia), came out on December 1927 and February 1928 respectively, then the other two, *Shujia zhong* 暑假中 (Summer Vacation) and *Ahmao guniang* 阿毛姑娘 (The girl named Ahmao) were published on May and July 1928 respectively; all the four pieces included in the collection were greeted as “一颗炸弹” (a bomb) dropped “在这死寂的文坛上” (on this dead-still literary world) and praised for their “率直的女性的心理的描写” (straightforward description of *nüxing* psychology) and for being “中国新文坛上极可骄傲的成绩” (the most accomplished achievements in the new Chinese literature).⁴⁷ Her first collection was also a reaction to the painful experience she had had while facing the decadent vortex of the modern world⁴⁸ as she tried to become an actress in the Shanghai

⁴⁵ “At the turn of the twentieth century, the city was imagined as the source of new ‘light’: enlightenment, knowledge, freedom, democracy, science, technology, the nation-state, and all the newly imported Western categories.” Zhang, Yingjin, *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁴⁶ Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, *cit.*, p. 144.

⁴⁷ Yi Zhen 毅真, *Ding Ling nüshi* 丁玲女士 (Miss Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, pp. 223; 225. Originally published in 1930. Yi Zhen’s praise mainly focuses on 莎菲女士日记.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 223.

film industry, only to emerge quite disillusioned as all the Chinese film industry men ultimately wanted from her was to undress and turn into a prostitute-like commodity on display.⁴⁹ Like many other educated women, Binzhi had hoped she could actually live a modern life in the city as an independent woman, yet she soon realized modernity for women could only mean being “devoured by the mechanisms of human commodification and [be] repackaged into a female-fleshed ‘thing’ for sexualized consumption.”⁵⁰ In other words, she realized women could become ‘independent’ only if they accepted to live as shadows, objectified versions of their lost selves in a world characterized by a violent, gender-specific form of erasure. Thus woman could become a *nüxing* only if she sacrificed her dignity to the light generated by man in *his* own terms in *his* own world, embodying a human commodity created for his own pleasure and consumption, thus falling back into darkness never to emerge again.

It was precisely Ding Ling’s own “disappointment with the female condition in a dark, barbarous society” that “led her to gamble on a revolutionary future for women,”⁵¹ writing being both the site of exploration of female subjectivity and a possible space of illumination/liberation from social and cultural constraints, where *nüxing* could finally be free.

3. Shadowscape: *Ahmao guniang* and her quest for subjectivity

Ahmao guniang apparently is an unusual story within Ding Ling’s early writing, the protagonist being a lower class girl from the countryside. As a member of the Chinese urban middle class, in *Zai hei’an zhong* Ding Ling was mainly concerned with the fate of educated urban middle class women – notably in her first story *Mengke* or in the controversial *Shafei nüshi riji*. Despite this difference, not only does *Ahmao guniang* revolve around *nüxing* just like all the other stories

⁴⁹ Zhou Liangpei, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-163.

⁵⁰ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p.172.

⁵¹ Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 129.

included in the anthology,⁵² but it can also be considered to be a *feminist* story, as it focuses on “‘the woman question’ as a social problem,”⁵³ investigating the possible configurations of woman as a willed and would-be autonomous subject within society. More importantly, the story explores the possible alternative configurations of space as an agent of self-expression and freedom for woman. In particular, Ahmao’s story focuses on the idea of land(e)scape and on the city as possible sites of evasion and self-fulfillment for the protagonist, while highlighting the impact of modernity on a young and traditional countryside woman, who is not used to articulate her own thoughts nor to acknowledge her place in the world.

As the story starts, the space Ahmao inhabits is confined within the walls of a cottage in a small village on a Southern China desolate valley. Not only is this place isolated from modernity, but Ahmao’s own imaginary space appears to be blank. Despite her imminent wedding, planned to take place in a few hours, she actually seems incapable of thinking of a world beyond the valley; the very idea ‘a space beyond’ might exist is almost inconceivable to her: “阿毛是已被决定在这天下午将嫁到所不能想像出的方去了” (It had been decided that Ahmao was to be sent off that same afternoon to get married and settle down in a place *she couldn’t even imagine*).⁵⁴ In dealing with the outside world, Ahmao literally posits her ‘self’ as a blank space: at first she doesn’t feel any urge to create her own space within the world, because she doesn’t even know she can articulate a wish to be a part of the world in the first place.

As she moves to her husband’s house in Geling, a town near Xihu, Ahmao starts inhabiting a new landscape made of mulberry trees, pines and Western-style houses. The little stream behind her house, in particular, becomes the main site of discovery for her blank-space subjectivity: this is the place where she goes to do the laundry every day, soon meeting up with two women neighbours, Sanjie三姐 and Ahzhaosao 阿招嫂. The neighbours’ words about the big modern cities they have visited quickly fill Ahmao’s blank-space conscience with an unprecedented desire: seeing what is beyond the lake and experiencing the invisible city beyond the visible landscape. To her, this

⁵² “Ahmao has a toughness that makes her able to endure beating for her new convictions; she possesses an organic will. Her strong desires mark her as a *nüxing* character.” *Ivi*, p. 140.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 133.

⁵⁴ Ding Ling 丁玲, *Ahmao guniang* 阿毛姑娘 (The girl named Ahmao), in Ding Ling 丁玲, *Zai hei’an zhong · Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo mingjia mingzuo yuanbanku* 在黑暗中 · 中国现代小说名家名作原版库 (In the dark. Original library edition of important works by important modern Chinese writers), Beijing, Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1993, p. 137. Emphasis added. Originally written in 1928. Unless otherwise stated, the translations are all mine.

invisible entity feels like a “一种神话中的奇境” (wonderful, unimaginable place from the fairy tales),⁵⁵ a magical space opening before her eyes as an endless net of possibilities:

一到夜晚，从远远的湖上，是天与水交界的地方，便灿烂着很繁密的星星，很大的金色的光映到湖水里，在细小的波纹上拖下很长的一溜来，不住的闪耀着，像无数条有金鳞的蛇身在不动蜿蜒着。湖面是静极了；天容也很黑。那明亮的一排繁星，就好像是一条钻石的宝带，轻轻拢住在一个披满黑发的女仙的头上。阿毛是神往到那地方去了，她知道那就是城里。

As the night came, on the distant lake, where sky and water met, the stars shone bright, spreading a vivid golden radiance over the lake in long, tiny ripples shimmering through and through. It looked like a myriad of serpent scales wriggling. Then the lake turned still and the sky grew dark. A myriad of shining stars appeared, similar to a diamond tiara softly placed like a drape on the black hair of an immortal maiden. Ahmao was spellbound by the idea of reaching that place. She knew it was indeed in the city.⁵⁶

Once covered by the veil of ignorance, her eyes are now confronted with a new, potentially infinite space she can actually see and breathe. Her fascination with the city beyond the lake grows stronger as she realizes that everyone else in Geling seems to have visited it already, including her husband Xiao’Er 小二. For the first time in her life, Ahmao comes to realize she lacks in something; her prior isolation from the world, confined to the small space of the desolate valley, had turned her into a lacuna, but now, while listening to other women talking about spaces lying beyond her blank imagination, a desire for new space creeps within her conscience, awakening her to a possible form of enlightenment.

The following visit to Hangzhou, organized by Xiao’Er for the whole family, brings about a transformation in Ahmao, piercing her eyes and conscience with the inescapable pull of modernity: her sudden contact with the city and its supposed ‘fairy tale’ marvels intoxicate her eyes and brains. She starts looking everywhere “惊诧和贪馋随着” (with insatiable intensity and surprise),⁵⁷ wishing everything to be hers and wishing everyone she sees to be close to her, and her own life to be like theirs. The *xin nüxing* (or *modern girl* as she was often referred to, using an English expression) is finally born: “[阿毛] 不知感到的是幸福还是痛苦。阿毛就由于这旅行，把她那

⁵⁵ Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, cit., p. 144.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*. The city the narrator refers to is Hangzhou.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p.146.

在操作中毫无所用的心思，从单纯的孩提一变而为好用思虑的小女了” (Ahmao couldn't tell if what she felt was happiness or pain, but from this trip onwards all the utterly useless thoughts she carried in her mind turned from simple childish whims into the elaborate and discerning thoughts of a young girl.)⁵⁸

During her visit to the city of Hangzhou, Ahmao starts deploying her curious gaze on the things she sees, including both objects and people; she especially lingers on city women as if she wanted to learn how to be modern from them. While wondering at their glamorous attire, her eyes learn how to decode their silhouettes wrapped in fur (a clear and ironic self-reference to the author herself, who shocked people for dressing in Western-style fashion): she sees them only as bodies, “像装饰店铺一样的东西” (adorned like objects sold in shops).⁵⁹ Yet, while reifying other women through her gaze, she paradoxically loses herself in them. As the visit to the city draws to a close, Ahmao has eventually turned into a desiring *nüxing*, a young woman who strongly identifies with her own desire to be a sexualized, reified object like the ones she has seen in other women. Yet she has also become a woman with a will of her own, and eyes now wide open to see life as a widening space, possibly expanding into a new existence where she can actually impersonate the modern girl she has invented for herself – a vague mirage-woman, a reflection based on the elegant women she met and gazed on in the city.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 145.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 148.

4. Woman, voyeurism and the mirage of modernity

It is actually the meeting with one of these urban modern girls that further pushes Ahmao into the exploration of her *nüxing* subjectivity as a desiring subject: despite still being confined within the reifying role of elegant object on display, Ahmao's exploration of her own subjectivity does not come through a man but significantly through the meeting with another woman, mirroring her wish to be independent and free-willed. A woman in fur accompanied by an elegant man walks past Ahmao's home; Ahmao hears the woman's laugh and her delicate voice, though vanishing as she leaves to reach the mountain, still persists in her mind.⁶⁰ The modern woman Ahmao desperately wants to be has just passed her by, like a mirage which failed to coalesce into an actual shape.

Far from being just a fleeting glimpse of modernity, though, the elegant woman is bound to reappear in Ahmao's life: she is actually moving in nearby, in the Manao Western-style mountain residence, thus permanently installing her presence in the protagonist's imagination. Her being from such a glamorous city as Shanghai and living in a Western-style house give evidence to her modern woman status, thus making her the perfect object of Ahmao's narcissistic desire: as they meet again and the woman's eyes fall on her, Ahmao can't help but blush, as if she had been struck by a lover's gaze. Eventually, she manages to conquer fear by using once again her voyeuristic drive on the 'modern girl' in order to capture the vision of modernity, fixing her gaze obsessively on the woman as she

一步，一步的踱上那通道小洋房的曲径去，那步法的娉婷，腰肢微微摆动的姿态，还是像那天游山时一模一样。阿毛很想再随着走上去瞧瞧，又觉得非常气馁，无语的便退回家来了。

slowly reached the winding path leading to the small Western-style mansion. The beauty of that walk and the swaying movement of those hips were exactly the same she had the day she was

⁶⁰ “那女人的影子，那笑声，才在她脑子里中晃” (the reflection of that woman, her laughs, kept shimmering in her mind). Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, cit., p. 153.

walking on the mountains. Ahmao wished she could follow and gaze into her a little bit more, but she felt discouraged and went back home without a word.⁶¹

Ahmao's desire to be (possibly to have) the modern girl leaves her speechless, as if it was impossible for her to articulate such a strange wish, so far this vision seems from her everyday space and experience. Yet her attraction and voyeurism for the other woman as a symbol of modernity⁶² is further encouraged by the windows this woman leaves open at night after switching the lamp on. This gesture provides the perfect excuse for Ahmao to gaze into the woman's life one more time:

那久闭的窗，已打开了，露出沉沉垂着的粉红的窗帷，游廊上也抹拭得非常干净，放着油漆的光。一到夜晚，刺眼的电灯光便射放过来，阿毛站在屋外，可以从窗帷里依稀看见悬在墙壁上的画，或偶尔一瞥的头影。

The apartment's window, usually shut tight, was now open, newly decorated with long, thick pink curtains; also the veranda looked completely clean and freshly painted. At night, the lamp suddenly flared up, dazzling Ahmao's eyes as she stood outside their house. From the curtains, she could dimly discern some paintings hanging on the wall, or occasionally catch a glimpse of people's shadows.⁶³

All the glamour of modernity and its promise of enlightenment, symbolized by the lamp, are suggested by this vision of shadows on the wall, yet the elusive thrill they send back give no delight nor any visual pleasure: the modern woman she is gazing at is reduced to an opaque silhouette, an electric shadow seen through a cinematic screen ultimately blinding Ahmao's mind with her own confused gaze. In other words, *nüxing* proves to be nothing but an illusion, not a real flesh and blood person. As Ahmao later sees other women emerging from the Shanghai woman's house, this illusion further evaporates into myriads of imperfect echoes: the unnamed, mirage-like neighbour is just a shard in a constellation of city women, all glamorous yet all alike, shapes infinitely repeating in the mirror of Ahmao's blurred subjectivity. The voyeuristic desire for the other woman is thus

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 154.

⁶² For a discussion on woman as eroticized (and male-centered) symbol of modernity in Shanghai literature from the 1920s onwards, see Zhang, Yingjin, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-231.

⁶³ Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, *cit.*, p. 155.

consumed in the flames of repetition, leaving Ahmao all the more dissatisfied, with a new, insurgent wish: changing her present living conditions and start a new existence.

The sudden ‘marriage’ of the experienced neighbour Sanjie – who’s actually leaving to become the concubine of a wealthy man – clearly turns Ahmao’s desire to be/have the other woman into a wish to inhabit a different social space: as Sanjie, herself a country girl like Ahmao, sets off on a new life’s journey as a wealthy woman, Ahmao starts believing she could do the same; thus, her new dominant *nüxing* trait becomes the quest for social upward mobility. Yet, because her vision of *nüxing* is trapped within the constraints of a semi-colonial society, Ahmao can only wish to attain a new configuration of space through reliance on a man’s fortune,⁶⁴ for in her incoherent, not fully-formed self, she sees female commodification as the only possible way to change her status of dependent and traditional woman confined within the countryside space. Consequently, “她已懂得了是什么东西来把同样的人分成许多阶级” (she suddenly learnt how to classify people according to the objects they owned):⁶⁵ to her newly found *nüxing* conscience, the more objects a woman has, the more modern (though reified in her turn) she is, thus having access to a space of fixed subjectivity and high social status.

Yet, this assessment of people, space and her own self cannot turn Ahmao into a truly modern and independent woman, as her quest for modernity is reduced to a wish to marry a powerful husband, wear fancy clothes and have a wealthy and idle existence, in short, it is a quest trapped in the wish to impersonate “a fetishized object.”⁶⁶ Thus, her thirst for modernity exclusively lies in her being a desiring subject who is still incapable of seeing things for what they really are and whose desire to be somebody she cannot be is so overwhelming to ultimately veil her eyes and view over things, turning everything she looks upon into an opaque reflection, resonating in her hollow conscience with its inherent, incomprehensible shimmer.

Once the opacity of vision sets in, preventing her from seeing other people and herself with clarity, the vague mirage of an alternative dream-like life inexorably falls like a curtain on her conscience, severing her mind from the fabric of reality.

⁶⁴ “现在她把女人的一生，好和歹一概认为是系之于丈夫” (now she believed that women’s lot, be it good or bad, invariably depended on their husbands. *Ivi*, p.158.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 157.

⁶⁶ Chow, Rey, “Virtuous Transactions”, cit., p. 98.

5. The fractured distance between dreams and reality

Ahmao's detachment from reality is marked by her retreating back into darkness, after being tempted and dumbfounded by the glittering light: “在黑暗中张着两眼，许多美满的好梦，纷乱的便来挤着她的心” (in the dark, her eyes wide open, all the happy dreams she had chaotically filled her mind).⁶⁷ Her thoughts on a future life-to-be are so confused and yet so strong to momentarily turn her into a sexually conscious being: suddenly, she wishes to make love to her husband Xiao'Er, yet, as Chinese women were not supposed to have sexual desires independent from men's will, he ends up beating her to punish her transgression of cultural boundaries, woman being allowed to impersonate a sensual being only in relation to man – that is as his personal sexual object. Left alone with her conscience, confused and troubled by the encounter with the light of modernity and by her desires constantly denied by reality, Ahmao can only resort to darkness, as there seems to be no other space for her to ruminate in and potentially create her own subjectivity. This leaves her still unconscious about woman's ultimate value in society exclusively as the object of man's desire and not as an independent subject with a consciousness and desire of her own. This lack of awareness creates a distance separating the dark space of Ahmao's impossible dreams from the clear light of subjectivity she needs to find in order to really become modern.

Though causing her to be still partially unconscious about her subjectivity as a *nüxing*, Ahmao's sudden impact with modernity creates a fracture in her being, a caesura which causes her to rebel against society and against the role of commodity capitalist consumption has created for her. Yet Ahmao fails to comprehend the real nature of this caesura, because she fails to understand she needs to negotiate her space in the world in order for modernity to be hers. In her fractured opacity, she starts feeling contempt for her present living conditions, which she considers too base and vulgar for her: “不安于她那低微的地位，不认命运生来不如人，然而她却并不真真的认识了什么，她只有一缕单纯的思想，正如许多女人一样” (she didn't feel at ease with such a low social status; she believed her destiny was different from that of other people's, yet she had absolutely no idea

⁶⁷ Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, cit., p. 159.

what her belief really meant. She only had one constant wish: becoming like other women).⁶⁸ Her rebellion results in neglecting everything other people expect her to be in her real everyday life as a young countryside woman. At first, after coming back from the visit to Hangzhou and after her unexpected contact with rich city women and their lifestyle, Ahmao decides to take control of the silkworm breeding activity of Xiao'Er's family with strong enthusiasm – raising silkworms was a typical female activity as well as a typical form of family economy in the countryside – because she thinks this activity might help her climb the social ladder and become rich. Yet, as soon as she realizes wealth and its wake of modernity implies hardship and strife, she starts neglecting work as a form of passive rebellion against reality: she doesn't tend to the kitchen nor to the silkworms anymore, even when both her husband and mother-in-law scold her for not performing her 'womanly' duties (that is, being obedient, responsible and resilient to hardship). The only thing that matters to her now is going outside to watch elegant women come and go along the mountain path, though after a while she can't even see them anymore, her gaze reducing them to mere objects (“现在她只看那衣饰了，她已不甚注意那脸蛋”，now she just looked closely at their clothes, no longer seeing their faces).⁶⁹ Her literally reducing other women to faceless commodities while simultaneously imitating their glamorous swaying walk significantly takes place in a dark space – the garden at night – as if modernity could be enacted (but never embodied) only by imitating its surface shimmer, without ever embracing its light. Far from being a painful but necessary gateway to revelation, though, here darkness only functions as an opaque space blurring all possible boundaries between dream and reality, shapeless woman and subject. Actually, darkness deprives Ahmao of the ability to tell reality from delusion, stunting her hope of becoming real as a *nüxing*; consequently, she completely dismisses what is really at stake for women whenever they try to embody modernity in their very flesh. The distance between Ahmao's confused ignorance and the modern woman's factual reality becomes manifest in the following outburst by the narrator:

现在她把女人看得一点也不神奇，以为都像她一样，只有一个观念，一种为虚荣为图快乐生出的无止境的欲望，这是乡下无知的阿毛错了！阿毛真不知道也有能干的女人正在做着科员，或干事一流的小官，使从没有尝过官味的女人正在满足着那一二百元一月的薪水；而同时也有着自已烧饭，自己洗衣，自己呕心呕血去写文章，让别人算清了字给一点钱去生活，在许多高的压迫下还想读一点书的女人——而把自己在孤独中所见到的，

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 160-1.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 162.

无朋友可与言的一些话，写给世界，却得来是如死的冷淡，依旧又忍耐着去走这一条已在这纯物质的，趋图小利的时代所不屑理的文学的路的女人？若果阿毛有机会来了解那些她所羡慕的女人的内部的生活，从那之中看出人类的浅薄，人类的可怜，也许阿毛又非常安于她那能忠实于她的生活的一切操作了。

Now she didn't consider those women to be magical at all; she considered them to be exactly like her. She only had one wish: to lead a vain and pleasant existence forever, but she was only a country girl. How wrong she was! Ahmao couldn't possibly imagine there might be talented women working as administrative clerks or government officials or that there were women who, despite not having the opportunity to become government officials, could still earn a generous salary of hundred or two hundred yuan, or that there were also women who cooked their own meals and washed their own clothes while pouring all their bleeding hearts into writing, making everyone see they lived by the money earned for every single character they wrote and that, though heavily oppressed by all sorts of injustice, still wished to be women intellectuals. And, in complete solitude, with no friends to write to, still poured all their words out to the world and yet were received with utter indifference, as if they were dead, but still they had to soldier on and endure this endless, purely material way of the world hurrying along this age based on personal gain, where the women who chose the path of writing were only met with scorn and disdain. If only Ahmao had had the opportunity to fully understand the inner life of the women she admired, she would have seen the shallow, pathetic side of human beings, and maybe she would have been content with the way she managed to live her own life.⁷⁰

The narrator's voice actually makes all Ahmao's pretense of finding light and a space of her own fade to black. Here Ding Ling implies that no freedom nor real achievements in life can come for woman by simply running towards the light, be it the phantasmagoria of the city or the small lamp of the neighbour's bedroom. She herself had experienced how, just like the woman producing writing itself, 'feminine writing' could be exploited and objectified by male literary publishers, reinforcing the man-woman power relations positioning *nüxing* (and her creation turned into product) as the dominated object with respect to man as the dominant subject.⁷¹ She knew creating a space for herself and other women by refusing to comply with man-imposed power relations implied living in darkness, as real understanding could only come through the acceptance of hardship and strife. She also knew that in 1928 both the craze over 'feminine writing' and literary revolution had vanished, and that being a leftist was no longer fashionable⁷² as the *Guomindang* started persecuting anyone who was even remotely interested in doing politics (especially feminist-oriented politics)⁷³ through literature. More importantly, she realized that, precisely because of this

⁷⁰ Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, cit., p. 162-3.

⁷¹ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-7.

⁷² Shen Congwen, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-8.

⁷³ "Works for 'women's movements and emancipation' logically sounded 'outdated' precisely because such movements were being violently erased and more urgently needed than ever." Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

reversal of fortune, “for real change to occur in a society or a country there must be some people who fulfill their responsibilities with effort, tenacity, courage, and self-sacrifice”⁷⁴ – what she actually did, running against the grain of His-tory. In other words, Ding Ling knew neither actual enlightenment nor inner clarity could be conquered without immersing herself in the solitary tunnels of darkness, that is by walking the path of creativity on her own, refusing to comply either with the hierarchical power relations framed within the binary man/woman system or with the Nationalist regime and its oppressive ideals.

Precisely because she hasn’t reached true enlightenment yet and because she is not willing to start her descent into the remotest cavity of darkness, Ahmao fails to see light and darkness as combined and as a possible help in her fight for life ‘with effort, tenacity, courage, and self-sacrifice.’ She’s lost in-between, in the opaque fog of ignorance. Consequently, to her the darkness of suffering dissipates into the vanishing thin air of dreams, while light only appears to be surface glitter, shining with neither reflection nor depth, thus granting no enlightenment and no awareness at all. So, the narrator’s words do not simply pay homage to women’s struggle to write a new, de-objectified path for themselves and their writing in a male-dominated and increasingly brutal world; they also distance themselves from Ahmao’s dreams, condemning the character to perpetual opacity as she proves incapable of creating any independent space for her female self and life: the only alternative Ahmao can resort to is (night)dreaming,⁷⁵ a typical negative trait of *nüxing* as an essentialized fragmented subjectivity, moving from mirage to mirage in order to avoid beholding reality.

Mirage as a promised space of freedom which is then denied is further symbolized by the imagined city of Shanghai: one day the new neighbours take notice of Ahmao’s beauty and immediately suggest her mother-in-law to let the girl go to Shanghai and work as a model at the National Art Institute, luring Ahmao into the unseen (and still invisible) metropolis. This proposal makes the illusion of modernity and the promise of a new life seem possible, like an imaginary landscape Ahmao can finally step into – something which can’t really happen, as becoming a model in a city is not a viable option for a respectable and married country girl. As her mother-in-law ‘wisely’ declines the offer, there’s nothing Ahmao can do to prevent the mirage of the city from disappearing, so when her husband beats her in reaction to her protests, she can’t say anything,

⁷⁴ Shen Congwen, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-8.

⁷⁵ “除了那梦幻的实现，什么也不能给与她的需要” (Apart from the idea of making her illusions come true, nothing else could give her what she needed). Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, cit., p. 164.

because her conscience is temporarily lost within the vanishing of the mirage. The city is not just invisible in the here and now of Ahmao's present, its light distant and unseen; it becomes invisible in perpetuity.

As Shanghai shuts its light tight, forever invisible to Ahmao's imagination, no land can finally be visible to her eyes: while she wanders around the mountain path, still dreaming of becoming a model, she is suddenly surrounded by fog,⁷⁶ a token for her inner confusion and utter lack of clarity. No spatial configuration seems possible for her, the landscape vanishing under the fog representing her own vanishing self, evaporating in the blank space of delusions. The only thing she can make out amidst the thick fog is the Manao mansion, where the elegant woman and the rich man live: as “她把所有的能希望的力，都从这眼光中掷去” (the intensity of her wishes all vanished in that gaze),⁷⁷ her own gaze turns into the act of vanishing itself, all-consuming in its impossible quest for self-fulfillment.

Even when shapes re-emerge from the fog (“白堤已迷迷糊糊在风的波涛中显出残缺的影” The white dam cast its vague and broken shadow on the waves rocked by the wind),⁷⁸ the landscape is only reduced to half-shadows facing an half-formed woman, both engulfed by fog again.

这里是除了十步以外都看不清，上，下，四周都团团围绕着像云一样的东西，风过处，从云的稀薄处可以隐约看出一块大地来，然而后面的那气体，又填实了这空处了。阿毛头昏昏的，说不出那恐惧来，因为非常之像有几次梦境，她看见那向她乱涌来的东西，她吓得无语的躲在石龕子里。动也不敢一动。正在这时，她仿佛又看见那路上，正走来一个人影，并且象极了她所想望的人，于是她又叫着跑下去，然而依然只有大气围绕着她。

Beyond ten steps she could see nothing; upwards, downwards... only cloud-like shapes surrounded her. Then the wind came blowing and from the dispersed clouds she could finally perceive a faint glimpse of the soil, and the gaseous air beyond filling the void. Ahmao's head felt like spinning, as if some undescrivable fear had taken hold of her... how oddly similar to the dream world she had imagined that space was... then she saw something rising chaotically towards her and, paralysed by fear, she hid inside a shrine without ever venturing to move. In that very moment, it seemed to her the shadow of a man was approaching along the street; it

⁷⁶ “湖面被雾气笼罩着，似一个无边的海洋。侧面宝石山的山尖，也隐没在白的大气里” (the lake surface was shrouded in fog and looked like an endless ocean; even the sharp side of the Baoshi mountain disappeared in the white air.) *Ivi*, p. 167.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

looked exactly like the man she longed for, so she called upon him and ran down from the top of the mountain, the thick air still surrounding her.⁷⁹

As the roof of the Manao mansion pierces through the fog of her illusion, Ahmao starts crying, because she realizes her dream of a different life (and space) is impossible to reach; like Shanghai, it will always be invisible to her. As she goes back home and Xiao'Er beats her again for disappearing amidst the landscape, instead of tending to the domestic chores like a 'proper' wife should do, she turns her eyes to the pink curtains of the neighbours' window. Like a smokescreen against her eyes, they block her view on the inside and her gaze is ultimately deadlocked over the conflict between dream and reality.

6. Awareness comes through another woman

This conflict generates a denial of speech – a refusal to speak with her husband – and a denial of sight – a refusal to see her neighbour is dying. Actually, the closed curtain functions as a prefiguration of the woman's illness: the elegant woman living in the Manao residence is terminally ill with tuberculosis.⁸⁰ Despite wearing glamorous red shoes, she looks extremely pale and simply waits for death to come. Though Ahmao cannot really see her for who she really is – a modern girl fighting to find a space of her own in a man's world – still she can sense the other woman's suffering:

也许阿毛是由于觉得她是太幸福了，所以怕看见她，怕看见了她，会相形出自己的不幸来，又感到伤心，阿毛总也愿意自己能快乐点才好。其实，那女人却正感到比阿毛更其应该的难过，因为她的肺病是很重了。不过在阿毛眼中看来，即使那病可以治死她，也

⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁰ As Ding Ling's best friend Wang Jianhong died of tuberculosis herself in 1924, this unnamed character can be considered to be a shadow of the lost friend engulfed by death, though critics usually tend to consider Shafei (rather than Ahmao and her neighbour) as the literary version of Wang Jianhong. See Zhou Liangpei, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

是幸福，也可以非常满足的死去。阿毛不愿出去玩，怕看见一些足以引自己又陷在无望的希望悲苦中去，阿毛也不愿和家里人 [...] 谈讲，怕让自己更深切的懂得她自己也正是确定属于她们那阶级的人。

Though she believed that woman was extremely lucky, Ahmao was somehow also scared to look at her because, as she feared that by looking at her she would have to look into her own misery too, and thus would constantly feel sad. Yet Ahmao wished she could be invariably happy all the time. Actually, that woman certainly felt much worse than Ahmao, as her pulmonary illness was really serious. To Ahmao's view, though, despite the illness would certainly lead her to death, that woman could still count herself lucky and be content with her destiny. At the same time, Ahmao didn't wish to go out anymore, for she was afraid she would sink back into that painful, hopeless state of mind again. She didn't even feel like talking to her relatives either [...], for she was afraid she could realize even more deeply she was definitely part of their same social class.⁸¹

Just like desire and self-improvement came through the other woman, so does awareness of pain: though rich, beautiful and more educated than Ahmao, the other woman is doomed to die. The inevitability of death as seen through the destiny of her shadow-self makes Ahmao's dreams and hopes ultimately shatter: in seeing the possible (though still unnamed) female self she might become defeated by illness in the end, Ahmao understands her potential space in the world – who she might have been – is destined to be erased by society. The death of the shadow-woman can only result in Ahmao's self-effacing annihilation, both in a physical and metaphorical sense: she suddenly stops eating and sleeping, working all day and hurting herself on purpose to hasten death. Because the modernity promised by the fleeting vision of the city and of the woman inscribed in the cityscape is ultimately denied by reality, Ahmao can only re-enact her first meeting with death by spying again on the other woman, to discover she has actually died. As the casket carrying the other woman leaves the house, Ahmao can only gaze once again, watching her slowly vanish in the horizon feeling “好像她自己的心也消失在一个黑洞里面” (as if her heart too had vanished inside a black hole).⁸² Before embracing death herself, Ahmao has a further glimpse on the actual suffering of the shadow-woman, this time represented by another neighbour living in a Western-style mansion nearby. In this new meeting, the narrator explicitly focuses on a possible sisterhood among women, acknowledging their lack of agency in a world dominated by men:

⁸¹ Ding Ling, *Ahmao guniang*, cit., p.171.

⁸² *Ivi*, p. 175.

她拚命挣起来，走到屋外，从玻璃窗望去，在明亮的电灯光底下，她把那女人望得清清白白的！那女人，她披着一件红的大衫，蓬乱着一头短发，手抱着一件东西，狂乱的摇摆着她半身。那声音便从那不知名的东西上所发出。忽然，那女人猛的又掷了那东西，只听见砰的一声，连女人也倒了下去。许久，许久，又都寂然。灯光从墙上反射出很明亮的光照到好远。阿毛很想跳到对面去，抱起那女人来哭。那女人曾和她谈过一次话的，是如何的和蔼近人呀！为什么她也会独自在夜深如此的悲苦？她不是也现得几多幸福的吗？

Defying death, Ahmao strenuously rose to her feet and dragged herself outside the house. She pierced through the window glass, and under the shining light of the electric light her gaze met the pure gaze of the other woman! She had casually thrown a red chemise over her shoulders, her short hair all disheveled; she was holding an object in her hands frantically swaying to and fro, thus causing the mysterious object to create a loud sound. Suddenly, the woman fiercely threw the object away and one could only hear its clattering noise while falling, and that of the woman falling in her turn. For a long, long time, all fell quiet. The lamplight cast a long bright halo from the wall. Ahmao wished she could just jump and land right in front of the woman, meeting her face to face, holding her in her arms while crying. That woman had once spoken to her – how intimate and friendly she had looked! Why did that woman have to be so sad, left alone in the dead of night, just like her?⁸³

In her sudden acknowledgement of the other woman's suffering, Ahmao is finally granted the political status of *nüxing* as a consciously different woman, thus going beyond essentialism: her solidarity towards the other woman shows she has paradoxically acquired an agency of some sort precisely in her realizing women can't have any agency, place nor voice of their own, in a would-be modern yet still semi-colonial society as China was in the late 1920s.

Ahmao's newly conquered awareness can only result in her own death in the end, as if the death of the city woman (amplified by the suffering of yet another city woman) was just a shadow of her own ending, a rehearsal set on a lamp-lit stage in preparation for her own demise in the dark. Thus, after ingesting some poison, Ahmao takes her leave from the world, giving no other explanation but the fact that she doesn't want to live anymore.⁸⁴ The story ultimately ends in the final conflating of the city woman and the countryside woman in death and suffering: both versions of *nüxing* are defeated and the enlightenment promised by modernity, marked by the lamplights illuminating the Western-style woman's room, results in a hopeless illusion, erasing women and granting them no real identity nor freedom. In death and suffering, the two (three) women become one, all crushed by the 'modern' society which gives them value only as precious trophies on display wearing fancy

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 178.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p.180.

clothes – like the glamorous city neighbours – or as ignorant peasants doomed to obey men and work hard to help with the family economy – like Ahmao herself. Even the only surviving *nüxing* described in the story, Sanjie, can manage to escape the squalor of country life just by becoming a concubine, that is by embodying a legalized prostitute figure whose assertion depends once again on a man and on his money, not on her inherent qualities as an independent woman expressing her subjectivity in her own gender-specific space.

7. *Nüxing* and future anteriority

The multiple deaths of woman described by Ding Ling in *Ahmao guniang* represent the author's political standpoint with regards to Chinese women's lack of space in the late 1920s, as they were ultimately reduced to objects both by society and His-tory. This constant reification was what made woman fail as a subject in the end, because it framed her within the confinements of her sexual and social role as female partner of man for reproductive purposes and as wife and potential mother for nationalistic purposes. So Ding Ling's early fiction ultimately "expanded even as it repudiated core colonial modernist eugenic assumptions"⁸⁵ about women, as the woman described in each story is doomed to fail in her attempt to define her own subjectivity in the end. In her view, the quest for *nüxing* subjectivity became one of unattainable coherence and illumination in a world which constantly trapped woman within her own opaque reflection as a commodity for male consumption and within her own self-consuming folly while searching for identity, her lacuna status giving evidence to the impossibility to name herself and to reconcile her own desires with reality.⁸⁶

Consequently, while trying to find a space of her own in the world, Ding Ling's *nüxing* in the end realizes this space has turned into a metaphor for her incoherence, a dark mirage ultimately stating her opacity as a subject. According to the cultural constructs of the time, "this feminine willed existence as an autonomous subject, the goal of enlightened Chinese feminism, rested on the

⁸⁵ Barlow, Tani, E. *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 8.

presumption that society was formed of libidinous, self-interested, juridical individuals who stood equally before the law.”⁸⁷ Yet women were *not* equal to men before the law: not only in the late 1920s they still didn’t have the right to vote⁸⁸ but, more importantly, they were literally being erased from history by the White Terror and by the whole “anti-woman character of the Republican era in the 1920s and the 1930s.”⁸⁹ Thus, despite focusing on a quest which ultimately proved to be a failure, in her early writings Ding Ling consciously voiced out the “yet-to-be actualized stories”⁹⁰ of women – what Tani Barlow defines as their “future anteriority”⁹¹ or “what women will have been,”⁹² had they managed to survive the brutality of His-tory. So, though women were reduced to ghosts in the end – including real women fighters like Wang Jianhong – their potential can virtually be restored to life thanks to writing. In particular, in inserting the voyeuristic scenes between Ahmao and the other woman, almost like a film director Ding Ling uses the female character to direct her gaze to a *nüxing* with the aim of “destroying or disrupting man-centered vision by representing its blind spots, its gaps, or its repressed” through the (shadow) bond between the two women. Furthermore, she also tries “to affect another vision: to construct other objects and subjects of vision, and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject,”⁹³ that is she tries to imagine a possible redefinition of *nüxing* freed from social and cultural constraints. After all, the future anteriority Ding Ling envisages for her women characters is a way to suggest ‘another vision’ on *nüxing* in terms of representability. Ahmao’s being trapped in darkness eventually hinders this quest, but doesn’t erase its possibility altogether.

Actually, in her attempt at creating *nüxing*’s life as it will have been, had Chinese society and gender politics been different, in *Ahmao guniang* Ding Ling focuses on the girl’s “proposed future role”⁹⁴ as a woman free from both her rural confinement and from her husband and family. Yet, her supposed-to-be ‘modernity’ is reduced in the end to mere simulacra – houses, clothes – failing to

⁸⁷ Ivi, p.132.

⁸⁸ Women virtually obtained the right to vote in 1936, although universal suffrage and gender-specific representation in the National Assembly was actually granted only in 1947. See Bailey, Paul, J., *op. cit.*, pp.95-6.

⁸⁹ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁹¹ Ivi, p. 2.

⁹² *Ibidem.*

⁹³ De Lauretis, Teresa, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, p.135.

⁹⁴ Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., p.169.

actually become real and giving the female self no real status at all, in fact leaving it empty and devoid of any possible meaning. Despite her final awareness of woman's subhuman status as lacuna of man, Ahmao does not manage to become a whole de-essentialized *nüxing* personality as the story ends; on the contrary, she is a signifier devoid of any meaning, consumed by its self-effacing struggle towards an unnamable and incoherent freedom: significantly, the woman she adores and would like to be (and possibly own like an object or a lover) has no name, to highlight Ahmao's own status not simply as lacuna/Other of man, but also as non-subject.

In a way, Ahmao perfectly encapsulates the man-made *nüxing*/modern girl psychology as an essentialized woman ensnared by the logic of capitalist consumption described by critic Qian Qianwu 钱谦吾 in 1931 while analysing Ding Ling's heroines (Shafei in particular). According to Qian, the *modern girl* was characterized by “颓废” (decadence) and by “怀疑苦闷的” (fits of doubts and depression) often turning into the impression of “悲哀锁住着” (being locked up within an endless sorrow); also, she is “专门寻观求乐的倾向, 要算是第一了” (particularly inclined towards the search for pleasure, which becomes her primary goal). She was also endowed with a “很强” (vivid), “动摇” (vacillating) imagination, “很忧郁的状态” (a melancholy attitude) and a tendency towards “无止境梦想” (endless dreaming), oscillating between ecstasy and pain, criticism and adoration, displaying “漠然、暧昧、无顺序 [...]、神秘狂 [和...] *Mystical delirium*” (indifference, ambiguity, incoherence [...], mysterious insanity [and] *mystical delirium*.”⁹⁵ Last but not least, modern girl's typical features also included narcissism and a fixative consciousness of her sentimental self, inflating her mind so much with feelings to be “完全是包含在灵与肉” (completely confined within [the space of her...] flesh and soul),⁹⁶ thus ending up being trapped inside her own immanence.⁹⁷ Because of this fixation with feelings, her very actions were eventually determined by her status of a woman locked “在病态的因子的内里” (within the innerness of [her...] morbid features).⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Qian Qianwu 钱谦吾, *Ding Ling* 丁玲 (On Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 227. The expression in Italics is in English in the original Chinese text. Originally published in *Xiandai Zhongguo Nüzuoqia* 现代中国女作家 (Modern Chinese Women Writers), Beixin shujubun, 1931.

⁹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 231.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 228-9.

⁹⁸ Fang Ying 方英, *Ding Ling lun* 丁玲论 (Discussions on Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 238. Originally published in *Wenyi xin wen* 文艺新闻 (Latest News on Literature and Art), 1931.

To my view, though, what makes Ahmao's story particularly interesting is not just her being positioned within the confinement of *nei* as the realm of feelings, but also her positioning her own quest both before and beyond *nüxing* as a sexualized, depoliticized standpoint to achieve freedom from essentialism and man's rules. She is positioned before this standpoint, because she is neither revolutionary nor conscious of the social/cultural constraints allowing her a subjectivity only as long as she accepts to become a commodity for man's consumption. She also proves to be barely conscious of her sexualized body and of the "social impossibility"⁹⁹ of her dreams, because she can't see many of the truths the narrator and the other characters share about society and its hierarchical structure.¹⁰⁰ Starting off as a blank space, as the story progresses Ahmao becomes a mirage lost in space, eventually turning into a mere *erasure* in space, finally confronted with "her agony over her own state of being as a socially paralyzed human non-entity."¹⁰¹

Ahmao's yet-to-accomplish *nüxing* status as an independent, de-essentialized woman is even more poignant than the other female portraits Ding Ling created in her early writing precisely because she is *not* overtly conscious of the biological limits posed by her sexed being nor of this lack of consciousness becoming her final undoing, as it happens for Shafei or Mengke. On the contrary, one of her main dreams is to become a highly feminized and sexualized subject in order to climb the social ladder. She wishes to embody the role of the self-adorned "sexualized feminine", that is a "profitable object for investment"¹⁰² immersed in the consumerist culture of the late 1920s, in order to attain upward mobility. Unlike her author, Ahmao doesn't really understand the implications this role might have on her life as a woman, while Ding Ling overtly denounced such a role as a social imperative forcing women into prostitutions of many kinds – including becoming either a wife, a concubine or a model for an art school, as she clearly states in the story itself.

Unlike Ding Ling, Ahmao doesn't have a political conscience: she's unaware of the essentialized nature of her dreams. She can't see that becoming the mistress/wife of a rich man or going to Shanghai to be an art school model would only turn her into a reified object on display, like the items she sees in shops or the itemized women she sees during her visit to Hangzhou. It is precisely Ahmao's ignorance of the reifying nature of her dreams that makes the story relevant from a

⁹⁹ Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 141.

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 146-151.

¹⁰¹ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p.185.

¹⁰² *Ivi*, p. 186.

political point of view, as it allows the narrator and the woman writer to denounce society's brutality against woman and the impossibility for woman to fulfill her dream of acquiring a stable subjectivity. The character's ignorance leads her quest for subjectivity to dissolve: finally faced with the indifference of the world to her own suffering, the woman fighting to achieve her own freedom can only decide to dissociate her mind from reality first and vanish into death in the end.

Yet, I believe Ahmao's is also a story beyond *nüxing*'s struggle as an essentialized subject trapped within the gender binary system. Actually, her attempt at finding her own subjectivity is not simply reduced to the search for a fitting male sexual partner (the man she never really meets but only fantasizes about) or to "inflating herself with emotions";¹⁰³ it is also enacted through her final recognizing a kindred spirit – no longer a mirror or a magnified version of herself – in the other woman, whom she envies and admires (possibly loves) at the same time. As a consequence, through Ahmao's story, Ding Ling tried to go beyond the man/woman binary opposition by shifting her main focus from the search for a male partner for reproductive purposes to a possible (shadow) relationship with another woman. More than the other symbols in the story – the Western mansions, the lake, the glittering city, the fog – the elegant woman functions both as a mirage of subjectivity and as a promise of freedom: she is the 'future anteriority' of the protagonist, what Ahmao would have been if only she had been born in an upper class urban milieu, thus with the opportunity to have an education and possibly develop a political conscience of her own as a coherent subject, like Ding Ling herself. The final death of the elegant woman not only denies Ahmao of the possibility to write the space of her own future anteriority and freedom, it also erases the space of the other woman's future, telling us how women in the late 1920s could only exist as trapped within a reifying social frame, Ahmao as a peasant's wife, the nameless woman as a rich man's mistress. The very fact this woman doesn't even have a name gives evidence to her opacity, echoing Ahmao's own opacity, and the other way round: the dream-self Ahmao so desperately longs for is just an illusion, a ghost doomed to die of tuberculosis in the end. Yet *Ahmao guniang* can ultimately be read also as a tale of possible sisterhood, denied by the stark brutality of life just like Bingzhi and Jianhong's love-like sisterhood was. In the end, both the contact with the outer space of the city and the contact with the inner space of desires lead to death, because Ahmao can't find any viable way to express herself freely. She can't name her 'self' and her real purpose in life, so she can't know who to be anymore in the end. Like the elegant woman she sees in the Western-style mansion who is doomed to vanish and die, she herself is reduced to a mirage, evanescing in the clash between the

¹⁰³ Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 134.

quiet and anonymous life of the valley and the opening possibilities offered by the modern city beyond the lake and the mountain. So, the story ultimately gives evidence to Ding Ling's bitter awareness of the fact that "stability and an accurate sense of self seemed to be constitutionally or foundationally impossible to achieve"¹⁰⁴ for Chinese women in the late 1920s, because they were trapped within "social darkness"¹⁰⁵ and within the impossibility to live outside the binary system of man/woman, self/other, intellectual subject/sexualized object.

8. The shift in space politics and the negative critical appraisal on Ding Ling's first literary phase

With her first stories, "Ding Ling was asking an immediate post-May Fourth question: Why has *nüxing* still not achieved social and emotional standing?"¹⁰⁶ The answer possibly lies once again in the inescapable *nei/wai* organization of social and ideological space, suffocating woman either into an endless fixative repetition of feelings shaping her subjectivity and actions as incoherent and opaque, or into a violent, self-effacing ritual of exploitation of her body, mind and conscience for man's cannibalistic consumption. Yet, despite Ahmao's final demise, Ding Ling's story explores *nüxing* sensitivity as a possible subversive and eccentric force dissolving this dichotomy into a series of multiple shadows, dark-mirage targets and fog-shaped places, meant as articulations of the woman's (and writer's) dissatisfaction with the usual configurations of space in man's literature (and society), eroticizing woman as a mysterious object.

As literature gradually changed its focus from modernism to proletarian vehicle for social commitment from 1930 onwards, space politics in literature changed as well, shifting from the city as the site of modernity and individual subjectivity to the countryside as the locus of revolution and collective liberation. Consequently, the evolution of *nüxing* as an educated intellectual woman (or,

¹⁰⁴ Ivi, p. 133.

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 132.

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 134.

like Ahmao, as a young naïve peasant woman) moving from the countryside to the urban setting, was interpreted as an incorrect way of exploring space in literature: being devoid of ‘true’ collective revolutionary meanings, the city could no longer give access to any social and political change. Thus, the feminist spatial quest Ding Ling had so painfully explored in her first stories was suddenly considered as outdated, because of its supposedly individualistic (thus reactionary) flavor, while the new pieces she started publishing from 1930 onwards were strongly appreciated by male critics because of their affinity with male revolutionary discourse. Actually, the female characters she developed in her 1930-1933 writings,¹⁰⁷ were seen as “积极的革命运动者 [...] 从个人主义的姿态里 [...] 成为了革命的同情者” (active revolutionaries moving from an individualistic attitude [like the one displayed by her previous literary characters] by becoming supporters of the revolution),¹⁰⁸ thus accepting to enter the new space established by male intellectuals as the only possible site for literature:

丁玲女士自然不能长久站在这空气之外。于是在继续写了几篇以女性的精神苦闷 [...] 丁玲女士开始以 [...] ‘革命与恋爱’的冲突 [写一些短篇小说]. 从一九三一年夏起, 丁玲再不是中国右翼作家联盟阵外的‘同路人’而是阵营内战斗的一员。[...] 在左联的干部中, 她是一个重要的而且最有希望的作家。

Naturally, Miss Ding Ling couldn't go on positioning herself *outside* this general trend. As a result, after continuing writing stories on the depressed state of mind of *nüxing*, she started writing stories about the [...] conflict between love and revolution. [...] From 1931 onwards, Ding Ling was no longer a ‘casual practitioner’ positioning herself *outside* the League of the Leftist Writers, but became an active member positioned *inside* the space of fight shared by an entire group of people. [...] Among the League members, [today] she is the most important and most promising writer.¹⁰⁹

In this rather paradoxical new way of configuring the ideology of space in literary discourse, the *nei/wai* dichotomy was curiously reversed, *nei* marking the perimeter of any legitimate class-oriented proletarian speech and *wai* representing any deviation from this perimeter. Thus, Ding Ling could be accepted as a ‘serious’ writer only if her works proved to be *inside* the new space

¹⁰⁷ Feuerwerker divides Ding Ling's literary production in four distinct phases: the subjective phase (1928-1929); the revolution-oriented phase (1930-1933); the Yan'an representation of reality phase (1936-1949); the final phase (1949-1982), with a long 1957-1975 hiatus caused by the antirightist campaign first and by the Cultural Revolution later. See Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁸ Fang Ying, *Ding Ling lun*, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

¹⁰⁹ Mao Dun 茅盾, *Nü zuojia Ding Ling* 女作家丁玲 (Female writer Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, pp. 254-6. Emphasis added.

politics established by men in literature, her previous spatial configurations focusing on a feminist-oriented speech eventually diminished by male intellectuals as incomplete experiments on ‘delusional women’ who couldn’t embrace the revolution but remained trapped inside their own feelings, that is inside a wrong, useless and feudal (though alternatively seen as capitalistic) configuration of *nei* as domesticity and female sensitivity, implying the configurations she had previously chosen couldn’t have any political implications at all. Once again, men assumed they were the only ones invested with the power to name ‘revolution’ and ‘politics’ as associated to space, self-awareness and liberation, without acknowledging woman’s attempts at finding a space of her own from a gender-specific, subversive standpoint.

Ding Ling’s very first steps in literature had been characterized by the bitter realization of the erasure of woman from literary discourse: “我读稿子, 不读 ‘女’ 字” (I read manuscripts, I don’t read ‘female writing’),¹¹⁰ a Shanghai editor explained to the young author while rejecting her contribution for his magazine in the early 1920s; at the time, no special issue on women writers published by literary magazines could be said to “是为广大妇女群众、妇女解放运动讲语, 并起了作用” (represent any specific discourse on the huge movement of women’s liberation and didn’t have any effect at all [on the masses of women]),¹¹¹ so as to suggest no actual liberation for ‘women’ as a distinct political class. Thus, despite expressing “五四青年们的革命气概” (the revolutionary spirit of the May Fourth youth),¹¹² framed as it was within the “女流的框框” (feminine-style pattern)¹¹³ – that is within a pattern men couldn’t appropriate as their own – her first collection was considered to be ultimately deficient and their author lacking in the ability “构筑起一个客观世界” (to build an objective world) but too often including her own “主观 和感情过剩” (*subjective and excessive* feelings).¹¹⁴ Even according to some Western women scholars’ feminist readings

¹¹⁰ Zhong Daobi 中岛碧, *Ding Ling lun* 丁玲论 (Discussions on Ding Ling), in Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

¹¹¹ Ding Ling 丁玲, *Xie gei nü qingnian zuozhe* 写给女青年作者 (To young women authors), as reported by Zhong Daobi, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

¹¹² Zhong Daobi, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

¹¹³ *Ivi*, p. 527.

¹¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 532. Emphasis added.

Ding Ling's work is organized along a gradually ascending scale, with her maturity as a writer measured in terms of her ability to abandon the subjective, Westernized, 'merely' feminine concerns of her early writings for the 'more important' ones of political revolution and *sinicized* consciousness.¹¹⁵

I do by no means intend to reduce Ding Ling's deliberate revolutionary efforts creating a new kind of socially-committed literature which could incorporate feminist self-assertion to a general discourse on political fight from 1930 to 1933 (but also up to the 1942 Yan'an 'incident').¹¹⁶ What I am saying rather is that the potential eccentricity of the *nüxing* discourse she developed in her first stories was soon underestimated and ultimately drowned by the dominant 'universal' male discourse (and, apparently, also by some Western feminist interpretations of her work along a similar hierarchical scale). From 1930 onwards, no Chinese intellectual seemed to appreciate anymore "the unprecedented audacity with which Ding Ling depicted the conditions and emotional states of women", their "rebellious against authority and convention in unprecedented ways [and...] their conscious self-assertiveness"¹¹⁷ or the ways in which "she unflinchingly dared to explore largely uncharted psychological and moral territory."¹¹⁸ Also, her decision to shift her literary focus from 'individualism' to 'collectivism' itself (gradually turning from *nüxing* to *funü* 妇女 as the main signifier referring to 'woman') was generally seen as influenced and/or determined by her common-law husband Hu Yepin 胡也频's decision to join of the CCP and also by his brutal public execution by the *Guomindang* in 1931.¹¹⁹

Actually, the simultaneous persecution of leftist writers by the *Guomindang* and the political radicalization of literature from 1933 onwards, followed by Ding Ling's own kidnapping perpetrated by the Nationalists and her final escape to the Communist headquarters of Shaanxi in 1936,¹²⁰ forced Ding Ling into a gradual shift of interest "from gender to class and she relegated the

¹¹⁵ Chow, R. *Woman and Chinese Modernity. The Politics of Reading Between East and West*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 162. Chow here refers to Tani Barlow's interpretation of Ding Ling's *Mother* compared to her first-phase stories.

¹¹⁶ "It was a time when she and 'bourgeois' writers like her felt that the ground on which they stood, from which they spoke, had shifted suddenly and forcibly. Cultural figures increasingly saw it as their responsibility to resist Japanese encroachments and rightist reaction." Barlow, Tani E. "Shanghai, Spring 1930. Introductory Note.", in Barlow Tani E. (ed.), *I Myself Am a Woman. Selected Writings of Ding Ling*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989, p. 113.

¹¹⁷ Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *op. cit.*, p. 20; p. 36.

¹¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 36.

¹¹⁹ Zhong Daobi, *op. cit.*, pp. 536-7. Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

¹²⁰ Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9. Yuan Liangjun, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

former to a secondary and contingent priority,”¹²¹ immersing herself more and more in a Communist-oriented discourse. In other words, rather than being a single man determining her fate in life and literature, “history did not leave her many alternatives”¹²² but becoming a revolutionary writer if she wanted her creativity to survive, albeit under the constant threat “of possible or actual martyrdom” during the *Guomindang*’s dictatorship years.¹²³

Yet, if we move away from dichotomizations and do away with “subjective versus objective involvements, personal versus national concerns, pro-foreign versus pro-Chinese literary interests, and Westernized, sex-oriented versus Sinicized, kinship oriented conceptions of femininity,”¹²⁴ we can finally analyse her first collection of stories, and *Ahmao Guniang* among them, as the first significant contribution to the possible construction of *nüxing* as a decolonized subject seeking her own space within the literary tradition and in society by breaking free from any possible individual and collective constraints. More importantly, by moving away from these multiple dichotomies we can focus on “what an extraordinary effort it took for a woman not only to launch herself but to continue as a creative writer”¹²⁵ in a world which never stopped trying to silence her as a woman *and* as a writer.¹²⁶ Thus, we will manage to see Ding Ling’s struggle and willpower to go on undeterred: “真真是三年来，我都是在一种寂寞中从事于写作 [然后]我当然还要努力继续下去，不怕摧残，也不怕寂寞” (I have been scrupulously writing for three years in isolation to give meaning to my own existence [and] I will certainly continue to do so with all my strength and will not be afraid of being destroyed nor isolated).¹²⁷

¹²¹ Liu, Lydia H., “Invention and Intervention”, cit., p. 45.

¹²² Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹²³ *Ivi*, p. 52. Feuerwerker further explains: “Even before Hu’s death, Ding Ling’s own exposure to Marxist ideology was already extending the range of her fiction and turning her attention away from the subjective lives of her characters to the milieu in which they lived”. Thus Feuerwerker gives more credit to Ding Ling for her shift from literary revolution to revolutionary literature, limiting Hu Yeping’s influence while highlighting her choice as autonomous and deliberate.

¹²⁴ Chow, Rey, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, cit., p. 163.

¹²⁵ Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹²⁶ As the 1957 anti-rightist campaign eventually established.

¹²⁷ Ding Ling 丁玲, *Zuozhe ji*. “*Yi ge ren de dansheng*” Xu. 作者记. 《一个人的诞生》序. (A Writer’s Notes. Preface to “The Birth of a Person”), in Yang Liangjun, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

CHAPTER TWO

Watermark: Xiao Hong's *Qi'er* 弃儿 (Abandoned Child) and the fluid resilience of woman

1. The 'small I' of *nüxing* writing

The *Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* 中国左翼作家联盟 (League of the Left-Wing writers) which was founded in 1930 changed literature's horizon dramatically, its new focus being the “大众之神” (spirit of the masses)¹, which became the leading standpoint in literature completely redefining power and tradition anew.

它不再是鲁迅笔下那麻木冷漠、微不足道的芸芸众生，不再是无主名无意识杀人团的集合，相反，它是一个须仰视才见的巨大群体意象，一个占全中国最大人口比重的巨大总体意象。

It was no longer a mass of numb, indifferent and insignificant people as the multitude described by Lu Xun [in his 1920s writings], nor was it an unopinionated and unconscious group of murderers; on the contrary, it was a vast entity writers had to look up to for its competent opinions. It was the biggest [literary] trope [of the time] and the biggest segment of the population, holding the most important role in the whole country.²

Soon, all discourse came to be structured around a new dichotomy, opposing *xiaowo* 小我 (the small I) to *dawo* 大我 (the big I), the individual to the collective, urban intellectuals to the working class/peasantry, and in doing literature “几乎都未能逃脱前者渺小与后者伟大的一抑一扬的模式” (nearly anyone couldn't escape repressing the former as negligible and highlighting the latter as important).³ More importantly, this dichotomy between ‘personal’ and ‘collective’ ended up drowning any possible gender-specific focus, so the “意识形态庇护”⁴ (ideological shield) that

¹ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 102.

² *Ivi*, p. 104.

³ *Ivi*, p. 106.

⁴ *Ivi*, p.108.

nüxing was granted during the May Fourth period as a signifier of rebellion towards the rule of the father “一点点地受到新意识形态新的压制” (was gradually once again neutralized by the new ideology)⁵ created by the League of the Left-wing writers. Consequently, the female gender was granted room *inside* the space politics of national literature only if the woman writer erased her specificity; otherwise, she would be forced

“父子秩序”之外的存在，倒是最有权指责并颠覆这一结构的力量。但就当时的边缘处境而言[...]，只能隐伏在总体及大众那巨大神性光芒背后的阴影中，作为 [...] 政父与大众之间关系结构之外的异己而生存。

outside the father and son's order; generally, she was entitled to criticize but not to overthrow this power structure [and], *pushed to the margins* of the age [...], she could only lie low under the shadow of the great collective deity and fall behind its radiance, *functioning as the difference* positioned outside the relational pattern between the great masses and the rule of the father.⁶

Actually, this new configuration of space politics granted the ‘League of the Sons’ the right to smash the laws of Confucian patriarchy and imperialism by replacing them with yet another version of this law – that of the Fatherland regaining its virility through the fight against Japanese invaders; yet, this space granted nothing to women writers who, despite growing more and more “不满足囿限在女性生活的狭小创作天地” (dissatisfied with the narrow limits imposed on their creative horizon when dealing with *nüxing*'s lives), eventually “汇入时代主潮，便既不复保留女性自我，又不复有反神话的揭示力” (converged with the main literary trends of the time, since they could no longer continue to write from a *nüxing* perspective nor could they oppose with vehemence the mythology of the time).⁷

Consequently, a woman author had to make a choice between either joining proletarian literature and its ‘manly’ space or expressing her *nüxing* self. “选择前者是大众之所愿，那里安全、稳妥，注定不会被历史抛弃 [。。。]; 选择后者则意味着孤军奋战，冒险而未知。萧红选择了后者” (Choosing the former, was what the masses wanted; here she would find reliability

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 109.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 117.

and safety and she would also be certain of not being abandoned by His-tory [...]; choosing the latter would instead mean engaging in a solitary, risky and uncertain fight without any support whatsoever. Xiao Hong chose the latter).⁸

Despite being praised by her contemporaries as an anti-imperialist and resistance writer purportedly aligned with the male writers' anti-Japanese rhetorics,⁹ in post-1949 China Xiao Hong was seen as a minor writer (especially if compared to her mentor and father-like figure, Lu Xun) both by Chinese critics and by Western ones, because of her focus on supposed-to-be 'trivial' and 'sentimental' (read female-centered) matters. Also, she has been strongly criticized

for deviating from masculine-defined principles of nationalism, judged as lacking commitment to nationalism, and [...] for her writing's emotive texture, her work [...] negatively judged by both a patriarchal nationalistic and a Euro-American feminist measuring stick. Xiao Hong's biographic details – her infamous love life, her subjection to abuse by men, her tendency to focus on the quotidian and affective details rather than on themes of revolution and nationalism have led her to be labeled a lesser writer.¹⁰

In other words, Xiao Hong's writing ultimately fell victim of the dichotomized definition of literature based on either a 'small I' or a 'big I' perspective: her 'small I' view on reality from a *nüxing* perspective was seen as limited precisely because it shifted its focus from His-tory to "history with a small 'h'",¹¹ that is a kind of history focused on small details where women as dispossessed species could finally have their voices restored. In trying to reinstate her importance as a revolutionary author, though, many Western feminist critics emphasized her contribution to the possible construction of a decolonized *and* de-westernized Chinese female subjectivity, yet focusing on resistance against death and violence more as specific symbols of anti-Japanese resistance than

⁸ Ivi, p. 182.

⁹ Lu Xun praised her for focusing on “北方人民的对于生的坚强，对于死的挣扎” (northern Chinese people's strong resilience in life and their struggle to fight death), using an “越轨的笔致，又增加了不少明丽和新鲜” (unusual style combined with a fresh and brilliant imagery). Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Shengsi chang. Xu yan* 生死场·序言 (Preface to “Fields of Life and Death”), in Xiao Hong 萧红, *Xiao Hong quanji. Shang*. 萧红全集·上 (Complete works by Xiao Hong, Volume One), Harbin, Harbin chubanshe, 1991, p. 54. Similarly, Hu Feng highlighted her strong depiction of peasants and destitute people in their “重的战斗意志” (imperative struggle and determination) to survive while caught up “在那模糊的血土上” (in a blurred land flowing with blood), praising Xiao Hong for her “纤细的感觉” (refined perception) and “非女性的雄迈的胸境” (bold view as an uncompromising woman), because of her unadorned style focusing on popular themes in a moving and poetical style. Hu Feng 胡风, *Shengsi chang. Du houji* 生死场·读后记 (Afterword to “Fields of Life and Death”), in Xiao Hong 萧红, *Xiao Hong quanji. Shang*, cit., pp. 146-7.

¹⁰ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 185. See note 27, Introduction.

on the fluidity of this resistance, symbolizing woman's (and dispossessed people's) struggle against any forms of invasion, be it imperialism, patriarchy, His-tory, society or poverty alike.¹² For example, Yan Haiping states that Xiao Hong's work focuses on "a multitude of the 'weaker species' [...] caught up in economic brutality and social disintegration amidst colonial occupation,"¹³ thus implying the author's first concern was emphasizing woman's struggle to survive *primarily* as a form of resistance against a specific historical timeframe in a fight which posits woman only as a part of 'the weaker species' opposing resilience to the ravaging pull of His-tory itself. Yet I believe that Xiao Hong's positioning her female characters (and herself) while facing both the specific 1930s history and His-tory as a male-centered, anti-feminist leveler in general was more complex and ambivalent than a victimized woman's cry against the world. As Lydia Liu points out, Xiao Hong used her writing to explore "the conflict between woman and nationalist discourse during the anti-Japanese resistance,"¹⁴ that is why her work was appropriated by national revolution-oriented propaganda, precisely with the aim of dismissing the gender-specific content of her writing, especially as far as her first masterpiece, *Shengsi chang* 生死场 (The Fields of Life and Death) is concerned.¹⁵ More than anything, her stories were focused on details and characters that can question the position of woman as a victimized loser submerged by His-tory and by Japanese occupation alike.

If compared to Ding Ling's, the question Xiao Hong might have posed herself in creating a woman's passage through writing might rather have been: can woman overcome poverty, violence and death by installing writing as a gender-specific site of struggle and resistance exploring first and foremost "the precariousness of the female body"¹⁶ as linked to suffering, isolation and sickness, all the while trying not to see them just as symbols of victimization but trying to go beyond them instead? In particular, by focusing on Xiao Hong's first story, *Qi'er* 弃儿 (Abandoned Child), this chapter aims at analysing her use of space in writing as an ontological landscape where, despite her

¹² "Her dilemma was that she had to face two enemies, rather than one: imperialism and patriarchy. The latter tended to reinvent itself in multifarious forms, and national revolution was no exception." Liu, Lydia H., *Translingual Practice*, cit., p. 211.

¹³ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁴ Liu, Lydia H., *Translingual Practice*, cit., p. 198.

¹⁵ "The majority of critics celebrate the work as a national allegory, a quintessential anti-imperialist novel imbued with patriotic spirit. Consequently one can hardly read Xiao Hong today without being aware of the existence of a highly developed, institutionalized, male-centred critical tradition that has tried to frame and determine the meaning of her work." *Ivi*, pp. 200-1.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 205.

“rootlessness,”¹⁷ inertia and lack of control over destiny caused by pregnancy,¹⁸ woman can finally manage to posit her mobile-yet-solid figure as a watermark permanently seamed within the hem of all sorts of oppressions and histories, big and small alike, symbolized by the flood submerging the city.

Xiao Hong’s own life was constantly marked by displacement and by a constant struggle against physical and emotional deterioration.¹⁹ Yet, far from being the life of a woman merely reduced to a victim by violent men and His-tory alike, hers was an ambivalent existence, where survival against adverse social and political circumstances constituted a deliberate and imperative (albeit chaotic and problematic) form of agency, deeply linked to her basic primary need to overcome starvation and illness.²⁰

China itself plunged into chaos in the 1930s,²¹ with the Japanese starting their gradual invasion of the country in 1931 through the occupation of the three Northeastern provinces, the very region Xiao Hong was born in.²² After organizing the *Manzhouguo* 满洲国 puppet state in the area and attempting at raiding the city of Shanghai by air in 1932, the Japanese expanded their presence in China occupying key cities like Beijing, ultimately managing to control Shanghai and the capital Nanjing in 1937, while the *Guomindang* government fled to Chongqing.²³ From would-be modern state trying to break free from the cultural, social, institutional and technological inferiority if compared to the West, throughout the 1930s China actually turned into a semi-colony of Japan and into a place ravaged by violence, where writers who deliberately chose the path of resistance against occupation literally and *literarily* explored the struggle for survival and decolonization as a possible form of agency. Yet, unlike her male colleagues, Xiao Hong engaged an ambivalent fight,

¹⁷ Cannella, Shannon, M., *The Path Towards the Other: Relational Subjectivity in Modern Chinese Literature 1919-1945*, Columbia University, New York. Phd Dissertation, 2014, p.220. [online] URL https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/download/fedora_content/download/ac:168509/content/CannellaRelationalSubjectivityFINAL.pdf (Last access: 2019-01-20, 10:45 UTC).

¹⁸ “Compared with the male body, the female body signifies a woman’s lack of control over her destiny, not so much because sexual desire is an animal instinct as because patriarchy determines the meaning of desire and chastity and hence the female body serves the interest of men.” Liu, Lydia H., *Translingual Practice*, cit., p. 205.

¹⁹ “the passing of youth [...] marked the beginning of a period of agonies, the effect of which was a progressive deterioration of her emotional and physical health.” Goldblatt, Howard, *Hsiao Hung, op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁰ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-9.

²¹ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p.13.

²² Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

²³ *Ibidem*.

seemingly associated to nationalistic propaganda but ultimately concerned more with the possibility for woman to resist men's (Chinese and Japanese alike) attempt at colonizing her body and spirit than with the celebration of her (father) homeland.²⁴

Despite her reluctance to become an official member of any political party or literary association,²⁵ Xiao Hong became a revolutionary figure in literature and a fighter in real life; finding herself caught up in a world reduced to chaotic mobility, where fortitude was imperative not to succumb to death, she tried to write her own passage through chaos and suffering, finding an agency of her own in the imaginative space of writing as a possible site of “mutual breath”²⁶ between woman and landscape, despite the latter constantly trying to annihilate the former, and between people, the land functioning as “the precarious yet tangible link among those in their life and death struggles,”²⁷ while revealing *nüxing* in the ‘small I’ of writing.

²⁴ “I am never keen on the idea of homeland. Whenever people talk about home, I cannot help being moved, but I am perfectly aware that I had become ‘homeless’ even before the Japanese set their feet on the land.” Xiao Hong 萧红, *Shiyan zhi ye* 失眠之夜 (Night without eyes), in *Xiao Hong* 萧红, *Xiao Hong quanji. Xia* 萧红全集·下 (Collected Works by Xiao Hong, Volume Two), pp. 1057-1060, as reported by Liu, Lydia H., *Translingual Practice*, cit., p. 211.

²⁵ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 13. Liu, Lydia H., *ibidem*.

²⁶ Cannella, Shannon, M., *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁷ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

2. A life on the run

Née Zhang Naiying 张迺莹, Xiao Hong was born on June 11 in Hulan, North East China,²⁸ in 1911, when the Manchu dynasty was overthrown.²⁹ Her childhood was marked by the death of her mother and by her father's lack of love,³⁰ indifference and constant beatings.³¹ The only one who showed a fond affection towards her in the family was her grandfather,³² who unfortunately died when she was in her twenties,³³ though his fight against social injustice left a permanent mark on her memory.³⁴ As a young girl, at seventeen Naiying left Hulan to go to school in Harbin and receive a formal education,³⁵ but she always went back home during summer and winter breaks, witnessing her father's cruelty towards peasants.³⁶ All the while, it became clear to her how women were discriminated against and constantly belittled both within the traditional Chinese family and in Chinese society in general.³⁷

From the fall of 1928 onwards, she studied in Harbin, a big cosmopolitan city of Manchuria³⁸ rivaling Shanghai in terms of culture and commerce,³⁹ as it was a major stop in the Transiberian

²⁸ Luo Binji 骆宾基, *Xiao Hong xiao zhuan* 萧红小传 (Small Biography of Xiao Hong), Shanghai, Jianwen shudian, 1975, p. 2. Originally written in 1947.

²⁹ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁰ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-4.

³¹ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., pp. 174-5.

³² Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³³ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p.18.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 21.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 20.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 21.

³⁷ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

³⁸ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 23.

Railway Line and “the city in North East China most susceptible to Western influences.”⁴⁰ Once in Harbin, Xiao Hong became a student at the First Municipal Middle School for Girls,⁴¹ where she was involved in a political demonstration against Japan’s attack on the Northeastern region.⁴² As a young girl, she was prone to loneliness and interested in painting, “an escape from the ugliness she saw in the actions and attitudes of so many people around her in Hulan.”⁴³ In Harbin, she was also introduced to the new May Fourth literature, which she loved reading in the literary supplement of *Guoji xiebao* 国际协报 (International Gazette). To her, literature soon became

幸福慰藉[...], 那是她的孤寂精神上的珍贵伴侣他。她認識的世界, 廣闊了。她的心魂已經漸漸的和那一時期的社會解放的思潮連結起來 [。 . . . 但] 在她還只是這麼一個家庭的環子, 以及親戚屯子的週圍生活, 她自己還沒走進社會的核心, 那距離還遙遠。

a happy consolation [...], it was her most precious friend in her solitary lifestyle. Her knowledge of the world suddenly widened. Her mind gradually started absorbing the ideas of emancipation of the society of the time [... though] her life was still horribly confined within the enclosure of her household and the surrounding boundary of her family village. She had not accessed society’s core yet, *its space still afar in the distance*.⁴⁴

She was soon to discover that space as being brutal and hostile towards woman, constantly denying her presence and forcing her to be on the run and to literally escape from reality, hopefully to find a new, alternative space for herself: as she returned home to Hulan for the school winter break in 1929, she discovered her father had arranged a marriage for her with a high-ranking landlord. This

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴² Xiao Hong herself spoke about the students’ demonstration in her short autobiographical story *Yi tiao tielu de wan cheng* 一条铁路的完成 (The Completion of a railroad): “1928 年, 日本帝国主义为加紧对东北的掠夺, 与东三省反动当局勾结攫取修造吉五(吉林至五常)、长大(长春至大赉)、逃索(逃南至索伦)、延海(延吉至海林)、吉会(吉林至朝鲜会宁)等五条铁路, 引起了东三省广大人民的抗议, 掀起“反五路”斗争。哈尔滨在中共哈尔滨市委领导下, 于 11 月 9 日发动三千多学生示威游行, 遭反动当局镇压, 打伤学生三百多名”。(In 1928, Japanese imperialist forces started intensifying their plunderings on the *dongbei* region and, with the collusion of the Chinese reactionary authorities, they set up and occupied five railroad lines, from the Jilin to Wuchang province, from Changchun to Dalai, from Taonan to Suolun, from Yanji to Hailin and from Jilin to Chaoxian and Huihing. This gave rise to an extensive mass protest in the whole Dongbei region, giving raise to the “Oppose the Five Railroad Lines” protest. In Harbin, more than 3,000 students organized a demonstration on November 9th with the help of the Communist leadership of the municipality. The protest was silenced by the authorities’ repression and more than 300 students were injured). Xiao Hong 萧红, *Yi tiao tielu de wan cheng* 一条铁路的完成 (The Completion of a railroad), in Xiao Hong 萧红, *Xiao Hong wangji*. Xia 萧红全集·下 (Complete Works by Xiao Hong. Volume 2). Harbin, Harbin chubanshe, 1991, p.1070.

⁴³ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁴ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 21. Emphasis added.

meant she would “沉落在封建的魔手里去了” (sink into a feudal nightmare)⁴⁵ and forced to become a meek, devoted wife and daughter in law. She only had one desire left: fleeing.⁴⁶ And flee she did, at the age of twenty, never to return to Hulan and to her family again: her life of constant mobility and fleeting rest had begun. Her rejection of the path her father had selected for her resulted in hazard and precariousness, as she couldn't ensure any solid economic prospects for herself, but still her choice was that of a non-victimized woman, “paradoxically beyond and bound to her primary needs.”⁴⁷

Refusing her father's decision and taking life in her own hands, in 1929 Naiying went back to Harbin moving in with a young intellectual named Li 李, allegedly a university student of law and politics or perhaps a teacher she had met in the First Municipal Middle School for Girls.⁴⁸ They shared a hotel room in Harbin first, then they went to Beijing together, where she enrolled to an art school but soon discovered Li was already married.⁴⁹ Staying true to her decision not to give in to patriarchal oppression, between 1931 and 1932 Naiying broke up with Li but didn't seek for her family's help, settling in a Harbin hotel instead as a pregnant and penniless young woman, “旁徨、渺茫，無所憑藉” (vacillating, uncertain, with nobody and nothing to rely on).⁵⁰ Her condition as an abandoned woman deserted by her lover and by life was echoed by the Mukden (now called Shenyang, in the Liaoning province) incident, through which the Japanese explicitly started their invasion in China:

On the evening of September 18, 1931, an explosion outside the city of Mukden (in Liaoning) destroyed a section of track of the South Manchurian Railway line. The ruling warlord of the area, Chang Hsüeh-liang, had pledged his loyalty to the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, and the Japanese vested interests in Manchuria were beginning to feel the pinch. Although they had earlier gained control of Dairen and Port Arthur and enjoyed broad privileges in all of Manchuria, still they were heavily outnumbered, and strong anti-Japanese feelings were making their control of the region less and less tenable.⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*. Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁴⁸ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 25.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 31-2. See Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p.26.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*. See Smedley, Agnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-33.

In the end, the Japanese managed to settle in Manchuria founding the state of *Manzhouguo* in 1932, with former Qing dynasty Emperor Puyi 溥仪 as its Chief Executive.⁵² This incident started a national war against the Japanese which lasted for the following fourteen years.

3. Abandoned prisoner coming to life again

Meanwhile, Naiying lived as a vagrant.⁵³ Unwilling to go back home to her father and to give in to his feudal ways, she finally found a room in a hotel run by a white Russian man near the banks of the Songhua river, soon becoming “a virtual prisoner in this hotel room, spending the winter of 1931-1932 there as a cold and despondent cast-off: not only was she unable to pay for her room and board, but she was reputedly by then addicted to opium, conveniently supplied by the designing hotel proprietor.”⁵⁴

As the river flooded the whole city in the autumn of 1932, the pregnant girl literally ended up being imprisoned in her room, so she decided to write to the editor of the city’s newspaper, *Guoji xiebao*, to ask for help.⁵⁵ Prone to support fellow underdogs, the newspaper editor and two writers went to see if they could rescue her; among them, an intellectual named Sanlang 三郎 actually managed to get her out of the hotel⁵⁶ by taking advantage of the chaos caused by the flood and leaving the premises through the windows to reach a rescue boat.⁵⁷ This was the first time Naiying

⁵² Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-7.

⁵³ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*. According to Luo Binji, Naiying walked up and down the stairs of the hotel covering her belly in embarrassment because she was pregnant, until she decided to lock herself up in the room to avoid the scornful look of the hotel lodgers and housekeeper. Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 34. Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁵⁷ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, both citations p. 137.

and Sanlang, the soon-to-be Xiao Jun 萧军, met.⁵⁸ It was also the first time Xiao Hong came in contact with the revolutionary minds of men who had joined the Communist party to fight for justice and survival in a hostile society. These ideas surely had a strong impact on Naiying, herself being “一個孤立的流寇，失停了所有的憑藉，帶着渾身的傷痕，而還是不屈於別外一個命運的小女” (an isolated rebel who had lost all means to survive and had been badly scarred all over her body, but still had the youthful and fierce energy of a woman who didn't want to give in to fate).⁵⁹

Naiying and Sanlang began cohabiting soon after, their survival apparently granted by Sanlang's fixed salary as a contributor to the *Guoji xiebao*; Xiao Hong later delivered the child she was carrying in her belly, giving it up for adoption and leaving it in the care of the hospital staff.⁶⁰ When she finally managed to become a regular contributor to the *Guoji xiebao* herself,⁶¹ thus embracing writing as a means of survival and as a spiritual nourishment, Sanlang's bad temper⁶² made them lose their accommodation as well as his regular income.⁶³ As the couple moved to Market Street, Xiao Jun managed to become a teacher giving private lessons to students.⁶⁴ Their writing life suddenly flourished and in 1933 they wrote a joint anthology of their writings.⁶⁵ As the Japanese were arresting many and other young people started joining the guerrilla forces,⁶⁶ they decided to flee again, this time to Qingtao, never to return to Manchuria again.

On the whole, Xiao Hong spent six years in Harbin, in the same period the Japanese took control over the entire Manchuria.⁶⁷ She gained independence from her father, escaped from imprisonment and managed to come to life again by becoming a writer, yet her physical health was deeply

⁵⁸ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁶⁰ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 58. Xiao Hong spent a whole year in hospital between 1931 and 1932 after giving birth to her child because she “沒有錢出院” (didn't have the money to leave), so she was simply left there by doctors, and in the hospital “冷冷清清的過了年” (a whole desolate and deserted year passed).

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 42.

⁶² Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-9.

⁶³ *Ivi*, pp. 29-30.

⁶⁴ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁶⁵ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 31-2.

disrupted by her constant drifting and the brutal abuse caused by Xiao Jun's violence.⁶⁸ Later on, when the Japanese targeted them because of their cultural activities, she and Xiao Jun moved to Shanghai in 1934, where they met Lu Xun.⁶⁹ The famous writer showed great enthusiasm for Xiao Hong's talent: his patronage suddenly turned her into "a leading writer of resistance"⁷⁰ against Japan, thanks to her novel *Shengsi chang*.

A first glimpse of resistance as a key theme of Xiao Hong's writing can already be found in her debut story, *Qi'er* 弃儿, written and published in 1933 by the *Arts and Literature* weekly supplement of *Guoji xiebao*.⁷¹ What makes *Qi'er* particularly interesting, though, is its coming *before* the outbreak of the national rhetoric propaganda developed in the late 1930s by male writers of resistance, thus positioning Xiao Hong's tale of an abandoned woman within a 'small I/small h' framework. Apparently devoid of any political meaning, *Qi'er* revolves around a woman protagonist ambivalently resisting against *and* connecting to the outside threat of the flood invading the city; the absence of any direct and explicit reference to the foreign invaders turns the story into an intimate tale on human, animal and objectival suffering alike, making the woman's point of view particularly poignant both for its resistance to appropriation of this multiple Other and for her own fluid approach to suffering and survival. Moving beyond nationalist fight, *Qi'er* ultimately proves to be a feminist form of resistance against any forms of violence and death, including natural disasters, however echoing actual His-tory they might prove to be.⁷²

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 32.

⁶⁹ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p.137.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p.136.

⁷¹ Ivi, pp. 136-7. "She began her writing as a homeless female when she wrote to *Arts and Literature* for help. From the moment she started publishing as a writer, she had been fleeing from one place to another, often only weeks or miles beyond the reach of the Japanese military operations." Ivi, p.147.

⁷² "Written a year and eight months after Japanese forces attacked and took control of North East China, such a life and death predicament as rendered in fiction is no mere product of an imagination speculating about the human condition in the abstract, but the evocation of an actual state of life in the nightmare of a turbulent His-tory. The economy of China's northeast region, including both urban and rural areas, was in total crisis, while social institutions and moral fabrics, repressive and oppressive when they operated, were now barely maintainable even as the façade of a minimal stability necessary for daily life to continue." Ivi, p.138.

4. *Abandoned Child* and migrant resistance

The protagonist of the story, Qin 芹, is a woman “caught in natural and human-made disasters.”⁷³ Like Naiying herself, she is pregnant and has been abandoned by her lover, all alone in a hotel “of a collapsing city in the midst of a flood.”⁷⁴ Abandonment marks her presence in life as an outsider: young, friendless, outcast because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she transits in an isolated space while the world outside is turning into a shapeless blot surrounded by water. Throughout the story, the flood ravaging the city and surrounding the protagonist who is blocked inside comes to symbolize a space of loss this woman needs to wade through, in order to find land again and resist oblivion. Literally trapped in a liminal space, detached from the world outside which is itself vanishing, the woman experiences space as a form of transition from water to mainland, a limbo on the threshold of life.

The story starts with the world reduced to a space effaced by the heavy rain turned into flood:⁷⁵ “水就像远天一样，没有边际的漂漾着，一片片的日光在水面上浮动” (The water, like the horizon, flowed on endlessly as patches of sunlight sparkled on its surface).⁷⁶ Water is the very first image we see, functioning as a space of emptiness where everything and everyone is engulfed and disappears: “大人、小孩和包裹青绿颜色” (Adults, children, packages, all blurs of dark green).⁷⁷ Shapes are being erased by water, washing them through and through until they vanish into shapelessness. Then a second image appears, that of Qin, “一个肚子凸的馒头般的女人” (a woman whose belly protruded like a steamed bun).⁷⁸ She is looking outside the window, staring at

⁷³ Ivi, p.136.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ According to Yan Haiping, the opening of the story is “an evocation of the modern world”, that is an echo of the disruptive chaos China had been turned into by its semi-colonial, soon-to-be invaded space. Ivi, p. 137.

⁷⁶ Xiao Hong 萧红, *Qi'er* 弃儿 (Abandoned Child), in Xiao Hong, *Xiao Hong quanji. Shang*, cit., p. 148. Unless otherwise stated, the translations used here are based on Dooling and Torgson’s rendering of the story. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*. Translated by Dooling Amy; Torgson Kristina, in Dooling Amy; Torgson Kristina, *op. cit.*, pp. 347-361.

⁷⁷ Xiao Hong, *Qi'er*, cit., p. 148. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 347.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

the landscape “没有目的地望着” (stared out vacantly),⁷⁹ herself an empty presence watching the vision of the flood erasing everything, as if she was absorbing water, literally letting it in, seeping through her eyes. What we see is a vision of the room becoming an abandoned space where both ambience and people are devoid of substance: as the innkeeper comes to warn Qin about the tenants’ imminent fate – being trapped forever inside the building as water reaches every corner of the town drowning all things and humans alike – the only reaction Qin can master is sending back her “脸上没有表情” (expressionless face) to the man, whose clothes seem to echo that same vacant stare, “像一条被倒空了的布袋” (hanging on him like an empty cloth sack).⁸⁰ Faces, clothes, buildings, everything seems to be deflated, life leaking out of them in a looming trap of death.

Yet the awareness of pain slowly creeps in, its intensity mimicking the flood in its stubborn persistence: both the space of the room with the woman trapped inside and the fleeting space outside morph into fluid-like shapes opposing their desperate, primal resilience to the imminence of death: “又夹着从窗口不时冲进来嘈杂的声音” (Loud noises continually poured in through the window),⁸¹ as people and animals still resisting the flood cry their lungs out, filling Qin’s heart. This pouring of noises from the outside space into the inside triggers her thoughts, which suddenly come rushing in: “她似乎非想下去不可，像外边的大水一样，不可抑止地想” (She could no longer check the flow of her thoughts; like the flood outside, she couldn’t restrain herself),⁸² while staring at “天棚的水影” (the water ripples reflected on the ceiling).⁸³ The urge to resist imminent death is enacted by her internalizing water through the immersion into her own water-like stream of thoughts and memories. This makes the isolated patch of land symbolized by the hotel room and the water outside conflate in a vision of survival against the ravaging pull of oblivion:

it is a time and place where humans and non-humans are barely distinguishable in their struggles to live. The floodwater, which turns an unnamed urban site into an ominous turbulence of currents, is captured as the organizing feature of such a time and place where all spheres of society collapse into a moving rupture. All forms of life struggle on the edge of unknown abyss, and the distance between life and death could disappear at any moment just like the distance

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 348.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, pp. 148-9. See *Ibidem*.

⁸² *Ibidem*.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

between the rising water and the sinking air that close in an instant when lives are abandoned and drowned.⁸⁴

Despite the distance between the horizon and the flooding water seems to have fallen down, water's presence grows stronger and stronger, closing in on the woman, who literally becomes the only human presence in the entire hotel: as everyone else leaves the premises, Qin is left on her own, abandoned in the empty building constantly threatened by water coming in. Not only the flood has reached the higher floors, but water has suddenly turned all creatures on the outside into helpless prisoners, the landscape reduced to an oppressive space of fluid annihilation. A pig tries to struggle its way out of the flood, only to be trapped once again in its lethal embrace: “水在它的身边一个连环跟着一个连环地转，猪被围在水的连环里，就如一头苍蝇或是一头蚊虫被绕入蜘蛛的网丝似的，越挣扎，越感觉网丝是无边际的大” (The water rippled about the pig in rings, encircling it like a fly or a mosquito caught in a spider's web. The more it struggled, the more the web expanded).⁸⁵ No creature nor substance is spared by water, not even the buildings, whose basic structure is mimicked by water, suddenly turning from liquid into solid: “两侧楼房高大空间就是峭壁，这里的水就是山涧” (The buildings on both sides of the road towered high, like mountain cliffs; the water flowed between them like a mountain stream).⁸⁶ The whole vision of water and buildings alike transforms into “深山” (endless mountains) reaching the woman trapped inside the hotel room, the whole solid blur of the watery landscape “吓跑” (looming before her).⁸⁷ Everything is submerged by the presence of water and Qin, weakened by pregnancy, can only listen to this firm and strong flow all night, beating “胜利” (triumphantly) through the streets.⁸⁸ Though fluid, water inflexibly turns into a solid web of oblivion, effacing the whole city and the creatures trapped inside it.

⁸⁴ Yan, Haiping, *op cit.*, p. 137.

⁸⁵ Xiao Hong, *Qi'er*, cit., p. 149. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 348.

⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 150. My translation.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 349.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

As Qin is rescued by strangers and temporarily manages to leave the insulated space of the room, she starts longing for alternative space, though the outside area now is reduced to a place where shapes seem to have all been washed away, and roads have turned into rivers full of desperate people on desperate boats: “江堤沉落到水底去了，沿路的小房将睡在水底，人们在房顶蹲着。小汽船江鹰般地飞来了，又飞过去了，留下排成蛇阵的弯弯曲曲的波浪在翻卷。那个女人的小船行近波浪，船沿和波浪相接触着摩擦着” (The riverbanks had sunken under water, and the small homes that once bordered them were now resting on the riverbed. Little boats flew back and forth like river hawks, sending waves rolling like slithering snakes. They crashed against the sides of the boat carrying the woman).⁸⁹ While shapes are drained of all substance (“船在浪中打转，全船的人脸上没有颜色的惊恐” (As the boat tossed about on the waves, the color drained from the faces of the frightened passengers on board)⁹⁰, Qin still hopes she could “走上陆地去。但是陆地在哪里” (step on dry land. But where was there any dry land?)⁹¹ Feeling on the verge of death by drowning, Qin desperately longs for *terra firma*, a space for herself where she can exist (and resist) without being erased, a permanent space where she can finally breathe, but she doesn't know where to find it nor how to cling on to things, her fingers “指还是四处张着” (unable to find anything to hold on to).⁹²

Thoughts of the man she has just met, Beili 蓓力, suddenly come to her mind and her eyes start looking for him, scanning every boat on sight to find a trace of his presence. Yet water-like fluid pain blurs her vision and prevents her from perceiving things and people with clarity: the flood makes everything and everyone turn into colourless outlines, sketches erased by water's mark on the land, so she can only “gaze in paralysis at their looming doom.”⁹³ This desperate vision on the destiny of weak people caught in the fury of the flood is a possible reference to His-tory, functioning as a metonymy for Northern China and its soil ravaged by the Japanese in the early 1930s, before the occupation of the main cities of the country took place in 1937: “A world war was spreading in deadly floodwater, claiming everything in its way including, in its Asian theater, the

⁸⁹ Xiao Hong, *Qi'er*, cit., p. 150. My translation.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 350.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² *Ivi*, p.151. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 350.

⁹³ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

Chinese land and its inhabitants as part of the necessary ‘weak species’.”⁹⁴ Qin’s gazing at the doom of poor people in Harbin echoes Xiao Hong’s witnessing the inexorable invasion of Manchuria from 1931 onwards, though it also implies multiple forms of doom not necessarily related to His-tory.

Chance finally makes Beili and Qin meet amidst the creatures desperately fighting the flood. Being both destitute, unmarried and outcasts and, what’s even worse, being Qin pregnant and bearing the child of another man, their coming together can only result in temporary solutions turning their life into a mimicking of water in its constant and inevitable mobility. As society can’t and won’t accept their living together, their attempt at finding shelter somewhere side by side is doomed to fail right from the start, their very presence constantly condemned to erasure, other people’s judgement reducing them to “地面上旅行的两条长长的影子” (two long shadows moving across the ground) who “在浸渐的消混” (gradually faded).⁹⁵ After being diminished by water’s threat by drowning, the ‘weak species’ is also downsized into mere human sketches by other people, because of their ‘unacceptable’ friendship; consequently, Qin has to move back to Fei’s residence, where she used to stay in the past, while Beili finds lodging in a room near a restaurant. They have nowhere to spend time together, and the only space they can inhabit as friends, possibly lovers, is “街口覆放着一只小船” (the overturned boat in the street),⁹⁶ that is an empty shell capsized by the flood. Life has been turned upside down by water; there is no place to actually stand in or walk to for outcasts, no *terra firma* where their unfinished sketch-like silhouettes can finally turn into a real presence: “公园也被水淹没了，实在无处可去，左右的街巷也被水淹没了，他们两颗相爱的心也像有水在追赶着似的” (Even the park was submerged now and there was really nowhere else to go; all the nearby streets and alleyways had been flooded as well; the water seemed to be running after their love-filled hearts).⁹⁷ Yet love is stronger than any divisive pull water and society alike might impose on them, so they decide to move in together in Fei’s residence, though their illegal status as unmarried couple is constantly threatened by the fury of the flood once again, symbolizing society and its rules. Their wavering presence is thus reduced to that of animals associated to water, so as to emphasize their helplessness while facing the flood and their outcast status while facing

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁵ Xiao Hong, *Qi’er*, cit., p. 153. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 352.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*. My translation.

society: “他的脚被捏得作痛醒转来，身子就是一条弯着腰的长虾，从藤椅间钻了出来，藤椅就像一只虾笼似的被蓓力丢在那里了” (The pinching awoke Beili and he squirmed about like a big shrimp before finding his way out of the chair, as if it were a great shrimp cage that he had fallen into),⁹⁸ looking at the sky which “鱼白的天色，从玻璃窗透进来” (as white as the underside of a fish, shone through the window), his body all “变作一条弯着腰的长虾” (curled up like a shrimp in a trap).⁹⁹ Here Xiao Hong emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and animals, equating human and animal destinies in their struggle to gain survivorship. Qin and Beili are aware their living together can only be a temporary solution, as there can be no place for unmarried pregnant women nor for unmarried couples in soon-to-be invaded, semi-colonial China, their mobile resistance functioning as a sort of refugee-like migration from land to land, or rather, from fragment of land to fragment of land, as humans not lost in the flood yet but constantly on the verge of drowning. Their lack of a firm solid space to inhabit is symbolized by the patch of drowned park they often go to, now reduced to a flickering light still resisting the flood:

公园被水淹没以后，只有一个红电灯在那个无人的地方自己燃烧。秋天的夜里，红灯在密结的树梢下面，树梢沉沉的，好像在静止的海上面发现了萤火虫似的，他们笑着，跳着，拍着手，每夜都是来向着这萤火虫在叫跳一回……

After the park disappeared under the water, there was only a single red electric light which kept burning in that desolate place. Seeing a red light hanging low beneath the thick tree branches on an autumn night, was like discovering a firefly in the middle of the calm ocean. They laughed, jumped and clapped their hands and every night they went back to the firefly light to shout and jump to its rhythm.¹⁰⁰

Life still beats its shimmering drum despite death and disappearance relentlessly haunting it down. Pain can give no respite, though, pregnancy kicking in with its violent life-amidst-death pull, tearing at Qin's body and soul. The threat of society erasing her as an outcast is symbolized by a new outpour of water coming from the sky: “雨在天空跑，铺着石头的路，雨的线在上面翻飞，雨就像要把石头压碎似的，石头又非反抗到底不可” (The rain was pouring from the sky,

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 154. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 354.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*. See *Ivi*, p. 353. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Xiao Hong, *Qi'er*, cit., pp. 155-6. My translation.

spreading on the stone-paved avenue. Strings of rain fluttered as if to crush the stones to pieces though they resisted to the very end).¹⁰¹ Water is ripping the world open again, closing in on woman to deny her survival, yet Qin starts crying out, her screams growing louder as if to rage war against the water raining down, the sound “从窗口射下来，经过成排的雨线，压倒雨的响声” (shot through the window, past the straight beating of rain, smothering the sound of rain).¹⁰² Woman proves to be stronger than water and its oblivion drive, her cry a form of resistance against vanishing and shapelessness. Though the situation at Fei’s residence gets worse and Qin is eventually threatened with eviction, she still fights against death and water trying to pull her down. The flood wants to leave its mark on the world, on the room and on the very soul of woman, yet she gathers all her strength to fight it, her resilience opposing fluids – mainly sweat and tears – to the inevitability of water inundating land, and leveling all space down: “她流着汗，也流着泪” (Sweat and tears flowed from her),¹⁰³ her own body pouring out liquid as if to submerge water with her own self, pregnant with new life on the verge of oozing out, like a river waiting to solidify into shape again.

As Qin is accompanied to the hospital by Beili, she hopes she might find a space where she can rest, yet all she can find is a cart, her swollen body reduced to “一个龌龊的包袱或是一个垃圾箱” (a discarded sack or a bundle of trash),¹⁰⁴ a non-entity almost devoid of life destroyed by poverty and suffering: Beili’s first attempt to let her be admitted into hospital fails. When she’s finally admitted despite not having any money for the fee, she momentarily finds some shelter in sleep, only to wake up submerged by liquid again, “急得汗水染透了衾枕” (growing so anxious that sweat soaked her quilt and pillow).¹⁰⁵ This time, the water flowing out of her own body functions as a vision of impending annihilation, the woman turning into a liquid herself as life seems to run out both inside and outside of her. As she finally gives birth to a baby girl, her almost lifeless body instantly sets into motion, enacting her to embrace a life of mobility once again: she eventually decides to flee the room knowing that her refugee-like status prevents her from raising any claim to the child, her illegal status as unmarried mother stricken with poverty denying her all possibility of

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 156. My translation.

¹⁰² *Ivi*, p.157. My translation.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*,. cit., p. 356.

¹⁰⁴ *Ivi*, p. 158. See *Ivi*, p. 357.

¹⁰⁵ *Ivi*, p. 159. See *Ivi*, p. 358.

keeping the child. She can only retreat into the adjacent room, a thick wall now standing between mother and child and signaling two female destinies being severed by class and social rules: reduced to a quivering shadow,¹⁰⁶ that is a woman whose presence is denied by society, Qin can only press her ear against the wall to listen to the baby's cry as the world comes ravaging her helpless presence with the brutality of dire poverty. This intrusion of the world is symbolized by a memento left by the flood on the child, a mark water leaves on the newly-born skin: “孩子生下来哭了五天了躺在冰凉的板床上，涨水后的蚊虫成群片地从气窗挤进来，在小孩的脸上身上爬行” (The baby cried for five days after its birth as it lay on the cold planks of the cribs. Mosquitos, newly hatched after the flood, swarmed through the fanlight and crawled over the baby's face and body).¹⁰⁷ Water's mark on the baby bears witness to the impossible coexistence of mother and child in poverty, as it would only cause the child to be engulfed by starvation and death forever. Thus, the wall separating them also functions as a token for Qin's awareness of this impossibility: as she talks to another woman, herself in turn reduced to a set of irregular patches disappearing under the water of pain (“她黄脸上涂着白粉，粉下隐现黄黑的斑点”，her sickly complexion masked with white powder, yellow and black blotches showing through),¹⁰⁸ Qin makes up her mind and opts for giving up the child for adoption. Once her decision is made, she initially feels the tears which, like water, “在被里横流” (flowed on under the quilt),¹⁰⁹ only to become solid again as she gathers up her strength, “眼泪和笑容凝结的笑着” (the tears and smile coalescing into a hardened, frozen smile).¹¹⁰ The fluidity of pain is turned into a solid by her firm decision, as the baby is permanently severed from her life of strife and uncertainty. When the baby finally leaves the hospital “包袱里的小被褥给孩子包好” (wrapped securely in a quilt)¹¹¹ her exit into the outside world marks the possibility for her to claim permanent survival, as opposed to the mobility her biological mother's living conditions would force her into.

¹⁰⁶ *Ivi*, p. 160. See *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*. My translation.

¹⁰⁸ *Ivi*, p.161. see *Ivi*, p. 359.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*. My translation.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*. My translation.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 161. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 360.

Qin's revelation of abandoning the child is welcomed by Beili, who proudly thinks she is “个时代的女人” (a woman of the time),¹¹² a truly modern woman who doesn't see motherhood and reproductive functions as something inherently defining her femininity. On the contrary, faced with the prospect of losing her child to starvation for want of means to sustain its survival, Qin's opting for the abandonment of the child not only proves to be “忠实” (truthful)¹¹³ but also solid and sound, as her choice will grant her own survival as well as the child's, now sheltered in somebody else's home.

Once birth and adoption are both dealt with, the hospital room can no longer function as a space where Qin can find temporary rest; on the contrary, this momentary *terra firma* forces her into immobility once again: stricken by poverty, Qin is literally left with nothing, as all her meager belongings were destroyed by the flood during the journey to the hospital. She has no money to pay for her stay nor clothes to wear, so while the other women leave one by one after giving birth to their children, she ends up being abandoned by doctors and nurses too, who barely tolerate her presence there out of pity without ever checking on her health once. Lost in this limbo, she can't leave, for this would mean facing the world stark naked, but she can't stay either, her lingering in the hospital functioning as a sort of refugee-camp stay, turning her into a 'floating' woman, doomed not to be accepted as a 'regular' citizen like legal residents of a city are.¹¹⁴ Left on her own, she can only resort to memories to find some tiny form of resistance against the harsh reality: like watermarks appearing on the wall, these memories can shed light on her past, giving hope for the future. Also, they can help Qin see her own reflection through shadows, her personal space of resistance constituting a thin thread of resilient humanity in a ghostly fading world: “芹一个人住在产妇室里，整夜的幽静，只有她一个人享受窗上大树招摇细碎的月影，满墙走着，满地走着” (Alone in the ward at night, she enjoyed watching the moonlight cast shadows of the thin tree branches through the window, shadows that crawled over the walls and onto the floor).¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ivi, p. 162. See *Ibidem*.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*. My translation.

¹¹⁴ Although the definition of *liudong renkou* 流动人口 (floating population) specifically refers to post-Maoist China migrant population from the countryside to the urban areas, I think Qin's status in the whole story bears a striking similarity to that a 'floating' migrant in her/his relation to space and residence status. See Yusuf, Shahid; Saich, Anthony (eds.), *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies and Policies*, Washington D.C., The World Bank, 2008, p. 70. See also Zhang, Li, "Interpreting Definitional Complexities of China's *Non-hukou* Migrants", in Wong, Tai-Chee; Han, Sun Sheng; Zhang, Hongmei (eds.), *Population Mobility, Urban Planning and Management in China*, Cham-Heidelberg-NewYork-Dordrecht-London, Springer, 2015, pp. 41-2.

¹¹⁵ Xiao Hong, *Qi'er*, cit., pp. 162-3. See Xiao Hong, *Abandoned Child*, cit., p. 361.

Remembering her dead grandfather, the only person that ever loved her, she can find herself again, in the filigree space in-between shadows, her bare consciousness being the only grain of hope left.

As Beili eventually comes back empty-handed, despite not having the money for the hospital fee Qin finally decides it is time to leave: her temporary rest has come to an end, for no permanent land can be granted to poor, ‘irregular’ people forced into endless spatial mobility by society. Stripped bare of everything but still holding her subjectivity as a woman and an outcast, Qin resumes her floating life on the move again, determined to leave her mark on existence despite the violent pull of the world threatens to drown her forever. The path of the future stretches out before her, as bare and destitute as she is: “她没有小孩也没有汽车，只有眼前的一条大街要她走，就像一片荒田要她开拔一样” (She didn’t have a baby, nor a car, just the road that stretched before her eyes like a barren plot of land waiting to be conquered).¹¹⁶ This barren road appearing in the end symbolizes both the character’s unfinished subjectivity as a woman and the space of writing as a possible form of resistance against the manly space of the nation for the woman author. The story ends with both Qin and Beili reduced to shadows and yet simultaneously refusing to give in to the ravaging pull of the world: “他们这一双影子，一双刚强的影子，又开始向人林里去迈进” (Their two shadows, two strong-willed shadows, forged ahead again into the throngs of humanity).¹¹⁷ In the end, their human shapes survive the flood of oblivion and His-tory, just like Nanying and Sanlang proved to be two “resilient fighters”¹¹⁸ living together and defying all scorn and bias from other people for not being married.¹¹⁹

Xiao Hong/Qin was deeply marked by her experience as an abandoned woman in a hotel room¹²⁰ and never fully recovered from this incident; still, she managed to survive by fleeing *and* resisting the water of an unjust society, her shape persisting and walking towards her future and towards writing as a distinct form of resilience against violence, and as a watermark stitched in the inside-out of His-tory, fighting with all her might not to be erased and not to be left drowning, but finally erupting from the submerged land. Being *Qi’er* a story focused on outcasts and refugee-like specks of humanity caught in their constant imperative to pursue mobility, woman’s survival can never be

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*. My translation.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*. My translation.

¹¹⁸ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 37.

¹²⁰ Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

permanent but always threatened by water, a symbol for His-tory, social injustice and gender inequality alike:

the novella ends with the two friends in utter poverty stepping into ‘the human jungle’ amid ‘large tracts of wasteland of streets’ where they could, like the small boat spinning in the flood, capsize and vanish at any moment, while their connection made in a random encounter is the only sustaining source of their existence.¹²¹

Poverty makes mobility inevitable and turns fleeing into a necessity, a compulsory way of living in woman’s endless struggle to conquer a physical space of her own before carving out a creative and literary space for her art: since the beginning of her literary career, Xiao Hong always had to deal with space as a conflicting force, both as a promise of *terra firma*, thus of a permanent site to set foot on, and as a fleeting, shifting site of possible kinship and alliance with fellow human beings and/or natural elements to strenuously, fervently walk the path of writing at all costs.

In particular, being the starting point of her writing career, *Qi’er* posits space as loss and oblivion, symbolized by the flood, but also as a form of transition from water to land, evanescent and being, in order to flee paralysis and isolation and find a temporary shelter, however fragmented and unstable this might turn out to be. As the story ends, the woman is still standing, searching for which way to go, which land to walk into: for a poor, unmarried and pregnant woman, life can only start and end as a liminal space, leaving her at the crossroads between political resistance and social survival, pushing the flood of violence and oblivion aside to reinstate the mobile fluidity of resilience.

The final walk of woman (and of her male companion) into the world and its unknown ‘throngs’ of discrimination against the poor also functions as a premonition on the fight for resistance both against the Japanese occupation but also against all forms of injustice and suffering, as without resistance, life as a whole would permanently turn into death. So, *Qi’er* may be a way to picture “a multitude of the ‘weaker species’ [...] caught up in economic brutality and social disintegration amidst colonial occupation,”¹²² but also a depiction of dispossessed and placeless bodies regardless of the historical contingencies of Japanese occupation. After all, Qin is stigmatized by her fellow

¹²¹ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹²² Ivi, p. 145.

countrymen and countrywomen, not by some foreign ‘devil’ invading the ‘sacred’ soil of the nation. In other words, woman’s placeless status in the story is first and foremost caused by patriarchal oppression and by centuries-old traditional Chinese culture, both alive and kicking despite the seemingly ravaging socio-cultural disintegration the water may symbolize.

In mimicking water’s flow and constant mobility, Qin reinstates her will for life to continue despite death, running against the grains of “physical destruction, and psychic rupture, not only in terms of the author’s world of imagination but also the passages of her actual life,”¹²³ wading through the water of violence to overcome submergence. The echo of the two shadows portrayed in the end evokes both the material and literary survival of woman and outcast man as resisting shapes against colonial occupation *and* semi-colonial oppression against women, searching for a physical as well as imaginative space where the woman (and her lover) can persist and exist, their shadows as “resilient flows of life in and beyond the force fields of death.”¹²⁴

5. A feminist road against patriarchal oppression

Qi'er marked both the beginning of Xiao Hong’s literary career as a writer and her love story with Xiao Jun. As in 1936 Xiao Jun started having an affair with another woman, Naiying had already become Xiao Hong, the most important woman writer of late 1930s-early 1940s China¹²⁵ and, according to Lu Xun, showing “the possibilities of becoming as much in advance of Miss Ting Ling as the latter was in succeeding Miss Ping Hsin.”¹²⁶

¹²³ *Ivi*, p. 150.

¹²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 152.

¹²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 147.

¹²⁶ Reported by Nym, Wales, “The Modern Chinese Literary Movement”, in Snow, Edgar, *Living China: Modern Chinese Short Stories*, Westport, Connecticut, New Hyperion, 1937, p. 348. Lu Xun further adds: “Xiao Hong may likely be a woman writer who continues what Ding Ling now is no longer able to do.” See Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

The road to writing had finally been paved, her mark on literature indelibly sewn against the flood of His-tory, though constantly oscillating between drowning and poverty because of the precariousness of survival in occupied China in the 1930s, thus turning her personal story into a political statement. In other words, hers was not

a solitary pursuit of a nebulously defined ‘female self’, but an integral part of a constantly brutalized, disposed, fragmented humanity that was also constantly re-gathering her resilience through varying and unprecedented kinships in the making. Such kinships, made by mobile bodies amid spreading violence, *are* life and death struggles of the ‘weaker sex’-cum-‘weaker species’ to alter their ‘destinies’ putatively assigned by the teleos of modern His-tory.¹²⁷

Yet, Xiao Hong also used writing as an ambivalent space for “reclaiming Chinese female survivorship and agency”,¹²⁸ despite highlighting “women’s overdependence and need to be rescued” and their “falling into inertia as they remain torn between split ways of thinking”.¹²⁹ In the story, Qin is actually caught up in a state of paralysis and needs to be rescued to get out of her isolated *and* insulated abandoned woman’s status. Inertia itself turns into a form of self-imposed abandonment: the abandoned woman abandons herself to powerlessness, disempowered by her own need to be rescued by somebody else, more specifically by a man. Xiao Hong herself addressed the question later on by stating: “women are excessively self-sacrificing, not out of courage but out of cowardice. A state of *inertia* develops us after living a long time with no one to aid us, and under conditions that require us to be sacrificing, so that we accept sacrifice willingly”.¹³⁰

This seems to imply that, while men wrote and acted about strategies to reform the nation, “little was required of women”¹³¹ to achieve these reforms, so female inertia *was* indeed seen as both inevitable and necessary to let men build the modern world. Xiao Hong was well aware of women’s inferior position in society, as she stated in her short essay *Nüzi zhuangshi de xinli* 女子装饰的心理 (Women’s Habit of Using Ornaments):

¹²⁷ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-8.

¹²⁸ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-3.

¹²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 174.

¹³⁰ Reported by Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 178. See Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹³¹ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

在文明社会中[...] 男子处处站在优越地位，社会上一切法律权利都握在男子手中，女子全居于被动地位。虽然近年来有男女平等的法律，但在父权制度之下，女子仍然是受动的。因此，男子可以行动自由，女子至少要受相当的约制。

in modern society [...] man is in every way in a position of superiority and the whole set of laws and rights existing in society are controlled by men, while women are kept in a *submissive* position. Despite today there may be laws on the equality between man and woman, nevertheless *in the patriarchal system, woman still is subject to the power of men*. So, when men are allowed to fight for their independence, women should at least be allowed that same possibility of fighting.¹³²

This proves Xiao Hong was extremely conscious both of women's limitations in society and of how a shift had taken place in what could be considered to be an acceptable political and social status for women in the 1930s: gone was the sexualized *nüxing* embodied by Ding Ling's heroines in the late 1920s; now every woman writer was expected to join the urgency of revolutionary rhetorics, where national politics would potentially silence all gender-specific content from literature and reinstate *funü* as the only acceptable role model for woman, conflating Confucianized/Late-imperial and Communist ideology to posit woman as a collective, "homogenizing"¹³³ political and social construct meant at erasing her specificity to exercise control and power over her.¹³⁴

Another important aspect in Xiao Hong's writing is probably "the incongruity between a materialistically and socially privileged readership free from struggles with basic needs and the dispossessed poor or illiterate who have no access to her materials."¹³⁵ She was an educated woman coming from a rich family, yet the very fact that she chose to live as a destitute disconnected her from the upper-class milieu her fellow writers were part of, rather making her closer to the poor and destitute people she met in real life than to the intellectuals who helped her become a famous writer (but conveniently dismissed the 'small I/small h' details of her writing because they were not functional to their national resistance discourse and propaganda). Like woman writer Bing Xin 冰心

¹³² Xiao Hong 萧红, *Nüzi zhuangshi de xinli* 女子装饰的心理 (Women's Habit of Using Ornaments), in Xiao Hong, *Xiao Hong quanji. Xia*, cit., p. 980. Originally written in 1936. Emphasis added.

¹³³ Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., p. 60.

¹³⁴ Barlow, Tani, E., "Theorizing Woman: *Funü, Guojia, Jiating* (Chinese Woman, Chinese State, Chinese Family)", in Zito, Angela; Barlow, Tani E. (eds.), *Body, Subject and Power in China*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 255-261. See also Barlow, Tani, E., *The Question of Women*, cit., pp. 55-63.

¹³⁵ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

said, “一个人不是生活在真空中，生活的圈子无论多么狭小，也总会受到周围气流的冲击激荡” (an individual does not live in a vacuum; no matter how narrow life’s enclosure might be, it is still affected by the breaths echoing around it).¹³⁶ This meant Xiao Hong was actually never detached from the society surrounding her as a segment of His-tory, like the League of left-wing writers chose to believe. It was precisely her focusing on the details of woman’s everyday life that turned her writing into a site of *nüxing* resistance both against patriarchal oppression of women and against His-tory:

Rather than recording the events of people involved in the broad strokes of His-tory – the political readers, the intellectual and nationalist leaders, and the army – Xiao Hong captures experience as mediated through space, time, and distance from the epicenter of intellectual ideological reform.¹³⁷

In *Qi'er*, the distance from this epicenter is marked by Qin’s confinement within a space isolated from the ravaging destruction of the city. Her affective and emotional view on the world, filtered through her flaws and fears but also through her hopes and memories, constitutes the mediation between the mobile space she temporarily and fluidly inhabits – the hotel room, the hospital ward room, the wall separating her from the new born child, the road – and the flood outside. What we see in the story is a space far from the Japanese occupation; the focus is shifted from the strictly political and historical magnitude of the invasion to the basic personal quest for female survivorship against the flood, while simultaneously embracing the flood’s momentum in its promise of porosity and mutual understanding. As the whole action and reaction depicted in the story is connected to the presence of the flood, consequently water becomes a crucial space in *Qi'er*, a presence woman has to deal with by making a ‘natural’ effort, that is by spontaneously connecting with and turning into the surrounding elements,¹³⁸ in order to gain survivorship. Experience, thus, comes to be inscribed most of all within the porosity of water and in the self’s mimicking this porosity as a form of

¹³⁶ Bing Xin 冰心, *Cong “Wusi” dao “Siwu” 从“五四”到“四五”* (From May Fourth to April Fifth), as reported by Yan, Shun-ling 闫顺玲, *Lun sanshi niandai nüxing wenxue chuanguo de jiazhi quxiang 论三十年代女性文学创作的价值取向* (Critical appraisal on women writers’ literary creations in the 1930s), *Lanzhou Jiaotong daxue xuebao* (Journal of Lanzhou Jiatong University), 34, 5, October 2015, p. 13.

¹³⁷ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

¹³⁸ Here ‘natural’ is meant as opposed to “an intellectualized conscious effort”. *Ibidem*.

interconnectedness with nature and reality.¹³⁹ The story depicts a kind of reality where no hierarchy among humans, animals, objects and landscapes is possible: not only humans are often described as zoomorphic in the story, but natural elements like water often conflate with man-made ones like buildings, creating an indivisible whole. Thus, the story proves to display an eccentric view on the *nei/wai* dichotomy in positioning woman in a relational dialogue with the outside space of water/flood and His-tory apparently conflating the drowned space of *wai* with the internalized fluidity of woman's confinement in *nei*, thus ultimately doing away with the dichotomy altogether.

More importantly, the story also reads as a *feminist* tale in its focusing on a de-colonizing Chinese pregnant and unmarried woman sealed off by a semi-colonial traditional Chinese society treating her like all unmarried pregnant women are in that same historical and cultural context, that is as women who “receive punishment and deal with the consequence of men's sexual desire alone, without support from their male partners”.¹⁴⁰ Even though Qin is occasionally helped by her male acquaintance Beili, as they share a destitute status, Qin's state of abandonment is “patriarchally imposed,” as 1930s Chinese society was still strongly influenced by Confucian culture which stigmatized women who get pregnant out of wedlock as ‘impure’ and unacceptable, pregnancy symbolizing “the female body being punished explicitly for its sexual desire”.¹⁴¹ Yet it is precisely in facing her powerlessness in being trapped inside a precarious physical space that Qin can find her own ontological space¹⁴² and articulate her female subjectivity.¹⁴³ No matter how much water (read ‘society’ and ‘patriarchal bias’) may try to oppress and engulf her, she will always oppose her strenuous will to survive to this apparent oppression, finally plunging back into the throngs of humanity to write her own path to life.

¹³⁹ “the self as indivisible, almost porous, with all other elements – people, objects, nature, and earth.” *Ivi*, pp. 249-250.

¹⁴⁰ Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

¹⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 239.

¹⁴² “Precisely because she enacted traditional self-defeating aspects in her writing and personal life, Xiao Hong was equipped to name, critique, and embody the potential for change and transformation.” *Ivi*, p. 181.

¹⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 170.

6. The ultimate plunge into the battlefield of life

Xiao Hong's brief existence as an adult woman resulted in a re-enactment of her dual relationship with men during her childhood years, as symbolized by the relationships she had had with her grandfather and her father respectively: she lived a continuous antagonistic ambivalence between warmth and indifference, being loved and cherished, being ignored and abandoned, constantly looking for the former but ending up finding the latter, eventually being engulfed by “亲子冷漠关系式的延长” (a prolonged father-daughter relational pattern based on indifference)¹⁴⁴ when dealing with lovers. For instance, right from the start, her relationship with Xiao Jun was marked by his brutal violence and infidelity.¹⁴⁵ Yet, his violence was generally seen by other male intellectuals as part of the general ideological semantics associated to the war of resistance against Japanese aggression, thus originating *outside* his individual temperament. When confronted with Xiao Hong's oppression perpetrated by Xiao Jun, according to this ‘virile’ war-centered ideology, intellectuals chose “对这一压迫视而不见” (to turn a blind eye to this kind of oppression)¹⁴⁶ because it wasn't centered on the ‘spirit of the masses’ and on the new configuration of space politics as exclusively male. According to Dai and Meng, though, the conflict between ‘the two Xiaos’

¹⁴⁴ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 176.

¹⁴⁵ Confronted with her lover's brutality, Xiao Hong asked Xiao Jun for the reason why he behaved that way. He answered: “我爱的女人不是林黛玉、薛宝钗，而是王熙凤” (My woman is neither Lin Daiyu nor Xue Baochai, she is Wang Xifeng), meaning that Xiao Hong wasn't a delicate creature like the two romantic heroines of the *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (The Dream of the Red Chamber), but self-assured and straightforward like the most independent woman character in the novel, so implying that, being a strong woman, she could endure pain. Yet, given the fact that Wang Xifeng was often seen as a negative character for her “unwomanly” intelligence and determination and as in the end of the novel she is abandoned by her husband and dies on her way back to her hometown, Xiao Jun's words also imply Xiao Hong's status represents a transgression of woman's traditional role and, because of that, she needs to be punished. Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 179.

¹⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 181.

不全是情感冲突，而倒是某种情所无法左右的冲突，即女性与主导意识形态乃至与整个社会的冲突。萧红所欲离导的不只是一个萧军，而是萧军所代表的“大男子主义”加“拟英雄”的小型男性社会，以及它带给一个新女性精神上的屈辱与伤害及被无视的实际处境。

wasn't a conflict of feelings nor a conflict on the inability to control these feelings; it was a conflict between the dominant [male] ideology and *nüxing*; more importantly, it was a conflict between the entire society and *nüxing*. Xiao Hong's reason to break up with Xiao Jun wasn't just Xiao Jun, but society's overall male-centeredness expressed in small scale through Xiao Jun's behaviour in his combination of 'male chauvinism' and 'heroic attitude', leading such a *xin nüxing* spirit as Xiao Hong's to the humiliating situation of being ignored and hurt.¹⁴⁷

So, although she was interpreted and thus protected as a resistance writer (mostly because of the intervention of the fatherly figure of Lu Xun), Xiao Hong wasn't protected as a *nüxing*. Yet, in her apparently self-destructive life choices, Xiao Hong stubbornly strived for her *nüxing* dimension to emerge again and not succumb either to His-tory and to the master narrative of the 'big I', by going against the grain of national resistance. Xiao Hong's final break up with Xiao Jun in September 1938 was marked by yet another birth, this time of a dead child, soon followed by a series of disastrous events which led to her multiple drifting and to her tragic death in Hong Kong: while the Japanese attacked the British colony on December 8th 1941, Xiao Hong's health rapidly deteriorated and, already suffering from tuberculosis, she was brought to the St Mary's Hospital by her friends.¹⁴⁸ As her health didn't improve and the hospital was soon occupied by Japanese soldiers, she was then moved to the St Stevenson Girls' College, then to the Red Cross headquarters.¹⁴⁹ Reduced to immobility by illness, she still felt the urge to talk to her friends: “對現在的災難，我所需要的就是友情的慷慨！你不要以為我會在這個時候死了，我會好起來我有自信” (I feel a kind of *fervour* towards my present suffering! You shouldn't consider my imminent departure as death: I'll finally attain *self-confidence*).¹⁵⁰ Her courage and defiance of social restrictions could sustain her in the ultimate plunge, leaving the road of life behind in 1942 but knowing “我將與藍天

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁸ Luo, Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 142. These friends included American activist Agnes Smedley.

¹⁴⁹ For more details on her final days, see Goldblatt, Howard, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-5 and Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-162.

¹⁵⁰ Luo Binji, *op. cit.*, p. 151. Emphasis added.

碧水永處” (*I will be with the blue sky and green water forever*)¹⁵¹, her watermark permanently printed in the flood of literary His-tory.

Had she chosen to find shelter under the reassuring wings of the CCP Yan'an headquarters, like Ding Ling did, her fate would have been much different and she probably wouldn't have died so young in such an awful way.¹⁵² Instead, she deliberately chose to express her difference as a gender-specific form of resistance to national resistance and to His-tory as a whole:

她以个人的孤独承受并昭示了整个女性群体那亘古的孤独，她以自我一己的牺牲宣告了我们民族在历史前进中的重大牺牲——反封建力量的、人的牺牲；她以自己短促的痛苦的生明烛照着我们社会和文化的结构性缺损。

she endured a solitary individualism and simultaneously declared publicly the unaltered loneliness of the whole *nüxing* category in His-tory; she used the sacrifice of her own self to declare to the whole nation the most important sacrifice enacted in His-tory's march ahead – the individual's fight and sacrifice against feudal power. She used her own short life of strife to shed light on the physiological and structural deficiencies of Chinese culture and society [...thus conducting an interrogation of His-tory].¹⁵³

In the end, as a destitute woman Xiao Hong was literally submerged by His-tory, yet as a writer, she managed to create a space of her own by focusing on the daily relation with the Other (be it human, elemental or animal alike)¹⁵⁴ as an affirmation of survivorship and female agency despite men's constant attempt at denying her distinct voice:

古语说，“女子上不了战场”。其实不对的，这并多么深，平白地你问一个男子，问他这并敢跳不敢跳，怕他也不敢的。而一个年轻的女子竟敢了，上战场不一定死，也许回来闹个一官半职。可是跳井就很难不死，一跳就多半跳死了。那么节妇坊上为什么没写着赞美女子跳井跳得勇敢的赞词？那是修节妇坊的人故意给删去的。因为 修节妇坊的，多半是男人。

¹⁵¹ Ivi, p. 156. Emphasis added.

¹⁵² Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 184.

¹⁵³ Ivi, pp. 184-5.

¹⁵⁴ Hu Feng, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-6.

An old saying goes: ‘A battlefield is no place for a woman.’ Actually, that’s not true: those wells are terribly deep, and if you casually ask a man whether or not he would dare to jump down one, I’m afraid he wouldn’t dare doing it. But a young woman, on the other hand, would certainly do so. An appearance on a battlefield doesn’t necessarily lead to certain death, and in fact it might even lead to an official position later. But jumping down a well, there’s not much chance of emerging alive – most never do. Then why is it that there are no words of praise for the courage of women who jump down wells included in the chronicles of chaste women? Because those compiling these chronicles deliberately chose to leave these episodes out of their writing. Because the majority of those who actually wrote these chronicles were men.¹⁵⁵

Despite the law of the fatherland and its ‘big I’ narrative, she entitled herself to write her own chronicle and that of other destitute women, carving her own space of fortitude¹⁵⁶ within life and literature as a woman never willing to give in to patriarchal oppression, violence, His-tory, and death.

¹⁵⁵ Xiao Hong 萧红, *Hulanhe zhuan* 呼兰河传, in Xiao Hong, *Xiao Hong quanji*. Xia, *op. cit.*, p. 746. Originally written in 1941.

¹⁵⁶ “I do not believe that Xiao Hong’s life under domestic abuse and her search to understand and heal her personal connections to men diminish her agency or life work in any way. Rather, I find it even more remarkable, indeed, an attestation to her strength and perseverance, that a person living under physical, verbal, and emotional abuse by men, often in fear of her own survival – due to the threat of starvation, freezing, and serious illness – found the time and *fortitude* to write as profusely and passionately as she did.” Ho, Felicia, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-4. Emphasis added.

CHAPTER THREE

In the flesh: Yang Gang's *Rouxing* 肉刑 (Fragments from a Lost Diary/Torture of the Flesh) and the erased/emerged space of woman's revolution

1. Antifeminist *Guomindang* rhetorics, Communist reconfiguration of space and the marginalization of women

In 1934, the *Guomindang* launched the *Xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活运动 (New Life Movement) with the aim of producing a supposedly “new citizenry”¹ based on the restoration of the ‘four social bonds’, or Confucian ideals – *li* 礼 (propriety), *yi* 义 (justice), *lian* 廉 (honesty) and *chi* 耻 (modesty, often rendered as ‘shame’) – in order to foster the rebirth of the ‘authentic’ Chinese spirit as a clear answer to the national crisis caused by the gradual but inexorable Japanese invasion, but also because of the growing consensus over the Communist cause in the countryside.² With this program of spiritual and social regeneration, the *Guomindang* actually aimed at limiting citizens’ rights and liberties, targeting women in particular with “the resurgence of neoconservative ideals of domestic womanhood that underwrote an agenda of sending China’s newly emancipated women back home”,³ ultimately making sure that “the women’s movement for liberation was made to disappear in life and in writing”.⁴ After theatrically displaying torture as a ritual to communicate and instruct people as well as to restore power⁵ by teaching women how to behave ‘properly’ through the White Terror, with the new wave of brutal public executions and secret kidnappings of Communist activists in the early 1930s and the New Life Movement in the mid 1930s, the nationalist regime reinforced its anti-women, anti-feminist policy. More specifically, the regime

¹ Duara, Prasenijt, “Religion and Citizenship in China and the Diaspora”, in Yang, Meyfair Meihui (ed.), *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, London and Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018, p.51.

² Nedostup, Rebecca, *Superstitious Regimes. Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, p.16; p.56. See also Cheng, Pei-kai; Spence, Jonathan; Lestz, Michael (eds.). *The Search for Modern China. A Documentary Collection*, New York-London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, pp. 294-304.

³ Dooling, Amy, “Introduction”, in Dooling, Amy (ed.), *Writing Women in Modern China. The Revolutionary Years, 1936-1976*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p.7.

⁴ Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p.192.

⁵ Foucault, Michel, *Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la Prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p.46; pp.52-3.

managed to virtually erase Ding Ling from the world of literature and politics by forcing her into hiding and retreating in darkness, all the while the Japanese invasion forced Xiao Hong into a life of floating mobility.

As far as intellectuals were concerned, the mid-1930s era, laden as it was with the emergency of the Japanese occupation, made literature and writing radicalize more and more; national liberation against the invaders on the one hand and the emergence of peasant and working class fight against the yoke of Nationalist rule on the other soon turned all forms of analysis not associated to class, social and national struggle into tokens of bourgeois individualism. This in turn led both Communist political practice and leftist literature to a progressive marginalization of women and their emancipation.⁶ While for 1920s left-wing male writers, woman's struggle was seen as important because it was interpreted as having historical value,⁷ and as such it was entitled to have a specific political space within the broader space of national literature, in the mid-1930s literature became the symbolic arena where a whole new configuration of space took place, inspired by the political events following the *Guomindang's* five Extermination Campaigns (1930-1934) against Communist forces, who then moved their bases in the countryside.⁸

In struggling to find its own space set against *Guomindang's* tyrannical rule, the Communist party developed a political rethorics which came to revolve around a peasant appropriation of land, seen both as a symbolical and a physical space culminating in the *Changzheng* 长征 (Long March, 1934-1935):

Besides the obvious significance of land as the political center of physical space, spatiality is indispensable in the foundational myth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) – The Long March. In order to escape pursuit by the Nationalists, the Red Army, led by the Chinese Communist Party, crossed half of China in the mid-1930s, eventually finding asylum in Yan'an. [...] On reaching the promised land of Yan'an, they established the embryonic form of the People's Republic.⁹

⁶ Dooling, Amy, "Introduction", in Dooling, Amy (ed.), *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 5.

⁷ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 39.

⁸ "In the 1930s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to move to the countryside after a series of frustrations in the city. The CCP was struggling for survival, establishing revolutionary bases and winning peasants over to the revolutionary cause by promising them land and other equal opportunities in the new society." Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, pp.31-2.

⁹ *Ivi*, pp.22-4.

Later turned into “a national myth in discursive space”,¹⁰ this event proved to be central both in political and in symbolical terms, as it came to be interpreted as “proof of the perseverance and vitality of the Red Army and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)”¹¹, thus leading left-wing writers to reconfigure space in their own works as aligned to the new myth of spatial consciousness as linked to the ‘epic’ event of the Long March.¹² To the eyes of intellectuals, the Long March gave evidence to the actual possibility of transforming space through the making of revolution, at least in the rural areas.¹³ Even though it wasn’t a national myth yet, throughout the 1930s the Long March already functioned as the pinnacle of Communist re-emergence in times when all hopes of winning against Nationalist repression were fluctuating at best. Not only such an event following multiple attempts at erasure from the *Guomindang* regime proved resistance against the regime itself possible; it also made a new configuration of space *as* revolution possible, both physically and symbolically.

As the space granted by the Communist fight seemed the only true viable alternative to the *Guomindang*’s oppressive and overtly sexist narrative, many women writers of the 1930s consciously chose to join the revolution:

What distinguishes the mid-thirties is the extent to which socially conscious women authors gravitated toward the leftist cultural groups that were organized in response to the political and economic crisis gripping the Chinese nation. Apart from their active involvement with the League of Left-Wing Writers, a radical organization formed in 1930 with the express purpose of promoting proletarian culture, some joined propaganda teams that toured villages and small towns to raise public consciousness about the war effort, while others signed up with troupes of traveling performing artists. In a certain number of cases, such individuals were (or were soon to become) members of the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p.65.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p.64.

¹² “The Long March in the 1930s marks a collective effort in search of a promised land as the Soviet Republic of China started on the road to an unknown destination”. *Ivi*, p. 25.

¹³ *Ivi*, pp.65-7. Zhang Enhua retraces all the steps from the 1927 White Terror campaigns to the CCP foundation of the Soviet Republic of China in Ruijin, Jiangxi, in 1931, followed by the strategy to flee west, then south, to escape from *Guomindang*’s persecution and culminating in the Long March itself.

¹⁴ Dooling, Amy, “Introduction”, in Dooling, Amy (ed.), *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 4.

2. A Communist life

While Xiao Hong was not an official member of any political association but came to be associated to (but also manipulated and appropriated by) leftist intellectuals, many women writers of the mid-thirties deliberately participated to Communist-oriented political activities, including overtly revolutionary and radical contents in their writings. Yang Gang 杨刚 was among those women authors whose destiny was strongly connected to that of revolution, fighting side by side with the Communists against the tyrannical yoke of Nationalists in pre-PRC years, later becoming an important part of the official party propaganda after the PRC was established – a position she would not (or could not) extricate herself from.

Born in 1905¹⁵ in the Jiangxi province but then settling with the whole family near Mianyang, Sichuan,¹⁶ Yang Jiangwei¹⁷ came from a family constantly fighting against poverty. Her grandfather was a *xiucai* 秀才, a scholar who had passed county-level imperial examinations but who died quite early, leaving the household with no money; the family managed to survive thanks to Yang's grandmother, who started weaving and mending other people's clothes.¹⁸ As Jiangwei's father later became a government official in the Wuchang district of Wuhan, Hubei, the Yang household suddenly became rich again.¹⁹ Jiangwei's childhood was marked by her father's strict behaviour, but also by her mother's cold-blooded determination: despite not being allowed to show

¹⁵ Yang Gang 杨刚, *Yi ge nianjing de Zhongguo gongchandangyuan de zizhuan. Tong Nian*. 一个年轻的中国共产党员的自传. 童年 (Autobiography of a Young Chinese Communist: The Childhood Years), in Yang Gang 杨刚, *Yang Gang wenji* 杨刚文集 (Collected Works by Yang Gang), Beijing, Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1984, p. 512. Translated in Chinese by Wen Jie Ruo 文洁若.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 509. The original manuscript of this autobiography was written in English by Yang Gang herself and it was later found among the papers and notes the author had had left to Grace M. Boynton 包贵思, an American missionary and woman professor of English Literature at Yanjing (now Beida) University in Beijing. Yanjing University used to be a Christian University, originally opened by missionaries in 1919; in 1928, in particular, a joint Harvard-Yanjing institute was founded for the teaching of humanities and social sciences. Here Jiangwei attended Boynton's lessons and became a close friend of hers, as stated by Xiao Qian 萧乾, editor of the 1984 collection of Yang Gang's works, in a footnote on the page aforementioned. Boynton had also been Bing Xin's professor of English Literature.

¹⁷ Arkush, R. David; Lee, Leo Ou-fan (eds.), *Land without Ghosts. Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth century to the Present*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p.193. No other source, however, reports this to be her original Chinese name. Actually, *Chinawriter.com.cn* claims her original name was Yang Jizheng 杨季征. 《扬刚 [女] 1905.1.30-1957.10.7》, in *China Writer* [online] URL <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/xdzj/73.shtml> (Last access 2020-01-27, 9:39 UTC).

¹⁸ Yang Gang, *Tong Nian*, cit., p. 509.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 510.

what she really felt towards her children because of the rigid and restrictive conventions of the time,²⁰ Jiangwei's mother was always “见义勇为, 并有办事能力” (ready to fight for a just cause, handling things with energy) and not eager to accept her husband's ways easily nor to “甘拜下风” (bow to his superiority).²¹ Soon after the 1911 Revolution, when bandits often took advantage of political turmoil to rob local households, she showed great strategic insight, acting as the head of the family in the absence of both husband and male children.²²

Briefly going by the name Yang Bin 杨缤 before choosing her official pen name,²³ Yang Gang was an early supporter of the underground Communist cause, joining the Chinese Communist Party and the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixth Central Party Committee in Beijing in the late 1920s and becoming the only woman to take part in official congress meetings of the CCP.²⁴ In 1928, Yang Bin was admitted to Yanjing University in Beijing, specializing in English Literature.²⁵ According to sociologist and author of the book *Thirty Years of Communist Party*, Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木, who first met her in Beijing during a Communist Youth League assembly at Yanjing University in 1931, Yang Gang's eloquence was impressive; also, she freely expressed disagreement over the other (all male) congress members' views, at times being critical of the whole plenary session as such.²⁶ In 1933 she moved to Shanghai to join the League of the Left-Wing Writers²⁷ but later went back to Beijing to work as a journalist building up her reputation as an English to Chinese translator: her rendition of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* became the first translation ever of the English author's masterpiece in the Chinese language.²⁸ As the war of resistance against Japan (1937-1945) officially broke out, in 1937 Yang Gang was sent to the U.S.A. as a reporter for the *Dagong Bao* 大公报 (Ta Kung Pao), “one of China's most important

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 515.

²¹ *Ivi*, p.510.

²² *Ivi*, p. 511.

²³ Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木, *Xu* 序 (Preface), in Yang Gang, *Yang Gang wenji*, cit., p.1.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Yang Gang, *Tong Nian*, cit., p. 517.

²⁶ Hu Qiaomu, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Though bold in his statement, Hu Qiaomu does not give any specific evidence to Yang Gang's eloquence and free expression of her own ideas, thus making his view seem a bit vague and not corroborated by any additional material.

²⁷ *Ibidem*. See also Yan Shun-ling, *op. cit.*, p.15.

²⁸ Hu Qiaomu, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

newspapers”.²⁹ During her long stay in the U.S., she also studied at Radcliffe College and interviewed several American intellectuals “trying to weaken American support for the Nationalists.”³⁰

After moving back to China, in 1948 she became a member of the Communist Party Central Committee in its headquarters of Xibaipo, Pingshan county, Hebei.³¹ The last part of her life was inextricably linked to that of the Chinese Communist party: Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 explicitly praised her and Mao Zedong 毛泽东, who met her in the Xibaipo years, considered her an exceptional woman cadre.³² The esteem influential men in the CCP showed for her helped Yang Gang pursue her work as a journalist for the *Jinbu ribao* 进步日报 (Progress Daily) and also granted her a job position as secretary in Premier Zhou Enlai’s office and as editor in the Central Propaganda Section of the *Renmin Ribao* 人民日报 (China Daily), the official CCP newspaper. Then, in 1955, a terrible car accident befell on her, causing a serious cerebral concussion from which she never fully recovered.³³ On October 1957 she suddenly lost a precious notebook and, despite her friends’ support, nobody was ever held responsible for the theft; the accident left her embittered and constantly on the edge, her tension “no doubt also related to the tense political atmosphere of the time”.³⁴ Then, on October 7th 1957, Yang Gang committed ‘suicide’ (a word Hu Qiaomu never mentions explicitly) after displaying an “abnormal”³⁵ mental state, possibly caused by the escalation of accusations and arrests of several intellectuals for supposedly ‘antisocialist behaviour’ during what was later labeled as the first *Fanyou yundong* 反右运动 (Antirightist Campaign, 1957). Did she actually fear being exposed to the party cadres as a ‘rightist’, thus as a

²⁹ Arkush, R. David.; Lee ,Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 193. According to Arkush and Lee, Yang Gang moved to the U.S.A. in 1944, not in 1937 like Hu Qiaomu states in his preface.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Hu Qiaomu, *op. cit.*, p. 2. Xibaipo also used to be the headquarters of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. Because of the civil war (1945-1949) between the *Guomindang* and the Communist Party and because of the major role the countryside population played in the Communist uprising against the Nationalists, Chairman Mao decided to move the headquarters far from the urban centres, so as to organize the fight and the attacks more swiftly. Xibaipo was a strategic choice, as it was hard to attack from the outside. The headquarters were then moved to Beijing in 1949, after the People’s Republic of China was established.

³² Hu Qiaomu, *op. cit.*, 2.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Though seemingly incapable of explicitly mentioning facts, probably for fear of being censored himself, here Xiao Qiaomu clearly refers to the first antirightist campaign which broke out in 1957, the same that condemned Ding Ling and left her without citizenship rights for twelve years. Hu Qiaomu, *op. cit.*, 2.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

criminal, because of some content hidden in the lost notebook, or was her anxiety really a side-effect of the 1955 accident? The baffling, unclear details surrounding her death made some people assume she took her own life “because of the adversities she encountered during the antirightist campaign.”³⁶

Historian John Fairbank’s brief portrait of Yang Gang, though, seems to describe an entirely different person from Hu Qiaomu’s. According to him, she was more interested in her creative work than in being part of the CCP: “She was a leftist but not openly Communist, in fact an ‘outside cadre’ urged by the CCP to pursue her career in the outer world, keeping clear of CCP connections”.³⁷ Could these words actually imply that her close ties to the CCP prevented her to have a career as a woman who wished to write freely about gender-specific issues?

3. Torture, writing and erasure

Despite the fog still shrouding both the circumstances of her death and her actual commitment to the party, as a young woman Yang Bin was clearly involved in the Communist fight against Nationalists, as the second part of her autobiography, *Yu zhong* 狱中 (In Prison), shows. On May 1st, 1930, Bin participated to the International Workers’ Parade, with the clear purpose of protesting against the *Guomindang*’s repressive policy. Bin “留意到会场上有侦缉队” (looked around to be sure there was no team of spies arresting anyone in the gathering area)³⁸ but then she was stopped by a tall man dressed in white and started noticing “大批穿白衣的侦缉队在向游行者的袭击” (a swarming team of spies, all dressed in white, attacking the protesters by surprise).³⁹ Like

³⁶ Dooling, Amy, “Introduction”, in Dooling, Amy, *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit, p.37. Arkus and Lee seem to corroborate this idea too. See Arkush, R. David; Lee Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

³⁷ Fairbank, John King, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir*, New York, Harper Collins, 1982, p.275.

³⁸ Yang Gang 杨刚, *Yi ge nianjing de Zhongguo Gongchandangyuan de zizhuan. Yu zhong*. 一个年轻的中国共产党员的自传. 狱中 (Autobiography of a Young Chinese Communist. In Prison), in Yang Gang, *Yang Gang wenji*, cit., p. 518.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

messengers of death (white being the colour traditionally representing death in China but also the colour chosen by the regime militia), the *Guomindang* spies took sixty students to the public security department, then after sixty days eight of them, including Yang Bin, were taken to the garrison's headquarters. Bin was the only woman arrested during the parade, so she was separated from her comrades and interrogated by the *Guomindang* judges separately. The final place of detention she was forced to live in had neither floor nor ceiling, “只有坑坑洼洼，潮湿的土地” (just a rough damp soil full of holes and walls) reduced to “乌黑” (utter darkness) and all covered in dirt.⁴⁰ To make her confess, the *Guomindang* officers first made her watch other students being tied and whipped;⁴¹ as she didn't break, Bin was brought to an interrogation room full of instruments of torture (刑具), forced on her knees and repeatedly beaten – we'll carve the truth “下你的皮肉” (out of your flesh),⁴² one of the torturers screamed to frighten her – but she didn't give in, despite her hands turning purple and her whole body growing weaker and weaker, soon reducing her on the verge of collapse.⁴³ Then, as the warlord acting as president then, Yan Xishan 阎锡山, was defeated by one of his opponents, Zhang Xueliang 张学良, the garrison's officers suddenly fled and the people who replaced them finally set the prisoners free. This way, Yang Bin finally managed to return to her student life, knowing she would continue “必须全力以赴地参加斗争” (to spare no effort to join the fight) and “能够继续工作下去是多么快乐啊!” (to succeed and continue working to that aim with extreme delight!).⁴⁴

The experience in prison surely left indelible marks on Yang Gang's creativity, which stemmed both from her lucid revolutionary commitment and from a constant awareness of *xing* 刑 (torture) as a coercive measure used by power to control people (especially women) both in their minds and their *rou* 肉 (flesh). Not coincidentally, her first story was actually called *Rouxing* 肉刑 (which roughly translates as 'Torture of the Flesh' or simply as 'Torture'). Published in Chinese under the name Yang Gang on April 15, 1935 on the 12-14 installments of the *Guowen zhoubao* 国闻周报 (National News Weekly), the story was originally written in English in 1933 and called *Fragments*

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 521.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 526.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 527.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 528.

from a *Lost Diary*.⁴⁵ This was actually the title Yang Gang herself had chosen for her story (and the title it is commonly rendered with in English even today)⁴⁶ as part of Edgar Snow's anthology *Living China*, which was published in 1937, two years after the story had already been published in Chinese. The constant threat to personal life Chinese leftist intellectuals had to face during the 1930s forced Yang Gang to present the English version of the story as written by *Shi Ming* 失名, (anonymous, rendered as 'Shih Ming' in alphabetical letters in Snow's anthology).⁴⁷ Despite the fact the original version in English came out two years after the one written in Chinese, as the *Guomindang* had spies everywhere, people fighting for the revolution like Yang Gang could be exposed at any time.⁴⁸ Women, in particular, seen as 'the weaker' segment of the revolutionary movement, were thought to break more easily under torture, given the 'exemplary' social and political stigma the White Terror (and its supposedly 'spiritual' version, the New Life Movement) had established once and for all for rebellious feminists.

Consequently, Yang Gang chose to protect herself by double anonymity, hiding her real name and hiding her true political message in writing under the translation disguise. Actually, the two versions of the story differ in many aspects: while the original English story includes explicit references to both the Communist underground revolution against *Guomindang* rule and to women's specificity within the space of this revolution, the Chinese version is mostly devoid of any reference to either, potentially de-gendering but also slightly de-revolutionizing her message, including a different finale to the story purportedly giving it a de-contextualized flavor, showing torture as a supposedly ahistorical evil. In many ways, the translating process functioned as an erasing strategy which eventually led Yang Gang into rewriting the whole story and/or writing off many key political contents for fear of being exposed to the *Guomindang* regime as a revolutionary on the one hand, but probably also not to contradict the new 'universal' (male-oriented) macro-narrative of the Communist revolution rising in the mid 1930s in the wake of the Long March on

⁴⁵ Editor Xiao Qian mentions 1935 as the date of the first Chinese publication of the story, while stating that the original version was actually written in English and published in Edgar Snow's anthology. Though this anthology came out only in 1937, Yang Gang actually wrote the English version of the story in 1933, also contributing to the translation for most of the stories included by Snow in his anthology. See also the notes on the author on Yang Gang, *Daughter. An Autobiographical Novel*, Beijing, Phoenix Books Foreign Language Press, 1988, sleeve cover.

⁴⁶ This is the title of the most recent rendering of her story in English. See Dooling, Amy, *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., pp. 37-49.

⁴⁷ See Snow, Edgar, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

⁴⁸ Smedley, Agnes, *op. cit.*, p.71. Smedley was a personal friend of Yang Gang's; she wrote a novel, *Daughters of the Earth*, which inspired Yang to write her own autobiographical novel *Daughter* in English.

the other. Despite the majority of Chinese people could not read her true political message – because she chose to present her full, ultimate truth to the English speaking audience of Snow’s anthology only – this dichotomy does not imply she gave up on the idea of writing about the hardships revolutionary women had to face in the late 1930s. Quite the opposite:

Shih Ming is the pseudonym of a Chinese woman writer who has thus far managed to shield her real name. [...] Her courage and daring in utilizing social material heretofore tabooed in Chinese literature show an emancipation which will astound those who have persisted in believing that Chinese art is incapable of a sharp revolutionary break with the past.⁴⁹

Snow’s explicit mentioning she was forced into anonymity to write about ‘tabooed’ (including feminist) issues in the late 1930s makes it clear she was constantly on the verge of being either arrested, tortured, persecuted or executed by *Guomindang* police. Yet the very fact that both the genesis of her English/Chinese story first and the circumstances of her death later are unclear seem to imply she might have been manipulated by the CCP intelligentsia as well, especially in the 1940s and the 1950s but probably even during the 1930s. Actually, her resolve to choose English over Chinese to write her first story (but also her short autobiography, not to mention her semi-biographical novel *Daughter* later) more likely suggests a rather pressing need to cover her tracks and to hide the real issues she wanted to address in her writing but that neither GMD nor CCP leaders wished to acknowledge because they were associated to women, and thus to a ‘non-universal’ subject. In other words, by analysing the two versions of the story, we can see how Yang Gang herself opted for self-censorship when re-writing her story in Chinese, for fear of a possible political retribution, while she deliberately delved into explicit female-centered issues in the original narrative she wrote in English, thus revealing a true *nüxing* standpoint of a 1930s woman caught between her own freedom and political commitment inside the space of revolution. In many ways, *Fragments from a Lost Diary* and *Rouxing* are two different versions of the same story, differing not simply in the title but in the actual fabric of the anonymous woman protagonist’s thoughts in her dealing with pregnancy, abortion, revolution and a woman’s ‘space of her own’. Thus, Yang Gang herself chose to erase some crucial female-centered details while writing *Rouxing*, all the while letting them emerge in *Fragments from a Lost Diary* which, despite being written earlier, was published after the Chinese version of the story. The erased/emerged nature of Yang

⁴⁹ Snow, Edgar, *op. cit.*, p. 301. Emphasis added.

Gang's debut story, combined with the political paranoia of the time, gives evidence to the conflicting nature of revolution as an all-male space, where female-related topics like pregnancy, abortion or explicit mentioning of 'women' as revolutionaries crushed and censored by His-tory were not simply seen as irrelevant, but also as impossible bourgeois deviations. In other words, Yang Gang may well have been the one who chose to censor herself and her most feminist contents while rewriting *Fragments from a Lost Diary* and transforming it into *Rouxing*; her self-censorship was ultimately induced by CCP-oriented male intellectuals and by the new configuration of space as revolution, already marked by the epic narrative of the Long March.

As evidence to a possible erasing strategy of her most eccentric, 'deviating' contents (as opposed to what the CCP established as the legitimate norm in revolutionary literature), in his preface Hu Qiaomu mentions the fact that, despite becoming an important journalist, throughout her life Yang Gang wasn't known for her literary accomplishments, not even by most of her closest friends⁵⁰ – a clear example of the erasure her art had gone through in the early PRC years. Yet he himself then proves to disregard her literary work if compared to her commitment to the revolution: though apparently praising her as an “富有热情” (ardent) writer, characterized by a “独特风格” (unique style) and a deep “识见” (insight) into life matters, he then candidly states: “她不是大作家，不追求文学的形式美” (she wasn't a great writer; she didn't seek for beautiful style in literature). What really mattered about her, Hu Qiaomu seems to imply, is that “在她把主要精力投入革命斗争的经常奔波劳碌的岁月中” (throughout her life she invested her greatest energy working hard and fighting everyday for the revolution) and because of that people couldn't help but admiring her.⁵¹ He specifically mentions how reading her work can help people understand “各种各样妇女的辛酸以及革命家的受难么” (all the misery, suffering and revolutionary aspirations women went through) in the pre-1949 era,⁵² particularly focusing on *Rouxing* as an example of her “朴素” (simple) but “撕裂人心的力量” (heart-rending power)⁵³ in depicting female characters and their lives. He deliberately fails to mention, though, that the Chinese version of the story is devoid of most of the specific references to the tortures and sufferings women had to bear during the revolution, often replacing the gender-specific events included in the original English version with

⁵⁰ Hu Qiaomu, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵¹ *Ibidem.*

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

generic ones in the Chinese one. Hu Qiaomu's standpoint may of course stem from his not being proficient in English, thus ignoring the contents Yang Gang included in her original story. Yet the very fact he and Xiao Qian 萧乾, editor of the 1984 edition of the *Collected Works by Yang Gang*, omit the possibility of translating back to Chinese the original story written in English, so as to analyse the possible differences between the two versions, gives evidence to the CCP intelligentsia's accidental and careless erasing strategy while dealing with Yang Gang's true political message – unless, being both proficient in English and being *Fragments from a Lost Diary* too 'feminist' in content for the party's taste, their strategy wasn't accidental at all but deliberate.

4. Writing, *nüxing* and *funü* liberation

Like the stories created by Ding Ling in the same period, Yang Gang's work focused on “the possibilities of politically engaged art, and the relationship of the writer/intellectual to processes of revolutionary change”⁵⁴ – that is a potentially ‘non-gendered’ art whose supposed-to-be ‘universal’ meaning could be used and manipulated by male critics for their own patriotic and anti-Japanese ends. Yet, Yang Gang was also part of a group of “radical women writers [... who] took it upon themselves to recast the politics of nation and class as an integral dimension of women's fight for socioeconomic justice.”⁵⁵ In other words, despite more and more women writers (including post-1936 Ding Ling) chose a non-gender specific view as their path to political liberation in literature and life, many others opted for a writing where a space for women's liberation could be reinstated along with the exploration of ‘general’ political forms of liberation for the whole of China.⁵⁶ Even if Yang Gang's gender-specific issues in her Chinese story remain problematic for the erasing process it has gone through by the author's own apparently deliberate (but actually coerced) choice, the very fact that she addresses these same issues in the original English version, which

⁵⁴ Dooling, Amy, “Introduction”, in Dooling, Amy (ed.), *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ “female literary radicals did not automatically abandon their feminist agenda, and quite a few continued publishing work that dealt explicitly with such issues as sexual freedom, domesticity, and the path to socioeconomic equality.” *Ibidem*.

significantly was published anonymously for fear of being killed, testifies to Yang Gang's actual commitment to women's liberation both from *Guomindang*'s oppression and from the Communist male-centered spatial domain.

So, an apparent dichotomy took place between national sociopolitical movements and gender-specific forms of fight, making the former grow more and more indifferent to the latter, women's fight for freedom progressively being undermined and silenced, by left-wing male writers and Nationalists alike – which was probably the reason why Yang Gang herself chose to write her story in English in the first place, thus making her most feminist and daring contents impossible to be detected by her male enemies. Despite this dichotomy between gender-specific, potentially subversive and feminist (*nüxing*) contents and male-centred 'universal' political agendas, the women's (*funü*) movement and the CCP-oriented revolutionary movement gradually (and somehow paradoxically) became inherently linked and depending on one another to succeed against *Guomindang* rule in the fight for the national space to be conquered and be whole again.⁵⁷ In terms of political semantics, the collective signifier *funü*, meant as 'female members of the clan', came to replace the supposedly 'individualistic' *nüxing*, gradually de-gendering women's literature and turning it into a genderless space where a generic leftist standpoint could highlight the rebirth of the nation and the triumph of the CCP and of the masses together, especially after the People's Republic of China was created. This double dichotomy between national male-centered sociopolitical movements and gender-specific female forms of fight on the one hand, *funü* and *nüxing* standpoints on the other, was still yet to be formally crystallized both in politics and in literature in the 1930s, but Yang Gang's erased/emerged strategy in dealing with the (re)writing process of *Fragments from a Lost Diary/Rouxing* is already inescapably marked by this dichotomy. Being the most overtly *nüxing* and feminist contents of the story revealed in the English version but often omitted or completely changed in the Chinese one, my analysis will focus on the original English version of the story first, comparing it with the changes and/or omissions Yang Gang chose to write (or write off) in the Chinese version later.

⁵⁷ MacKinnon, Steve; MacKinnon, Jan, *op. cit.*, p. xxxiii.

5. Emerging truth: writing her-story in English

Fragments from a Lost Diary/Rouxing is a story on “the trauma of unwanted pregnancy or the complex impact of motherhood on political commitments and party work” which “implicitly interrogate the separation of private and public experience and problematize the revolutionary narrative in which female desire is mobilized on behalf of national salvation”.⁵⁸ In its original English version, anonymity is the necessary prerequisite for the author/narrator/protagonist not to be detected by anyone:

The author recycles the hugely popular fictionalized diary format to capture the intense mental, moral, and emotional anguish that engulf a woman radical as she contemplates the meaning of reproduction and motherhood amid the perilous throes of revolutionary change. For this writer, clearly, meaningful change in the contemporary social order was not to be achieved by transcending gender subjectivity but instead by transforming it. More pointedly perhaps, the story makes the compelling case that the specific adversities women activists often encounter at times of great social upheaval need to be recognized as forms of struggle in their own right. Thus, in the very act of telling this story, Yang Gang implicitly takes issue with the lament of her lead character that women’s participation in the fight for social change is doomed to be written out of history.⁵⁹

The story literally revolves around the flesh as a space of struggle where woman needs to conquer her freedom out of her forced confinement in bed as a pregnant woman. More than in Xiao Hong’s *Qi’er*, Yang Gang’s *Fragments from a Lost Diary/Rouxing* focuses on pregnancy as a hindrance to woman’s subjectivity and to her own fulfillment as a revolutionary subject. From the very ominous title in Chinese, juxtaposing torture with the body, Yang Gang seems to equate pregnancy with a form of torture, preventing woman from achieving revolution and independence.

The English version of the story opens with pain and writing as the only things the woman protagonist’s life is characterized by, the latter functioning as a form of compensation for the former:

⁵⁸ Dooling, Amy, “Introduction”, in Dooling, Amy (ed.), *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

“It is impossible for one moment to relieve the constant throbbing pain in my body. [...] Only writing – since there is no one to talk with – seems to take my mind out of itself, as small idle occupations do.”⁶⁰

Her lover seems to be cross at her because of her present condition: “Jing’s⁶¹ forehead has become noticeably more lined since he learned the reason for my illness”.⁶² Of course, man can’t accept woman’s pregnancy, because it is a hindrance to the revolutionary cause, yet neither can she, though for different reasons: “I know well enough how inconvenient a thing I am. *What small regard the female womb has for the ‘historic necessities’! It is its own history and its own necessity!* [...] What generosity of nature to make me this gift of the ‘illness of the rich’ at just such a time!”⁶³ Here Yang Gang explicitly mentions how His-tory and its male-centered priorities do not take woman’s own ‘necessities’ into account; in particular, her womb as a possible site of rebellion against nature’s laws of reproduction is marked by erasure, as it is not consistent with His-tory’s macro narrative of constant fighting. At the same time, in defining her pregnancy as an “illness of the rich”, the female protagonist acknowledges how having children is not a sensible choice for a revolutionary woman; only a rich and idle woman without a political conscience could afford wasting her time on such a ‘bourgeois’ act as having a baby. Giving birth and raising children, in other words, are seen as incompatible also with women’s gender-specific form of revolution, not just with revolution as a manly configuration of space. Actually, Yang Gang’s lament over the “historic” (meaning ‘inevitable’) necessities of the female womb is not simply a fatalistic (and thus reactionary) acknowledgement of women’s fate; it rather is a deliberate denunciation of men’s refusal to take responsibility for getting women pregnant, in fact completely disregarding a pregnant woman’s condition. Particularly in revolutionary times, Yang Gang clearly suggests, pregnancy is seen by men as an ‘irrelevant accident’ within the manly space of revolution; this means that woman and the limitations her body has to endure because of biology *and* because of man’s selfish behaviour are erased as they are not ‘epic’ enough and because they are not compatible with the macro-narrative of the revolution. Yang Gang’s denunciation, instead, is clearly aimed at including

⁶⁰ Shih Ming, *Fragments from a Lost Diary*, in Snow, Edgar, *op. cit.*, p.302. Originally written in 1933 and published in 1937. Reprinted in 1973.

⁶¹ Qing 青, in the current pinyin rendering. See Yang Gang, *Fragments from a Lost Diary*, in Dooling, Amy (ed.), *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 37.

⁶² Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

⁶³ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

woman's peculiar her-story as accidental prey to man's urges in the supposedly universal His-tory made of rude fighting and manly bravery.

Actually, the protagonist's thoughts are constantly focused on the revolution and on how her being trapped in bed can cause the whole (man-centered) revolutionary organization to slow down: "It isn't that my own small *role*⁶⁴ remains unfulfilled. It's that my incapacity causes interruptions and irregularities for everyone [...]. It is so terribly important that all our plans at this time should be unfailingly sure, so much more important than this struggling life inside of me."⁶⁵ She soon realizes revolution is more important than her "unendurable sickness"⁶⁶ and of the faetus hidden inside of her. Pregnancy thus represents a form of physical and psychological confinement for woman,⁶⁷ that is an obstacle she has to go through or eliminate in order to find her own space of awareness and freedom.

This sense of pregnancy as hindrance and confinement is heightened by the claustrophobic description of the protagonist's room located in Shatan, a street in Beijing: it is a place with no window, the door functioning as the only opening yet, when closed, "no air nor sunshine can stir within".⁶⁸ Besides, the wallpaper is "cracked", with "dust and cobwebs" hanging from the ceiling, rats and spiders as the woman's only companions, helping her "to forget the oppressive loneliness and agony of this dreary May day"⁶⁹ and hopefully "刺破这一屋子坚实的寂寞" (pierce the solid loneliness of this room).⁷⁰

⁶⁴ The Italics and the circumflex accent are in the original English version.

⁶⁵ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 303. See Yang Gang [written in simplified characters as 杨刚], *Rouxing* 肉刑 (Torture of the Flesh), in Yang Gang, *Yang Gang wenji*, cit., p. 215. Here the two versions are very similar in content.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*. The Chinese version defines her condition as adding many "想象不的麻烦" (unimaginable inconveniences) to the cause of the revolution.

⁶⁷ The 1935 Chinese version of the story actually opens with the words "我失了理性" (I've lost my rational faculties), thus focusing on woman's sense of entrapment within an 'irrational' (read 'unrevolutionary' and 'unmanly') situation. This same sentence is reproduced in the 1984 version only later, always on the first page of the story. Yang Gang [written in traditional characters as 楊剛], *Rouxing* 肉刑 (Torture of the Flesh), *Guowen zhoubao* 國聞周報 (Chinese Weekly), Shanghai, Guowen zhoubaoshe, 12-14, April 1935, p. 7. See Yang Gang 杨刚, *Rouxing*, cit., p. 215: "病苦使我失了理性" (my illness makes me lose all my rational faculties).

⁶⁸ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 303-4.

⁷⁰ Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, cit., p. 216. These words are not included in the English version.

The rude intrusion of the outside world adds to this claustrophobic atmosphere: the voice of one male neighbour suddenly fills the air, commenting out loud on the woman's suffering through sighs and groans of disapproval:

'How unendurable! How much better off dead!' Not content with exaggerated groans to himself, he sometimes ventures to tap the thin wall and whispers through the chinks in a soft, sympathetic voice: "Madam, sister, would you bring peace to my heart by permitting me to assist you? Ah, it is bitterly painful to me, painful!" However great my contempt of him I am helpless. I say nothing. My very silence provokes him to actual savage scolding and cursing. I am pestilence to him! We paste up the chinks in the wall, but he slits them open again with a knife.⁷¹

As in Xiao Hong's story, a wall signals a literal severance of the woman from the rest of the world, in this case preventing her from gaining privacy and independence: the neighbour deliberately spies upon the woman's life by literally cutting through her private space, intruding upon her and implying she can't be granted any personal space by society, because she is nothing but a "pestilence", a "burden"; that's how a pregnant woman might have looked to the eyes of a traditional Chinese man in the 1930s. The intrusion of the outside world and its stark brutality are further amplified by the sounds and noises coming from the courtyard:

The whole courtyard is crowded with quarrelsome voices. Women curse and scold and beat. There is a droning voice somewhere forever mechanically reading the old Four Books and classical poetry. Eight different families, living in a twelve-*chien*⁷² house, and each one rivaling the other to produce the loudest noise to create the greatest possible friction! The whole day long this courtyard boils and seethes, and only my damp, suffocating little room contributes nothing. Perfect Confucian harmony: *li, yi, lien, ch'ih*.⁷³

Ironically hinting at the New life Movement here, not only does Yang Gang overtly criticize the *Guomindang*'s hypocritical reintroduction of Confucian values to re-instill 'spirituality' in Chinese people's minds; she also reveals the physical and ethical decay Chinese people were going through

⁷¹ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, 305. As we will see later on, in the Chinese version, the man has no knife, but just opens the wooden wall banging heavily with his hand.

⁷² 'Jian' in the current pinyin rendering.

⁷³ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, pp. 305-6.

under the Nationalist yoke, showing human interaction as marked exclusively by verbal (and potentially physical) violence and subhuman cries.

The woman then starts overtly contemplating abortion for the first time: “That I should think, even now, of wanting to continue to exist only as the vessel of a chemical experiment heartlessly, inexorably formulating itself within me! And against my will! Am I insane to think of *that* way out? But it is obviously the solution. Still, I won’t consider it again to-day”.⁷⁴ Far from making up her mind, the woman lingers on conflicting thoughts on her condition, ruminating upon whether she should terminate the pregnancy or not:

I kept thinking of that hope, and it seemed to me the only way to freedom. I must have been very delirious. I remember pinching and pressing and even sharply striking my womb. How I wanted the little creature to die! And yet at the same time my heart seemed to be protesting with all the vigor left in me, responding with a blow at *me* for every one I struck at *it*! With the conflicting instincts – the one selfish, for the preservation of my child, the other unselfish, for the preservation of my usefulness – I felt for a while that only through a double death could any solution be cleanly achieved. Traitorous thought!⁷⁵

A conflict starts arising within the woman’s mind and body, a fight between selfishness and usefulness, motherhood and revolution, her flesh becoming the space where this conflict is enacted:

And yet I love this little life! With all the pain in it, I long for the wonderful thing to happen, for a tiny human creature to spring from between my limbs bravely out into the world. I need it, just as a true poet *needs* to create a great undying work. [...] Ever since my lunar pause, ever since the first quivering in my womb, my heart has been unspeakably shaken with the wonder of this knowledge.⁷⁶

As the torture of indecision starts devouring her mind and shaking her flesh, though, the woman finally decides to opt for abortion over motherhood:

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 308.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, pp.308-9.

I am awake at last, after years of bovine slumber. *I am more fully awake than when I first made up my mind to join the Revolution.* Only when the beat of life is lifted to this pitch, this fury, and this danger, only when destiny (here in my case *it is but a wayward sperm carrying its implacable microscopic chromosomes*, but nevertheless it is a form of destiny!) poses the choice between irreconcilable desires at a given moment, *only when a human being feels the necessity of ignoring personal feeling in the decision taken – only then can one talk of a revolutionary awakening!*⁷⁷

Not only does the decision of choosing abortion over motherhood prove the woman to be fully awake in terms of spatial awareness as connected to the revolutionary configuration of space, turned into an area characterized by manly fighting in blood and sweat; her acknowledgement of pregnancy as the result of selfish male sperm stuck inside a woman's body constitutes an even more subversive configuration of revolution as a woman-centered space. In other words, her acknowledgement is a *nüxing* statement, as it posits woman's decision as a form of resistance against an all-male construction of revolution and re-instates a gender-specific vision of blood and sweat as associated to the female body's inherent features when being forced into pregnancy or abortion alike, for both conditions imply shedding blood and sweat though they are not seen as 'heroic' acts like the deeds of war and fighting traditionally and culturally associated to man.

Her decision to have an abortion seems to shock her partner Qing at first, not only because it may be dangerous for her in such harsh conditions, as a revolutionary woman forced into hiding, but also because he believes abortion "isn't to be thought of! It's impossible!" and, most of all, because "later on you will regret it".⁷⁸ Just like war and fighting are traditionally and culturally seen as 'manly' acts, here Qing seems to hint at the cultural bias equating women with inherent mother-like qualities and positioning maternal instinct as inevitable for all women, thus making abortion 'impossible' because it is 'unfeminine'. Yet, as the woman gives her final answer to the matter ("Abortion, on the contrary, is the only way. It is settled"),⁷⁹ the man has to give in and accept his partner's decision. After all, Yang Gang seems to imply, it's up to the woman to decide whether or not having a baby, her own body being the only site where this decision can actually take place and turn into reality.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 310.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

Then Qing suddenly disappears, leaving her alone in the house for the entire night. She feels like an object, abandoned among dead things, “a dead one”, insignificant because she can’t play her role “as a social being, as I do when living with the working masses”,⁸⁰ thus being an active member of the revolution; on the contrary, she lies down as “an abandoned lump” surrounded by “the ceiling webbed with the spider’s spinnings, somehow making the room seem like a place where only discarded things should be”⁸¹ – those useless abandoned objects which apparently include herself. Then a friend, Lao Li 老李, comes to reveal her the terrible news: Qing has been arrested by the *Guomindang* police.⁸²

As she is left with no other choice but abandoning her house, the woman accepts Lao Li and his Korean wife’s help: she will live in their apartment, and the Korean woman, who is a doctor and an obstetrician, will look after her. The proximity between the two women creates a possible new configuration of space where a woman-centered bonding can take place within the manly space of revolution. At first, the protagonist and Doctor Li seem very different to one another, having almost nothing in common; their views on motherhood and abortion, in particular, seem to be mutually exclusive: Doctor Li barely speaks Chinese, yet as she comes to realize what the protagonist wants to do about the fetus, she starts sobbing and tries to convince her against this resolve. Doctor Li’s reaction seems to imply she may have traditional views on motherhood, which she probably sees as an inevitable goal for all women, even revolutionary ones, a point of view which the protagonist clearly sees as obsolete. The narrator herself seems to share the protagonist’s skepticism over Doctor Li, as her description of the Korean woman conveys a sense of criticism, at times even using overtly racist words to define her: for instance, Doctor Li is mainly described with negative adjectives, as if to undermine her most ‘feminine’ (read ‘essentialized’) features: “She held me close to her *fat breasts* while she shook with *convulsive sobs*. Almost *hysterically* she cried, ‘No, no, no! You shall not!’ Her *obviously deep emotion* rather surprised me.”⁸³ The words the narrator uses almost reveal a manly-like bias against all women who, condemned to essentialism, display extremely sensitive reactions to abortion, often on the verge of hysteria and always smothered by their own overwhelming anatomy, here symbolized by Doctor Li’s “fat breasts”, an image clearly incompatible with the narrator’s (and the protagonist’s) idea of making the revolution as the

⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 311.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 311-2.

⁸² *Ivi*, p. 312.

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 313. Emphasis added.

paramount goal for leftist women in the late 1930s. After comparing Doctor Li to an hysterical smothered (and smothering) mother-like figure, the narrator further undermines her by comparing her reactions to those of a little girl crying: “She kept sobbing, *as pathetically as if she were a small orphan girl*”.⁸⁴ The protagonist seems to imply that Doctor Li can only represent a traditional kind of woman, despite being a woman doctor in 1930s China, that is a country ravaged by a notoriously antifeminist regime such as the Nationalist one.

In her judgemental view on Doctor Li as displaying too much a ‘feminine’ behaviour to be an active part in the fight against tyranny, the protagonist fails to understand the actual implications of Doctor Li’s very existence as a woman doctor in a time and a place where surely no official *Guomindang* propaganda could conceive ‘doctor’ as equating with ‘woman’. Thus, Doctor Li is initially seen as a negative, ‘feminized’ (and thus deficient) element within the revolutionary space, as if the protagonist chose to analyse the other woman from a de-gendered, manly-oriented point of view equating a display of emotions and big breasts with excessive and bourgeois sentimentalism. But then, as Doctor Li starts revealing her own past, she’s finally granted the possibility to become an actual agent within the story and a strong revolutionary woman: her reaction to the protagonist’s decision to have an abortion was due to the fact she couldn’t have any children of her own, though she desperately wanted one.⁸⁵ Slowly, Doctor Li’s personality emerges as that of a free-willed, educated woman, who consciously chose to marry a revolutionary man despite her family’s objection:

Li *taitai*’s family were Christians and furious when she married her revolutionary husband. They disowned her. What annoyed them particularly was that, after they had spent so much money educating her and getting her medical degree, she had turned it to the service of such a worthless cause. They refused to extend to her even a copper of help.⁸⁶

As Lao Li often had to go into hiding for his revolutionary activities,⁸⁷ Doctor Li was often left on her own with neither money nor food, until she finally lost her unborn children seven times.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ *Ivi*, p. 314.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

The unfolding of Doctor Li's story transforms her into a truly revolutionary woman whose gender-specific experience of losing children while supporting the revolutionary cause creates a common space of sisterhood between the two women, a space where Doctor Li and the protagonist can share their pain and resistance, constantly erased by His-tory but temporarily salvaged through words recounting the past and through the protagonist's (and the narrator's) comment: "Is it possible for a woman to go through this horror seven times? *Women and revolution! What tragic, unsung epic of courage lie silent in the world's history!*"⁸⁹ Here lies the most important political message Yang Gang wanted to convey through her original story – a message significantly erased in the Chinese version, as we will see later on.⁹⁰ Clearly, Yang Gang sees His-tory as a great leveler denying women a space to express their own version of epic, struggling with life and death much more than men because of pregnancy and abortion, and because of the scars men and biology carelessly leave on their body and soul. By including these words in the English version of her story, Yang Gang deliberately used writing to reinstall this space of oppression and possible resistance women were being denied both by *Guomindang's* oppression and by fellow revolutionary men. Her cry against His-tory is the most lucid and self-aware *nüxing* statement she weaved inside her tale of sisterhood, abortion and revolution.

Doctor Li's sad story culminates in the sudden death of her eighth child: after managing to survive for seven months, the baby was brought to prison together with its parents, as they were arrested for political activities ("Ten days of that is sufficient to kill any child. Theirs died."⁹¹). As Doctor Li's story ends, tears come to her face, but the protagonist no longer sees her cries are a sign of weakness nor as a token for a traditional woman's behaviour: now that the bond between the two women is sealed, the tears have become the most basic expression of "the repressed misery burning within her".⁹² There is no longer any judgement on her, only compassion and solidarity towards a fellow woman revolutionary whose pain will never be celebrated in the Long March nor in the book of His-tory, as no man would consider it to be a truly 'epic' tale: no matter how we see her husband showing empathy towards her sudden urge to share this pain with their host, Doctor Li's words will

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

⁹⁰ For instance, the very introduction to the whole book edited by Amy Dooling takes this potent sentence written by Yang Gang as its starting point. Dooling fails to mention how this sentence is completely absent from the Chinese version of the story, though. See Dooling, Amy, "Introduction", in Dooling, Amy, *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 1.

⁹¹ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

⁹² *Ibidem*.

forever be sealed inside their little room, in a house targeted by the police where oppression can come and erase everything and everyone (mostly women) at any time.

In a way, though, the words Doctor Li uses to describe her story will never leave the protagonist's mind nor the doctor's, in fact not only the space created by those words transforms Doctor Li's personality and behaviour in the protagonist's eyes from traditional, sentimental woman to revolutionary fighter; it also transforms the protagonist's choice to have an abortion in the doctor's eyes from murder to lucid political decision. Consequently, Doctor Li accepts to help the protagonist with a self-induced abortion, as now they both share a female-centered version of epic, where blood and sweat are generated by the actual fighting of woman against her own womb, seen as a prison cell severing her from the spatial freedom granted by revolution.

As the two women reach a political agreement, the protagonist takes some pills to induce abortion, and the torture begins once again: "I feel exactly as if there were dozens of repulsive hairy worms crawling back and forth in all my joints! It seems to me that if these worms managed to get out they would take with them the basic tincture of my life-blood!"⁹³ This space of torture she experiences within her flesh is then echoed by the torture she imagines Qing might be suffering from at the hands of the *Guomindang* police:

An old man with red, blinking eyes bent over him, holding a huge kettle with a tiny spout, out of which he poured "pepper water" into Jing's nose. "Among means for the regeneration of Mankind," old red-eyes quoted Confucius, "those made with great demonstrations are of least importance." [...] The torturers revived him by turning him over and emptying him of water. More than forty kettles had been poured into him! [...] Now and then the torture would cease while Jing was cross-examined. [...] It seemed that already I had been shoved in front of him, and whipped on my bare back.⁹⁴

As she sees Qing's face "mottled with red, blue, purple, and greenish bruises. Blood clung to his hair",⁹⁵ the protagonist suddenly notices the officials coming towards her: they start tearing off her jacket, ready "to whip my back and breasts in front of him. Then I did scream. Opening my eyes I

⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 315.

⁹⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 315-6.

⁹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 316.

looked into the face of Li *tai-tai*, who had her arms around me”.⁹⁶ Sisterhood comes to the protagonist’s rescue to release her from that nightmare: the comforting embrace of Doctor Li, who shares the space of woman-centered revolution with her, manages to help the protagonist momentarily keeping torture, both real and imaginary, at bay.

Besides, this inescapable woman-centered truth, as associated to the option of maternal labour on the one hand and to abortion on the other, makes the outerness of landscape, represented by the wind, overlap with the innerness of woman, represented by torture and pain: “All the paper panes in the windows have been burst open by the storm. *The wind screams like a woman, like a woman in torture and travail*. It shows its torn face through the window – but am I still delirious?”⁹⁷ As the space of the wind/woman refuses to bow to the erasing force of His-tory, the protagonist realizes her final decision to expel the faetus from her aching imprisoned body will help her “get into the world again, to carry on Jing’s work and my own”, thus using her rational faculties and independent *nüxing* spirit instead of giving in to the “useless, pointless enterprise”⁹⁸ of pregnancy. Once the ‘stone’ forcing the protagonist’s body and flesh to inanity is disposed of, the woman will finally be part of the revolution again, and march along with the other protesters on the day of the anniversary of the May 30th 1925 massacre⁹⁹:

Tomorrow is May Thirtieth, day of awakening for China, day on which the masses everywhere rise up to show their growing strength and unity. Tomorrow over the whole nation resolute young men and women will march forth, defiantly, and some of them will be killed – and from their deaths new strength will arise. But I – weighed down by a stone! Women and revolution – strange pair!¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, pp.316-7. Emphasis added.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 317.

⁹⁹ In a footnote she herself included in the English version of the story (but not in the Chinese one), Yang Gang writes how May 25th, 1925 “was the day on which foreign police in Shanghai killed many students and workers in a demonstration, an incident which inflamed the whole nation to anger.” *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi*, 317-8. In her collection of interviews included in her book, Smedley also mentions the incident Yang Gang refers to in her story, defining it as “the massacre of students and workers by the British police of Shanghai, May 30, 1925. Far more than the May 4th incident this massacre revealed to us that imperialism is the great hindrance to the advancement of China. We determined to fight it down.” Then the *Guomindang* police massacred the students and workers and soon the revolution shifted from the urban to the countryside setting, with peasants fighting to emancipate themselves from the yoke of imperialist forces. From 1927 up to the late 1930s “the feudal merchant class, the old officials, and all the bourgeois intellectuals that had sprung from their ranks were adopting every measure possible to regain their lost power and crush the rising mass revolution”. Smedley, *op. cit.*, p. 16; p. 18 respectively.

Pain takes hold of her flesh again as the protagonist ingests two more pills. Will the space of revolution be conquered or erased? Will the police come and arrest her before she can actually free her body from the weight it hides, or will she finally come to her senses and actually join the protest in the street? Will she meet Qing again, or is he actually dead? Worse still, will she live or will the drugs she has just taken prove fatal and kill both fetus and woman? The story gives no answer to these questions, in fact it stops abruptly heightening the tension and torture experienced by the woman up to the very end: “My whole flesh itches and stings and burns. My entire body pulses as if with anchored lightning. Everything around me is poisonous, sickening. There is that hot stone ready to burst from within me at any moment – another ready to burst from my head.” [*Here the diary ends*].¹⁰¹ The final, briskly interrupted words seem to corroborate the idea of uncertainty, suspicion and impermanence in woman’s struggle for the resurgence and re-emergence of her fragmented flesh to tell its own gender-specific her-story to the world, while simultaneously highlighting Yang Gang’s constantly living on the verge of being erased by the *Guomindang*, as the 1935 rewriting of *Fragments of a Lost Diary* in Chinese with the title *Rouxing* clearly testifies.

6. Erased truth: writing (off) the space of suffering in Chinese

Actually, many gender-specific elements Yang Gang decided to focus on in the English version are absent from the Chinese one. In the opening passage, for instance, the protagonist refers to herself not as a ‘woman’ but as a ‘person’: “凡有小孩子病的人, 定知我这是如何妄想” (After all, I’m just *a person* suffering from pregnancy. Surely I know this [escaping from pain] is just a vain hope).¹⁰² Also, all reference to writing as a possible consolation for her condition is erased from the opening passage of the story in Chinese, as if to undermine the possible role of creativity in a pregnant woman’s life: all the focus is shifted to physical pain instead, all intellectual activity and “rational faculties” gone. Right from the start, thus, the Chinese version posits woman’s “痛苦”

¹⁰¹ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p.318.

¹⁰² Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, *cit.*, p. 215. This translation and the following ones from the 1984 version of the story are all mine.

(agony) and her “活罪” (living hell) as the only possible truth she has to face, with tossing and turning on the wooden planks of the bed as the only possible way to temporarily alleviate her pain.¹⁰³

Another important woman-centered passage is erased from the story: when her lover Qing reacts negatively to the news of her pregnancy, the narrator does not mention the “female womb” with “its own history and its own necessity” as politically different from His-tory. The whole feminist comment is instead replaced by a neutral one, which actually shifts the perspective from the pregnant woman to her male lover, “变成病榻前的奴隶” (turned into a slave to my sickbed).¹⁰⁴ Thus, the lament and denunciation of men’s selfish behaviour towards women’s pregnant condition is completely written off in the Chinese version of the story, where the anonymous woman protagonist defines herself simply as “有孩子病的人 (a *person* suffering from pregnancy)”¹⁰⁵ whose illness constitutes nothing but “一個凹字形” (a dented, hollow shape),¹⁰⁶ an accident with no manifest gender specificity of any kind. Even the dilemma over abortion seems to be softened by her lucid resolve to distance herself from “這小屋裏特有的了了他” (the peculiar creature in this room I am to dispose of),¹⁰⁷ almost as if Yang Gang wanted to divert her Chinese readers’ attention from the act of abortion itself, making the woman’s choice devoid of all its political implications but turning it into a random ingredient within a story revolving around a universal, de-gendered form of torture as the only possible experience left in a world without freedom.

The claustrophobic sequence with the neighbour first and the courtyard people nearby later seem to corroborate this idea of a muffled, de-gendered version of torture: actually, the neighbour here appears to have no specific weapon to cut through the wall and intrude upon the protagonist’s privacy; he just opens the pasted holes in the wall “划开偷看” (peeping in with one stroke),¹⁰⁸ thus using his bare hand instead of a brutal weapon as a knife, as if Yang Gang did not want to signal

¹⁰³ Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, cit., p. 215. The 1984 version of the Chinese story is written in simplified Chinese, while the 1935 one is written in traditional Chinese. The two versions mainly differ in graphic layout and characters layout (from the traditional to the simplified one), while the content is the same, although some sentences are reproduced in a different order. Unless otherwise stated, all the following citations from the Chinese version of the story will be from the 1984 version.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ Yang Gang, *Rouxing* (Guowen zhoubao version), cit., p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

man's cultural (as well as physical) violence in prying upon woman's subjectivity, on the contrary, trying to lessen man's actual oppression against woman in Chinese culture, society and politics. All ironic reference to the four Confucian values is also lost, replaced by a generic hinting at the abnormal, subhuman state Chinese people were reduced to in the 1930s, comparing the courtyard to a slaughterhouse filled with voices “终日打鸡骂狗” (cursing and barking all day).¹⁰⁹

Also, the whole pregnancy/abortion dichotomy is silenced down, and the protagonist's ruminations often equate 'woman' with essentialism, associating the birth of a child to the act of writing: “当然我是个女人，我喜欢由我自己迸发出一条新生命，正如一切作家们创造他们的名世作品一样 [...]；被它称为母亲！这样的光荣和喜悦，谁有权利谁有力量来拒绝？我没有，一切女人也都没有” (Of course, being a woman, I like the idea of a new life bursting out of me, just like all writers create their famous works [...]；being called 'mother' by this creature! It would be such an honour and joy, who has the power to resist? I certainly don't, *neither do all women in general*).¹¹⁰ Here Yang Gang seems to turn all political *nüxing* statements about women's erased struggle within the manly space of revolution into a banal celebration of the 'natural' maternal instinct every woman is bound to possess, even replacing the supposedly too crude image of “a poisoned needle to thrust into my womb”¹¹¹ with “象毒针一样猛刺入我的脑中” (a poisoned needle thrust like a violent splinter into my brain),¹¹² thus erasing all clear reference to the act of 'killing' through abortion with a metaphor, replacing the womb with the brain, thus the flesh with the intellect.

Not only does any non-essentialist reference seem to have disappeared from the story, but also all explicit detail referring to either the Revolution and the *Guomindang* are completely missing from the Chinese version, apparently making both *nüxing*-centered statements and CCP-oriented, revolutionary ones impossible (as any occurrence of the word 'Guomindang' is).¹¹³ The very act of changing the title into *Rouxing* actually makes *anything* but torture – including revolution –

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 218. Emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

¹¹² Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, *cit.*, p. 218.

¹¹³ For instance, both the words 'Guomindang' and 'Revolution' (or 'revolutionary') are erased from the Chinese version. See Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, *cit.*, p.218; p.222; p.223; p.224 respectively. See also Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 309; p.313; p.314; p.318 respectively. The explicit reference to 'the working masses' included in the English version, is replaced by the politically neutral “人群” (multitude) in the Chinese version. Shih Ming, *op. cit.*, p. 311. See Yang Gang, *Rouxing*, *cit.*, p. 220.

impossible to appear in the story, as torture is the only possible experience left in a politically neutral world without freedom. Actually, the absence of any explicit space of revolution from the story's narration in the Chinese version makes the presence of the enemy perhaps even more frightening, hovering on the protagonist's and other people's lives with its nameless and invisible threat. This sense of dealing with something invisible and nameless seems to amplify woman's experience with pain and torture as inhabiting a prison-like space: the room and the protagonist themselves are thus defined as “埋在这阴沉的古墓里 [... 这个] 黑暗的坚房” (*buried in this ancient tomb [...], this obscure prison*)¹¹⁴ where life is constantly reduced to a bare and painful lingering “到了死的边陲” (on the verge of death)¹¹⁵ where all possible human interaction seems lost, itself similar to a “死刑” (death sentence)¹¹⁶ or to something almost dead already.

Even Doctor Li's story and her interacting with the protagonist are reduced to a pale, brief intermission with no judgement nor sisterhood of any kind; also, the doctor's experience in prison is muffled and deliberately censored: in this version, the Lis and their son spend some months in prison *then* move to China, presumably implying they were imprisoned in Korea, thus erasing any possible reference to the Chinese government's brutality.¹¹⁷ Only one vague element of bonding between the two women is left, as the protagonist wakes up from her nightmare, finding herself “在李太太的怀抱” (lying on Li *taitai*'s lap)¹¹⁸ – though this suggests more a temporary and random mother-daughter-like interaction than an actual bonding between the two women.

Yet, in its final part, the Chinese version of the story takes a completely new direction, bearing more similarity with *Yi ge nianjing de Zhongguo gongchandangyuan de zizhuan* than with *Fragments from a Lost Diary*: though equally left broken and interrupted in the end just like the original English story, the narration shifts its focus on the actual imprisonment of the protagonist. First, she explicitly equates pregnancy and the lingering of the faetus in her body to oppression (“定要驱遣可怜的肉体去忍受一切受不尽的宰割” (I've decided I want to expel this pathetic creature

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 221.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*. This is how the protagonist actually defines abortion.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, p.222.

¹¹⁸ *Ivi*, p.223.

and endure *this endless oppression* no more),¹¹⁹ swallowing two more pills at once and thus configuring abortion as a strategy to find a space of freedom for woman. As the police might come any minute to arrest everyone, this configuration of space as freedom from torture within and without the body of the protagonist proves to be nothing but a fleeting escape: the narrator's focus shifts abruptly, leading us into a small room where the protagonist lies surrounded by “十几个蓬头污面的女犯人” (a dozen women prisoners with disheveled hair and dirty faces).¹²⁰ An armed soldier stands at the barred entrance of the cell, pacing to and fro but constantly checking on all prisoners to behave and be quiet. The woman knows she might be beaten, tortured or even executed in no time, yet she can't help but finding consolation in the only weapon she has left against torture and against her enemies: writing. “我不怕; 我还是用这根发针在这块薄纸板上刺写; 我要赶快, 怕天亮了之后, 我的命运使我再也写不成了” (I'm not scared. I'm using this needle to pierce into the broad paper board [to write down my diary]. I must hurry, as I fear when dawn comes, destiny won't allow me to write anymore).¹²¹ While the English version focused on writing as a form of consolation in the opening passage of the story, the Chinese version sees writing from a different angle, mentioning it in the final part of the story, where the setting is no longer the protagonist's room but the cell of a prison. In other words, the Chinese version installs prison as an actual space of torture but also as a space the woman writer can literally pierce through with her creative needle, in order to inscribe the possibility of her own break-out within the perimeter of brutal oppression. Consequently, though the act of recording what the police has done to her and to other women may be lethal, resulting in the death of many prisoners, it also becomes a deliberate strategy to resist man's violence and power at all costs.

Actually, this action of writing in hiding while being imprisoned constitutes a genuine political statement, as it reveals the protagonist's (and the narrator's) will to re-introduce fighting, revolution *and* a *nüxing* standpoint within the fabric of the story, despite most of the overtly political statements have been written off if compared to the original English version. Here the narration goes back to the moment of the actual arrest of the woman: the police comes in the exact moment the protagonist and Doctor Li are preparing for the abortion procedure, so they are both vulnerable and unable to prevent the soldiers from entering the room. The protagonist is visibly hurting, yet

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

¹²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 224.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*.

brutality stops at nothing – “病苦不能感动人” (Pain can’t move [these] people)¹²² – here the narrator clearly hints at the typical male strategy of erasing women’s suffering from the political macro-narrative: to her male jailors’ eyes, she needs to be escorted to prison anyway, regardless of her predicament, and in so doing they dismiss both her gender and her present condition (significantly caused by a man) completely.

This construction of the male and female genders as all-powerful and invisible, written on and written off respectively, is reversed by the narrator not only through the act of writing as a form of feminist resistance against power, but also through the introduction of a new female character in the story: once in prison, the protagonist meets another pregnant woman, who she defines as “个人和我同样情形” (a *person* sharing my circumstances),¹²³ thus apparently depicting a de-gendered version of a fellow pregnant woman prisoner within the cell’s enclosed space. Yet, the presence of the other woman actually allows the protagonist to focus on the unjust discrimination pregnant women have to face, ultimately turning the story into a denunciation of power as a male-centered erasing strategy against women. The other woman lies fainted on the floor,

腿张得大开，裤子和衣服全是血，裤裆里有许多看不清的血肉块。肿了的两只手摊放在膝上，全是青紫大泡；在她半合着的眼下，挂着白浆似的眼泪，嘴唇僵硬的张开，白沫和涎涂满了一下巴。约略听说她是个女房东，有了六个月的身孕。最近她的房客某学生因为犯了该杀头的‘危害民国’嫌疑，偷跑了，官家便着落在这大肚子女人身上要他。把她抓来，抽了皮鞭，又打了竹板 [...]. 医官不在家，没有人来理会。

her legs wide open, her trousers and clothes all stained in blood, with many dark blooded traces of flesh on her crotch. Her swollen hands lay motionless on her knees, completely cyanotic. In the very moment I was looking at her she was in such a state... a thick white liquid similar to tears ran down her eyes, and her lips rigidly opened wide, foam and saliva smearing her face all over. I faintly heard somebody say she was a landlady and that she was six months pregnant. Recently her tenant, a foreign student who had committed a crime, had been condemned and was to be beheaded on suspicion of ‘harming the nation’, yet he was on the run, so the government authorities had gone to ask for his whereabouts to the woman with child. Then they had seized her and whipped her [...]. The medical officer wasn’t there [on duty], and no one else had come to look after her.¹²⁴

¹²² *Ibidem.*

¹²³ *Ibidem.*

¹²⁴ *Ivi*, pp.224-5.

Though nameless and voiceless, the other woman is neither dehumanized nor reduced to an inanimate object; on the contrary, her bleeding presence functions as a mirror for the protagonist's (herself anonymous) own suffering and also as a reminder of His-tory's erasing strategy when dealing with women and their gender-specific conditions like pregnancy (as in the other woman's case) or abortion (as in the protagonist's case). The story ends with the protagonist's actual bleeding and physical torture (“血流出来了[...] 全个身子象掉在毒蛇口里似的”, Blood has just flown out of me [...] My whole body is falling inside a poisonous snake's mouth), culminating in the surrounding space suddenly turning dark (“五月一天的黎明... 咦, 窗上什么黑影...” (It's the dawn of a May day... and yet, how dark it is through the window...)¹²⁵ and invisible, all promise of freedom fading to black.

7. Manliness, maternal spirit and *nüxing* awareness

Yang Gang's literature was no doubt part of the 1930s 'spirit of the masses' trend, according to which authors had “不必怎样精, 用不着什么雅” (no need for refinement, no need for elegance).¹²⁶ This had a strong impact on her literary style: while

五四时气的读者, 对温情脉脉的女性笔调拍手叫好, 对缠绵悱恻的男观女爱心满意足。置身血与火的时代, 读者已经难以接受缺乏力度的作品, 审美上需要一种阳刚之气。历史向现代作家发出了急切的呼唤, 时代要求女性文学重新考虑价值取向。终于, 文坛女士悄然隐退, 一批女性作家以文坛斗士的姿态向读者走来。[。。。这个阳刚之气] 代表了三十年文学的主流。文学主潮随着整个社会的变革而变得空前的政治化。

the readers of the May Fourth era praised the *highly sensitive* style of women writers, and the *exceedingly sentimental* love affairs they narrated with self-indulgence, in the era of fire and

¹²⁵ Ivi, p. 225.

¹²⁶ Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Lu Xun zawen quanji: nanqiang beidiaoji- xiaopinwen de weiji* 鲁迅杂文全集: 南腔北调集·小品文的危机 (Complete Essays by Lu Xun: a mixture of accents. Essays on Crisis), as reported by Yan Shun-ling, *op. cit.*, p.12.

blood, though, readers were not likely to accept works *lacking in strength*, as literary aesthetics needed to display *manliness*. History demanded a prompt answer from contemporary writers and a reshaping of *nüxing wenxue* on completely different grounds. In the end, literary women gradually disappeared and the rare *nüxing* writers still working had to present themselves *with a warrior's attitude* to their readers. [This manly literary trend] came to express the mainstream literature of the 1930s [following] the transformations of the entire society and its unprecedented politicization.¹²⁷

This meant that *nüxing* writers had to deliberately move away from the conscious use of *nüxing huayu* 女性话语 (feminist discourse) common in May Fourth and late 1920s women's literature, in order to rather lay stress on the expression of collective experience, by weakening their “女性意识” (*nüxing* awareness) and ultimately drown it so that “女性文学被异化了或是雄性化了” (*nüxingwenxue* became alienated or masculinized), that is not focused on women's specificity.¹²⁸

Many women writers who chose to join the Communist revolution and the fight against the *Guomindang* contributed to this new literary trend, displaying what was often interpreted as a “无私” (selfless) character, fully dedicated to the cause of proletarian revolution, “富于慷慨的牺牲精神的‘地母’变体 [...然后] 置个人幸福于度外, 因为‘不是浅薄的浪漫女子’” (imbued with a fervent spirit of sacrifice which was yet another variation of the ‘maternal spirit’ [...and] setting their own individual happiness aside, because ‘they were not shallow or sentimental women’).¹²⁹ Some of these women were from the countryside; consequently, seeing things from a *funü* standpoint (that is a collective and class-based ideological frame of mind), they could display a genuine kind of ‘heroism’; all the other women, coming from the urban milieu, did not automatically possess any heroic quality: they could just aspire to revolution but not spontaneously become revolutionaries. Being a small-town woman moving to the capital for studying at university, then joining the revolution and moving back to the countryside as a war correspondent, Yang Gang was a combination of both, herself displaying a mixture of heroism, revolutionary enthusiasm and *nüxing* awareness.

¹²⁷ Yan Shun-ling, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Emphasis added.

¹²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 13.

¹²⁹ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 107.

While apparently praising Yang Gang's style and many 1930s women writers for managing to broaden the proletarian collective narrative by including possible *nüxing* contents in her writing, though, Chinese scholar Yan Shunling actually highlights them for their “英雄气概、牺牲精神” (heroic and self-sacrificing spirit) and for their “异常强烈” (unusual strength),¹³⁰ thus once again reducing them to mere female versions of men, that is equating them with *nüren* rather than with *nüxing*. In particular, in her analysis of Yang Gang's style, Yan Shunling praises her for writing literary works filled with “阳刚之气” (manliness) and for her “炽烈的爱国精神” (blazing patriotic feelings), seeing *Rouxing* in particular as focused on

女性生命痛苦和民族的苦难相联系，以牺牲女性个人利益奉献于国家和社会，突出了坚韧顽强、深明大义的品格，这种品格超越了私爱和家庭之爱，使时代灵魂、民族尊严和革命情怀都得以升华。

the relation between the agony of a woman's life and the suffering of the nation, making woman sacrifice her own interest as an offering to society and country, thus giving prominence to a tenacious, politically conscious style which *transcends individual* love and familial love so as to reveal the spirit of the age, national dignity and revolutionary feelings.¹³¹

Yan's reading completely dismisses Yang Gang's gender-specific contents by reducing the protagonist's deliberate political (read 'gendered') decision to have an abortion as a mere act of self-sacrifice and as a tribute to the virile master narrative of the Revolution. In her analysis, Yan seems more concerned with detecting Yang Gang's supposedly great patriotism than with a possible re-emergence of *nüxing* contents to the surface of literature (and His-tory) – which is her article purportedly is centered on. Also, her emphasis on *nüxing* as associated to 'feminine' qualities like beauty and overflow of feelings ultimately implies an essentialist reading of the *nüxing* signifier.

To my view, what Yang Gang's story reveals is a woman writer's perception of the body's voice and language, the strengths and implications of its meaning¹³² in a subversive, de-essentialized *nüxing* way. In particular, by analysing the Chinese version of the story we can see how, though apparently writing off all reference to either *Guomindang* oppression, manly CCP-oriented

¹³⁰ Yan Shun-ling, *op. cit.*, p.13.

¹³¹ All quotes *Ivi*, p. 15. Emphasis added.

¹³² Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 113.

revolution or woman-centered resistance, through her translating/erasing strategy from English to Chinese Yang Gang finally managed to reinstate a *nüxing* perspective within the story, thus creating a possible space of resistance and survival for a woman through writing and shared suffering with another woman, because of their condition as pregnant/soon-to-undergo abortion women within the barren space of prison. In other words, her depiction of both the protagonist and of the other woman is not an essentialist interpretation of *nüxing* but a subversive one, precisely because their condition in a barren place devoid of any gender-specific symbols is an anomaly which man's all-compassing power constantly tries to erase.

In Yang Gang's story, not only is woman trapped within an actual prison, she is also trapped within the ontological perimeter of *nei*, as it happened for pre-republican China's women, confined in the hidden chambers of the house. Besides, in the Chinese version of the story, while initially absent from the literary space, writing ultimately proves to be woman's only form of empowerment and the only possible strategy to reach the outerness of *wai*: while the invisible regime constantly tries to erase woman's subjectivity trying to transform her into 'an empty site', the protagonist manages to re-instate her subjectivity through the hidden act of writing, literally piercing her way out of the confinement of *nei* to finally be free, despite and *because of* her final bleeding, itself a form of a visible symbolical protest against the invisible brutality of power. Thus, even in the Chinese version, apparently devoid of any *nüxing*-centered political message, Yang Gang enacts a powerful disruption of the social and political order, opposing male supremacy (and *Guomindang*'s antifeminist rule) with the double act of writing and bleeding: actually, writing literally becomes a form of bleeding out woman's soul and a way to let it pour out in the openness of *wai*, in order to escape the threat of being buried forever in the ultimate innerness of prison, torture and death. Thus, Yang Gang enacts a configuration of space as gendered, because both the bleeding body of woman and the act of writing about her own imprisonment are not neutral, but gender-specific; also, the protagonist does not choose to defy the space of *Guomindang* oppression by inhabiting the epic space of manly revolution, but rather opts for cutting through the GMD/CCP divide by creating a possible active *nüxing* space of resistance against oblivion within her imprisonment. In other words, the woman protagonist manages to create an alternative, gender-specific ideological space separating her both from the oppressive space of tyranny and from the space of the male-centered revolution, thus choosing abortion not simply as a form of 'selfless sacrifice' for the sake of the nation, but most of all as a path towards woman's personal and political freedom. This 'space of her own', however temporary and marginal it may seem, is built and conquered by Yang Gang and by

her anonymous female protagonist through the pregnancy/abortion obstacle pattern first and the paper board/needle locus of writing later, finally helping her truth and the truth of late 1930s Chinese women resonate in the flesh of writing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wreckage, war, woman: fragments of a female self in Zhang Ailing's *Qing cheng zhi lian* 倾城之恋 (Love In a Fallen City)

1. An ambivalent form of desolation

Wreckage and war soon became the ontological background of any literary creation for Chinese writers of the 1940s. On the one hand, as far as spatial imagination was concerned, the Sino-Japanese conflict (1937-1945) “干脆剥夺了中国人自己选择历史出路、哪怕是象征性选择的余地” (simply deprived Chinese people of any marginal space or any symbolic choice granting them a viable historical way out);¹ on the other hand, the actual physical space of the nation came to be organized along a “三个空间形象” (a three-spaced pattern) configuration:² the *Guomindang*-controlled areas, the liberated areas and the Japanese-occupied areas. While in the literature produced by women authors in *Guomindang*-controlled areas and liberated areas alike, any form of *nüxing* subjectivity was ultimately neutralized because of the emergence of national suffering against the foreign invaders, women authors working in the Japanese-occupied territories paradoxically managed to find a possible space for self-expression in the accidental crevices generated by the language and culture of aggression.³ In other words, although they literally lived in prison, somehow these women authors found a way to exert a form of suffocated agency among the splinters of a wrecking space. Yet, being the 1940s characterized by heightened precariousness, this construction of women's authorial voice and

¹ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 203.

² *Ibid.*, p. 204.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

of a possible *nüxing* self inevitably came to be inscribed “in the debris of history,”⁴ often emerging as a fragmented female self, rather than as a whole.

This was particularly true for Zhang Ailing (usually rendered as ‘Eileen Chang’ by Western translators and publishers), a woman writer whose overt lack of interest in political concerns condemned her writing to oblivion for thirty years in mainland China (but not in Taiwan)⁵ as the product of a ‘bourgeois’ individual. Indeed, “an unapologetic individualism”⁶ was the most distinctive feature of Zhang’s writing, one that seemed to condemn her to a tepid reception in the West too outside the circle of Chinese literature scholars, despite an early praise by literary critic C.T. Hsia⁷ and the late 1990s-early 2000s worldwide re-discovery of her work following two film adaptations of two homonymous novellas by Zhang (*Red Rose, White Rose* and *Lust, Caution*, directed by Stanley Kwan and Ang Lee respectively in 1994 and 2007).⁸ Besides, though she has often been praised as a literary genius⁹ and compared to influential Western

⁴Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Yan’s definition is inspired by her reading and analysis of Walter Benjamin’s analysis on modern history.

⁵ For a discussion on the popularity of Zhang’s writings in Taiwan and her influence on Taiwanese *feminine* writers of the 1970s and the 1980s in Taiwan, see Sung-sheng, Yvonne Chang, “Yuan Qiongqiong and the Rage for Eileen Chang among Taiwan’s Feminine Writers”, in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 215-237.

⁶ Wang, Xiaoping, “Eileen Chang’s Cross-Cultural Writing and Rewriting in Love in a Fallen City (倾城之恋)”, *Comparative Literature Studies. Special Issue: Modern China and the World: Literary Constructions*, 49, 4, 2012, p. 565.

⁷ “Eileen Chang is not only the best and most important writer in Chinese today; her short stories alone invite valid comparisons with, and in some respect superiority over, the work of serious modern women writers in English: Katherine Mansfield, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers.” Hsia, Cheng-tsing, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction 1917-1957*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1961, p. 389. As Liu Zaifu acknowledges, C.T. Hsia “helps Chinese and foreign readers recognize her as a literary genius.” See Liu Zaifu, “Eileen Chang’s Fiction and C.T. Hsia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. Part I: The Characteristics of Eileen Chang’s Fiction and Her Tragedy. Paragraph 1. A Speech Delivered at a Conference on Eileen Chang Held at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, 2000.” Translated by Yunzhong Shu. [online]. MCLC Resource Center, Ohio State University, July 2009. URL <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/liuzaifu/> (Last access: 07-18-2017 14:40 UTC).

⁸ For additional information on the sudden growing interest for Chang’s writing in the West following the film adaptations of her short stories and a revival of popularity towards her work in mainland China, as opposed to the constant interest shown in Hong Kong and Taiwan, see Kam, Louie, “Introduction. Eileen Chang: A Life of Conflicting Cultures in China and America”, in Kam, Louie (ed.), *Eileen Chang. Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2012, pp. 2-3. For a discussion on how literary criticism has changed from the ‘80s onwards in mainland China, see also Liu, Zaifu, “Eileen Chang’s Fiction and C.T. Hsia *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. Part II: The Biases in C.T. Hsia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction – A Response to C.T. Hsia’s Response*”, cit. Karen S. Kingsbury, one of the most important translators of Zhang’s work in English, also mentions the ‘Chang craze’ spreading in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China. See Kingsbury, Karen S., “Introduction”, in Chang, Eileen, *Love in a Fallen City*, New York, New York Review of Books, 2007, p. xiv. Translated by Karen Kingsbury.

⁹ After Zhang Ailing’s death in 1995, “a veritable mystique has been built around her” in all Chinese-speaking countries, including mainland China, where critics suddenly changed their attitude towards her writing. See Lee, Ou-fan Leo, *Shanghai Modern. The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1999.

writers – Henry James, Jane Austen and, quite recently, Alice Munro,¹⁰ to name just a few – Zhang’s solitary isolationism sometimes has been seen by Western or Western-oriented critics and scholars (especially feminist ones) with suspicion: according to Yan Haiping, for example, her apolitical stories of oppressed, seemingly non-triumphant women are mere products of “an ontological desolation”,¹¹ ultimately resulting in “human bankruptcy”.¹² In her book analyzing Chinese women writers from a feminist perspective, Yan Haiping completely dismisses Zhang Ailing, implying her writing wasn’t concerned with women’s empowerment – let alone liberation – at all, a view shared by Chinese scholar Wang Tian in her comparison between Zhang’s and Virginia Woolf’s visions on life and women.¹³ No doubt, trying to analyze Zhang Ailing from a liberating and empowering perspective for women would prove utterly disappointing, given the pessimistic tone of her writings:¹⁴ the optimistic vision of many May Fourth-inspired writers was replaced in her writing by a profound pessimistic view on the human soul – man’s and woman’s alike. She had no faith at all in the possibility to change one’s own destiny, because for her human beings were just mean creatures paralyzed inside the *nei* of their petty little lives with no *wai* to run to. This is why analyzing Zhang Ailing’s stories from a Euro-American feminist perspective can be really frustrating: her pitiless description of women’s weakness and of their material drive, ultimately resulting in no real agency for any of them, inevitably makes the author look irritating and disappointing to our eyes. Yet denying Zhang’s pessimism – with no independence whatsoever granted to women – would not simply mean misinterpreting her writing but also ignore the pain hidden in it. If *huangliang* 荒凉

p. 267. One of her most recent biographers, Yu Qing, describes her as “一段文坛传奇” (a literary legend). Yu Qing 于青, *Zhang Ailing zhuan* 张爱玲传 (Biography of Zhang Ailing), Guangzhou, Huacheng chubanshe, 2008, p. 2.

¹⁰ Scholar Yuanfei Wang has devoted her entire Master of Arts thesis on the comparison between the two authors. See Wang, Yuanfei, *Feminine Fantasies and Reality in the Fiction of Eileen Chang and Alice Munro*, University of British Columbia, MA Thesis, 2004. [online]. URL <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0091943> (Last access: 2017-07-18, 14:35 UTC).

¹¹ Yan Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Wang Tian 王恬, “*Tan Wu'erfu he Zhang Ailing nüxing guan de chayi* 论伍尔芙和张爱玲女性观的差异 (On the differences between Virginia Woolf and Eileen Chang’s feminist standpoints)”, *Qiannan minzu shifanxueyuan xuebao* (Journal of the Teachers’ College of Qiannan), 24, 6, December 2014, pp. 35-7.

¹⁴ C.T. Hsia defines Zhang Ailing as “a profound pessimist”. See Hsia, Chi-tsing, *op. cit.*, p. 414.

(desolation) was what ultimately prevailed in her writing – as she herself frankly admitted¹⁵ – it is because she wanted to depict no heroines or exceptional beings, but mediocre pawns crushed by destiny.

Yet, her desolation was an ambivalent one. Despite the fact she did not share the main concerns of Chinese women intellectuals of her time, apparently displaying no belief in woman's ability to improve her destiny, this did not necessarily mean she couldn't see reality as suffocating and oppressive for women. On the contrary, she did indeed analyse the ways in which woman's displacement within family and society could reveal her daily struggle for survival, albeit surrounded by a halo of desolation. Actually, Yan Haiping's negative evaluation on Zhang Ailing as a "non-feminist" writer doesn't take into account a possible Chinese configuration of feminism as a denunciation of patriarchal oppression of women within the man-woman transaction, rather than as a search for woman's empowerment at all costs. Actually, in her essay *Tan nüren* 谈女人 (On women, 1944), Zhang Ailing explicitly denounced women's inferior status as caused by men and by socio-cultural circumstances:

在上古时代，女人因为体力不济，屈服在男子的拳头下，几千年来始受支配，因为适应环境，养成了所谓妾妇之道。[...] 女人的缺点全是环境，然则近代和男子一般受了高等教育的女人何以常常使人失望，像她的祖母一样地多心，闹别扭呢？当然，几千年的积习，不是一朝一夕可以改掉的，只消假以时日。。。

Because of their lack of physical strength, since prehistoric times, women have always been subjugated under the fist of men's control. Throughout several thousand years of languishing under these circumstances and adapting to them, women have cultivated the so called 'wifely attitude'. [...] If women's weakness was entirely the result of their circumstances, then why is it that modern times women who have received the same college education of their male counterparts often disappoint others by displaying hypersensitive and hot-headed temperaments similar to their grandmothers'? Certainly, century-old habits can't be discarded in just one day; one only needs to wait for the right time to change them...¹⁶

¹⁵ Chang, Eileen, "Preface to the second printing of *Romances*", in Chang, Eileen, *Love in a Fallen City*, cit., p. i.

¹⁶ Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, "*Tan nüren* 谈女人 (On women)", in Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, *Zhang Ailing diancang quanji sanwen juan yi 1939-1947 nian zuopin* 张爱玲典藏全集 散文卷一 1939-1947 年作品 (*Complete Works by Zhang Ailing. Essays, Volume 1, 1939-1947*), Ha'erbin, Ha'erbin chubanshe, 2003, p. 61. Originally written in 1944.

Not only does Zhang Ailing complain about women's oppression as caused by men, she also points out how women themselves are often not strong enough to change their fate, as the 'lethargy' of die-hard habits takes hold of them completely. Although Yan assumes feminism is some sort of monolithic universal regardless of any specific historical and ethnical context within the space-time frame, dismissing Zhang Ailing's attempt at defining (and denouncing) woman's constraints within the enclosure of domesticity simply as an anti-feminist token of desolation implies we should also dismiss Ding Ling's first literary phase as exclusively essentialist, thus seeing it as irrelevant from a 'authentic' feminist point of view.

No doubt Zhang Ailing is highly problematic as a woman writer, as she doesn't fit into any clear-cut definition of neither what a feminist woman author (and the female characters she creates) should be – fully independent – nor what a post-May Fourth Chinese intellectual is supposed to be – leftist. Also, she clearly wished to extricate herself both from the May Fourth-generated *nüxing* signifier and from the CCP-oriented *funü* signifier by deliberately using the term *nüren* 女人, namely in *Tan nüren*, which makes her ambivalence even stronger. Actually, the difference in meaning among these signifiers and Zhang's deliberate use of *nüren* was connected to the historical changes China had been going through, especially during the Japanese invasion era and in the Japanese-occupied areas. The new form of precariousness generated by foreign aggression ushered both men and women living in these areas into an age of disillusionment, where no 'spirit of the masses' seemed possible anymore, confused as it was with pain, death and a vague hope of victory.¹⁷ This shattering of all beliefs soon became the only certainty for women writers of the Japanese-occupied areas: they found themselves living in a world where no actual *nüxing* choice seemed possible; consequently, they deliberately wrote about the lack of any alternative choice for themselves, and this realization of the impossibility of evading from this situation gave rise to “清醒、豁达与美” (a sober, sanguine and beautiful) “自己认识” (self-awareness) in their writing.¹⁸ This prison-like spiritual and ideological standpoint turned women writers' spatial quest from the *nüxing* rebelliousness of

¹⁷ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 219.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

the 1920s-1930s into fierce straightforwardness and ruthlessness¹⁹ – a quest which, far from displaying mere passivity, showed a true

对于男性中新社会的认识已不限于[...] 表达被压迫被玩弄被出卖者的怨憎。她们走出了这个‘弱者’的阶段 [...] 成长为有能力、有才智去以女人身份在男性世界里站稳脚根的女人。这女人并非弃绝男性，而是更懂得男性，也更了解自身，更明白两性关系包括爱情的低细。

awareness of the new Chinese society’s chauvinistic core [...] which] wasn’t limited to the wish of conveying the resentment and hate women writers felt about how much they were oppressed, toyed with or reduced to mere commodities. They moved away from this “weak” phase [...] so as to become powerful and wise by taking their rightful position in a man’s world as *nüren*. This kind of woman does not cast man aside, but understands him and her own self, while understanding even more the specific details of the love strategies required in the man-woman relationship.²⁰

While Ding Ling’s heroines of the late 1920s “向男性社会讨公正” (asked for fair treatment from a sexist society), the women characters created by the 1940s women writers imprisoned in the Japanese-occupied areas, “既然这社会男女之间本无公正可言，不如立起腰杆光明正大做人 – 当然是做女人，而不是做任人填补意义的空洞能指” (since they knew this fair treatment was impossible, they thought it better to stand upwards, face the truth and behave accordingly; of course they *had to* behave like *nüren*, as they couldn’t use any other form of representation to fill in the semantic void they had to bear and acknowledge for themselves).²¹

In other words, writers like Zhang Ailing created female characters who deliberately chose to behave like female versions of men, that is as *nüren*, because it was the only strategy left they had to survive in a world ravaged by His-tory where all meaning seemed lost, including what ‘woman’ and her spatial quest might mean. Yet, if we take Tani Barlow’s definition of

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 222.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 223.

nüxing as a woman displaying “an organic will” of her own despite the world constantly denying her space, we can easily see how the shrewd *nüren* Bai Liusu 白流苏, the protagonist of Zhang Ailing’s story *Qing cheng zhi lian* 倾城之恋 (Love in a Fallen City, 1943), shares many traits with 1928-born Ahmao in her struggle for *nüxing* self-expression and self-awareness. Furthermore, being Bai Liusu’s spatial quest also an indirect questioning of woman’s role in Chinese society, *Qing cheng zhi lian* can indeed be interpreted as a *feminist* story from a distinct Chinese perspective, more specifically from a late Qing-born elite woman’s perspective and from an author who chose to focus on the stifling limitations the ideological perimeter of *nei* still caused to women in the 1940s despite social changes, paradoxically in the same year (1943) China’s unequal treaties were abrogated and the country was internationally granted a “civilized status” despite being invaded by Japan.²²

Besides, the gender-specific quest of Zhang Ailing, unlike Yang Gang’s, wasn’t related to “the master narratives of political revolution or salvation” at all, as she chose to explore the “contractual” nature of all human interactions in general focusing on feminine sorrow in particular,²³ thus on ‘individual’ matters. In many ways, it was precisely in professing a deliberate “unapologetic individualism” that Zhang revealed her own otherness as a woman and as a writer: in a time when the majority of authors felt compelled to profess an optimistic drive towards progress and modernity, thus finding purpose in political activism and in politicized literature despite the Japanese invasion (also because most of them actually operated *outside* the Japanese-controlled area), isolationism and detachment came to symbolize a far more troubling form of otherness, because it was at odds with anything else, offering no solution to life’s contradictions and sufferings, but laying them bare for everyone to see. Like Lu Xun, Zhang chose to focus her attention on the ‘disease’ and decline of late Qing-generated (and/or influenced) Chinese society and urban elite in particular²⁴ while simultaneously

²² Duara, Prasenjit, *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, cit., p. 96.

²³ Chow, Rey, “Virtuous Transactions”, cit., pp. 94-5.

²⁴ C.T.Hsia speaks about her work as dealing with “a society in transition [...]” and with “the persistence of the past in the present, the continuity of Chinese modes of behaviour in apparently changing material circumstances” and displaying “a strong historical awareness”. See Hsia, Chih-tsing, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

transcending history depicting “the unhealthy collective unconscious of the Chinese”.²⁵ Unlike Lu Xun, though, Zhang Ailing found no consolation nor any reform-driven mission in literature. Her primary concern in describing the decline of late-Qing middle class values stemmed from her cold acknowledgement of His-tory being on the verge of collapse while she was constantly struggling against the precariousness of life in mid 1930s-late 1940s China. The war with Japan was at the very core of Chinese people’s (and writers’) existence, but though everyday life was bleak and ravaged, this “time being wrecked”²⁶ state of mind paradoxically granted her the lucidity to dissect human nature “with an artist’s compassionate detachment”.²⁷ As an echo of what was going on in the country as a whole, she dealt with family matters as she was dealing with war matters themselves, depicting a universe characterized by war on all fronts. If “human bankruptcy” was what ultimately prevailed in most of her writings, as Yan explicitly states, it was not because Zhang reveled in the desolation and wreckage His-tory was imposing on Chinese people and on lateQing-born elite in particular, but because she wanted to denounce that same bankruptcy as the most poignant element emerging from the ruins of society, family, people, and women too.

²⁵ Liu, Zaifu, II, 4, *op. cit.* Though Liu gives this definition on the collective unconscious only referring to Lu Xun’s writings, I believe Zhang’s ability to create unpassionate portrayals of Chinese men and women as mean at heart makes her own writing a further example of this definition.

²⁶ Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, *Zhang Ailing quanji 张爱玲全集* • 第四卷 (Complete Works by Zhang Ailing, Volume 4), p. 425, as reported by Yan, Haiping, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁷ Kingsbury, Karen, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

2. From wreckage to wreckage

Zhang Ailing's own life was a constant struggle to emerge and survive from wreckage to wreckage: her family belonged to the once powerful late-Qing aristocracy²⁸ whose privileged status had crumbled to dust because of China's unstoppable drive towards modernity. When Zhang Ailing was born in 1920 Shanghai, under the child name of Xiaoying 小煊,²⁹ there was little left of the glorious past of the family and of the country as a whole; this preliminary family wreckage echoing national disintegration soon resulted in a violent tension between decadent nostalgia for tradition and thirst for cosmopolitanism, symbolized by her parents' conflicting behaviours. While her refined but reactionary father Zhang Yanzhong 张延重 devoted his time to debauchery, smoking opium and taking a concubine to live with him, thus embodying all the negative aspects of Chinese tradition, by contrast, her liberated *nüxing* mother Huang Yifan 黄逸梵 (herself coming from a distinguished family) preferred Western culture and independence, eventually discarding family life from 1924 to 1928 to continue her studies in Europe and temporarily leave the immobility and oppression of Chinese society behind.³⁰ This duality³¹ left its mark on the daughter too, born under the Chinese name of Zhang Ying but later enrolled to the Virgin Mary Missionary School for Girls by her mother under the English name of Eileen Chang, a glamorous name her mother eventually started

²⁸Yu Qing, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4. Zhang Ailing's paternal grandfather Zhang Peilun 张佩纶 had married prominent Qing diplomat Li Hongzhang 李鸿章's daughter; consequently, he enjoyed a prestigious career as a government officer. Zhang Ailing's great-grandfather Li Hongzhang "was known to Westerners as the Superintendent of Trade – the chief architect of foreign policy in the late Qing. He was such a highly regarded figure that Queen Victoria made him a Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order". Kam, Louie, "Introduction", *cit.*, p. 3.

²⁹ Yu Qing, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 5-11. An authentic rebellious *nüxing*, Huang Yifan hated the fact that marriage had deprived her of the possibility of cultivating knowledge at a very young age only to bear and rear children, so she decided to leave her family behind for a while.

³¹ Yu Qing refers to Zhang Yanzhong and Huang Yifan as “真有天壤之别，水火不容” (two worlds apart, completely incompatible to one another, like fire and water). *Ivi*, p. 41.

using it in Chinese as well, translating it directly from English.³² As a child, the girl already experienced life as wreckage through this parental conflict, with her father and mother both consumed by a self-absorbed quest which eventually ravaged familial and personal survival alike. When her mother returned from her travel abroad in 1928,³³ living together proved impossible for the couple and they eventually divorced in 1930: again life was shattered to pieces for Ailing and everything had to be built again out the debris of her parents' relationship. There was no clear-cut solution to this splitting of life in two, no simple choosing between "father's dark, smoky lair; mother's bright, modern apartment",³⁴ as both parents seemed oblivious of their two children.³⁵ Yet Ailing at first had no choice but to live with her father, as the parents established he would be the only one entitled to raise the children, while the mother would continue providing for their education (although, finally free from marriage, she was soon to leave for Europe once again). Ailing's life was once again split in-between her father's relapse into the dusky cloud of self-destruction and the brightness of education she could feed on at school.³⁶ Despite being encouraged to write by her father,³⁷ as a young teenager Ailing managed to cultivate her own knowledge only by locking herself up in her room, without any practical knowledge of the outside world. The war with Japan hadn't broken out yet, but young Ailing already lived as a *neixiang* 内向 (introvert) prisoner, physically and psychologically self-confined to domesticity and strongly influenced by the indolent lethargic atmosphere of the house, devoting her time to study not to see decay and human bankruptcy taking hold of her father, eventually becoming oblivious of her own decay too. She spent so much time in her room that she "永远不记路" (completely forgot the way to the front door of the house), "却不

³² *Ivi*, pp. 14-5.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 12. The family moved back to Shanghai after Zhang Yanzhong had lost a prestigious government-related post in Tianjin.

³⁴ Kingsbury, Karen S., *op. cit.*, p. xi.

³⁵ Yu Qing, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-8. During this period, Zhang Yanzhong dilapidated all the money he had been left by his own family and by Huang Yifan's dowry, thus pushing the marriage to its final wreck. The couple had two children, Ailing and her little brother Zhang Zijing 张子静.

³⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 18-19.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 29.

知电铃在哪里” (not even knowing where the doorbell was)³⁸ but only dreaming of going to England once graduated from school.³⁹ When her mother came back from her second trip to Europe, in 1936, not only did Ailing find the strength to go to see her, expressing her wish to study abroad out loud; she also declared her decision to her father and his new wife, both of whom reacted very badly.⁴⁰ When in 1937 Ailing was beaten up by her father and stepmother for speaking up against their opium addiction,⁴¹ everything shattered to pieces again: locked up in her room for six months as a punishment for her ‘unfilial behaviour’ and suffering from dysentery-induced hallucinations, at the age of sixteen Ailing nearly died of lack of food and medicines but finally managed to escape from her prison at night, finding momentary shelter in her mother.⁴² But wreckage reared its ugly head once more: the Japanese invasion of Shanghai had already begun, and despite being free from her father’s decay, Ailing’s personal survival was threatened still. Had the war been confined to China only, she would really have gone to study English literature to the U.K., but she was forced to settle for the University of Hong Kong instead, hoping to build life anew there. This experience too was interrupted by yet another Japanese invasion on December 8th 1941, this time in the British colony itself.⁴³ Fleeing from wreckage again, Ailing returned to Japan-occupied Shanghai, where she enjoyed a brilliant but brief career as a writer. She managed to publish a collection of stories in 1945, finally revisioned with the unpretentious title of *Chuanqi* 傳奇 in 1947, and had an immense success, though history constantly threatened her life, until the ultimate wreckage came: when the Communist Party took hold of the country in 1949, being overtly apolitical and previously

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 34.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, pp. 41-4.

⁴² *Ivi*, pp. 43-5. Ailing also recounted her house imprisonment in an article written in English for the *Damei wanbao* 大美晚报 (Evening Post).

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 57.

married to a man publicly denounced as a “汉奸” (traitor),⁴⁴ Zhang Ailing was forced to leave Shanghai for Hong Kong first, then for the U.S.A., where she arrived in 1952 never to set foot on Chinese land again.⁴⁵ Her success had been stunning but meteoric and it was soon destroyed, just like any other part of her life had been: once in the U.S.A., Zhang Ailing tried to build up her career again out of the debris of her past, salvaging fragments of existence re-writing her stories,⁴⁶ but ultimately achieved only oblivion. She still tried to survive and create her own self out of the multiplied wreckage of her life caught in-between spaces – darkness and light, ruins and survival, desolation and reaffirmation of the self – in a constant echo of the family conflict between the father’s Chinese dim lair and the mother’s European bright apartment.

Wreckage is also an important element in the stories included in the *Chuanqi* collection, the most celebrated work by Zhang Ailing. These novellas depict life in Shanghai and Hong Kong and focus on characters “defined against [...] a culture in decadence”,⁴⁷ thus, like Zhang herself, living among the ruins of civilization but hoping to rise from its ashes. All her female characters seem to revolve around a vital question: can woman salvage some possible fragments of identity in a world constantly on the verge of collapse, or collapsed already? The novella *Qing cheng zhi lian*, in particular, explicitly associates the idea of wreckage to the presence of war, whose main setting is Hong Kong before and during the Japanese attack of December 8th 1941, that same attack that had forced Zhang Ailing to flee the city and its university and go back to occupied Shanghai. Wreckage and war are at the core of this novella, where Hong Kong as a city of ruins collapses all the while Bai Liusu, the female protagonist

⁴⁴ Her husband Hu Lancheng 胡兰成, critic and editor in chief of the *Zhonghua ribao* 中华日报 (China Daily) and of the *Nanhua ribao* 南华日报 (Southern China Daily), had served as deputy director of the cultural propaganda department in the puppet government of the Reorganized nationalist regime run by collaborationist Wang Jingwei 汪精卫 and established by the Japanese between 1940 and 1945. As the Japanese officially surrendered on August 25th, 1945, Hu Lancheng escaped first to Japan, then went to Taiwan, where he was offered a post as a university professor at the Taiwan Institute of Chinese Culture. The marriage between Hu and Zhang Ailing, though very brief (it only lasted from 1944 to 1947) and constantly kept secret for political reasons, was soon discovered by comrade Xia Yan 夏衍, responsible for the CCP cultural work in Shanghai. This permanently damaged Zhang Ailing’s career. See Yu Qing, *op. cit.*, pp. 137; 145; 152; 154; 163.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 170.

⁴⁶ Her final, posthumous work *Xiao Tuanyuan* 小团员 (Little Reunions), is a re-enacting of her own existence and writing combining them in a fragmented whole.

⁴⁷ Hsia, Chih-tsing, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

who left Shanghai in search for stability, tries to cling on to a fragment of life out of the debris of history: all of a sudden, the outside world steps inside narration, apparently wrecking the protagonist's life. But it is precisely in the debris of the city itself and within the wreckage of history that Bai Liusu eventually manages to find a crevice back into her life so as to hold on to a self-evident fragment of a *nüxing* self in the dichotomy of existence, in-between Shanghai and Hong Kong, China and the West, semi-colonial spaces and colonial ones, stale tradition and glittering modernity, oppression and escape – though this fragmented salvaging of the self may prove to be just an illusion for woman.

Bai Liusu herself is a woman wrecked by destiny when the story starts: she's a 28 year old divorcee forced to live with her brother's family and with no money of her own – her brother squandered all her dowry after her moving in back with the family. Her position within the Bai household is determined by her decision to leave a violent husband, his actions giving her enough grounds to file for divorce. The rights granted to women by the *Guomindang* Civil Code in terms of divorce were a recent innovation in China⁴⁸ at the time, yet these legal changes did not necessarily give any real freedom to women, as their fate was still chained to their family's and to its oppressive traditions. Zhang explicitly states so through a male family member, Third Master, whose words embody the atavic oppression still stunting Chinese women's growth as individuals in the 1940s:

法律呀，今天改，明天改，我这天理人情，三纲五常，可是改不了！你生是他家的人，死是他家的鬼。

The law is one thing today and another thing tomorrow. What I'm talking about is the traditional ethics, the three rules and five constant virtues of Confucianism, and these will never change! Your life belongs to the family, and when you die, your ghost too will belong to the family.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ “the new GMD Civil Code (1929-1930) – on the basis that all citizens were equal before the law – accorded women the same divorce rights as men, allowing them to initiate a divorce on ten different grounds (including bigamy, adultery, ill-treatment, incurable disease or mental illness).” Bailey, Paul, J., *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴⁹ Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, *Qing cheng zhi lian* 倾城之恋 (Love in A Fallen City), in Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, *Zhang Ailing quanji. Qian cheng zhi lian* 张爱玲全集·倾城之恋 (Complete Works by Zhang Ailing. Love in a Fallen City), Beijing, Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2009, p. 114. Originally published in 1943. Unless otherwise stated, all the translations from the text are mine.

The only freedom Bai Liusu seems to enjoy is the ability to ferociously snap back at her relatives whenever they verbally attack her. Besides, though the *Guomindang* reforms in matters of divorce may well have originated from the need to modernize the family as a form of compensation for the government's deliberate destruction of the women's movement in the White Terror campaign of 1927-1928,⁵⁰ traditional elite people in decline were still prone to consider divorce as unsuitable for women and divorcee women family members as a burden, “天生的扫帚星” (a jinx),⁵¹ because divorce could only result in irresponsible disaster, that is, in wrecking the foundations of family life and turning the divorcee woman into a wreck herself. After all, while apparently granting new rights to women in terms of marriage, divorce and inheritance, the *Guomindang* had simultaneously fostered a reinstatement of traditional feminine virtues through the New Life Movement of 1934-1935. In other words, the personal wreckage Bai Liusu has to deal with echoes the wreckage of all Chinese women smashing against their lack of any actual agency within society and family while being granted new institutional rights.⁵² Disillusioned, sour, but not prone to passivity nor despair, Bai Liusu can only resort to the use of sarcasm and anger as her weapons to survive her family in a context more and more characterized by a war-like atmosphere. This cannot last for long, though: as a potentially modern urban woman fighting to escape from a traditional context, she needs a way out of her misery and will do anything she can to accomplish her task.

Ironically, being the microcosmos depicted by Zhang Ailing in her novella characterized by “semitraditional, semicolonial”⁵³ traits, education and manual labour cannot be considered as viable options for a woman; here we won't find any Nora defying and eventually fleeing social

⁵⁰ Bailey, Paul, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 76-7.

⁵¹ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 114.

⁵² Not coincidentally, as Hershatler points out, although in 1936 “a draft constitution gave women the right to vote [...] this provision was not implemented until 1947” – exactly the same year when the *Chuanqi* collection was revised. Hershatler, Gail, *op. cit.*, p. 94. This meant that Zhang was creating a possible *nüxing* struggle to obtain her own rights in family and society precisely in the same period in which real women were still being denied actual political rights.

⁵³ Wang, Xiaoping, *op. cit.*, p. 566.

and family conventions because life is frozen, leaving the ‘rebellious’ woman “虚飘飘的、不落地” (floating and unconnected)⁵⁴ to anything and anyone else: Bai Liusu cannot rely on economic independence in order to break free from her family ties. As family relative Mrs Xu suggests, “找事，都是假的，还是找个人是真的” (looking for a job is the wrong thing to do. But looking for a somebody, that’s the right way to proceed).⁵⁵ In order to defeat her family and win the war for her own survival, it is imperative that Bai Liusu finds a husband she can rely on.

What Zhang envisages here, though, is not the building of a possible romantic relationship: despite what the title may suggest, *Qing cheng zhi lian* is *not* a tale of love, but rather a mockery and reversal of love, just as the whole collection of *Chuanqi* stories is a mockery and a reversal of traditional Tang and Ming tales of the extraordinary.⁵⁶ Zhang explicitly declared in a famous essay “我的作品里没有战争，也没有革命” (there is no war nor revolution in my works),⁵⁷ yet *Qing cheng zhi lian* eventually proves to be a tale of war indeed, even before any actual bombing breaks into the palace of the story. As it happened in most literary creations by all the women authors imprisoned in the Japanese-occupied areas, Bai Liusu and other female characters by Zhang Ailing display “一种前人所未有的清醒，一是对身处境的清醒，明白自己在社会关系中的位置和价值以及男人对自己的打算[...]; 明白自己必须选择一个什么方式生存 [...]。于是，张爱玲的爱情故事皆非写情，而是写男女双方的计谋之战” (an unprecedented clear-headedness and awareness with respect to their literary predecessors. They

⁵⁴ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 117. Here I opted for Karen Kingsbury’s rendering of the second set of characters, 不落地, which she translates as “unconnected”, though they may also suggest the idea of “lack of fixity” and of “leaving no trace behind”. See Chang, Eileen, *Love in a Fallen City*, cit., p. 120..

⁵⁵ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 116.

⁵⁶ “The tradition of *Chuanqi*, or ‘accounts of the extraordinary’, as a literary genre can be traced back to the Tang dynasty prose *chuanqi* as well as to the popular genre of Ming drama. In the Tang genre in particular, the accounts of extraordinary happenings often involve ghostly figures or legendary heroes and heroines. The Ming *chuanqi* drama deals, among other subjects, with historical romance”. Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *Shanghai Modern. The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 288.

⁵⁷ Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, “*Ziji de wenzhang* 自己的文章 (On my writing)”, in Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (2003), *Zhang Ailing diancang quanji sanwen juan yi 1939-1947 nian zuopin* 张爱玲典藏全集 散文卷一 1939-1947 年作品 (*Complete Works by Zhang Ailing. Essays, Volume 1, 1939-1947*), Ha’erbin, Ha’erbin Chubanshe, 2003, p. 16. Originally published in 1944.

knew how to assess their unfavourable situation, their position and value in society if compared to man's [...]; they knew they had to choose *whatever means to survive*. [...] Thus, Zhang Ailing's love stories are not about 'love' at all; they describe the war between man and woman and their mutual warfare strategies).⁵⁸ Actually, for Bai Liusu finding a new husband involves using elaborate tactics and schemes aimed at conquering a man and his assets, because this is deemed by social and cultural conventions as the sole means of survival for woman outside a ravaged family situation and outside her 'unconnected' self.

3. Conflict and conquest: Bai Liusu and her 'war' for life

Right from the start, Bai Liusu is highly aware of her anomalous position within the family as a divorcee woman, a status which can only cause conflict with the other household members, consequently generating a wish to escape on her part. In planning to do so, she also comes to understand she needs to act completely by herself: “她是个她是个六亲无靠的人，她只有她自己了” (She had no one of the family to turn to: she was on her own).⁵⁹ Yet in a semi-traditional world where hierarchy of any kind is still an important issue to achieve self-preservation, escape from conflict and independence from family ties can only come at a price for a woman, without involving any path to individual independence *per se*. Bai Liusu cannot look for a job to support herself, for she would lose her social status, nor can she use her own personal qualities to her advantage, for she seems to believe she has none.⁶⁰ Sadly enough, she can only resort to marriage and consequently to reliance on a man to be fully independent. As explained by Wang Tian, in Zhang Ailing's works, “女性并没有自我价值的认定[...]; 没有

⁵⁸ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., pp. 221-2. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 120.

⁶⁰ Later on in the story, she openly admits to Fan Liuyuan: “我什么都会，我是顶无用的人” (I'm not good at anything, I'm a utterly useless person). *Ivi*, p. 123.

男性依附作为保障的女性是没有价值的女性，受到整个社会的唾弃和欺凌” (women have no awareness whatsoever about their own personal value [...]; a woman whose economic safety did not come from relying on a man was considered to be worthless and eventually loathed and humiliated by the whole society).⁶¹ Having no value, no skills nor money of her own, Bai Liusu soon has to set off on a life journey whose final destination must necessarily be a man (and his assets), in order to secure her place in a male-dominated world. This journey is both a physical and a metaphorical one, where the break from family ties will bring Bai Liusu to experience Hong Kong, war and victory over a man's fortunes in the process. All three aspects of her journey originate from her basic quest of a husband as the only way out of her conflict with family members. In her aim for truth as bare display of the desolation of the human soul, the narrator makes it perfectly clear that Bai Liusu's quest of a husband has nothing to do with love but rather with self-preservation at the expense of her previous configuration of life, creating a con-quest strategy, waging war against everything and everyone standing in her way:

她开了灯，扑在穿衣镜上，端详她自己。还好，她还不怎么老。她那一类的娇小的身躯是最不显老的一种，永远是纤瘦的腰，孩子似的萌芽的乳。她的脸，从前是白得像磁，现在由磁变为玉——半透明的轻青的玉。上颌起初是圆的，近年来渐渐的尖了，越显得那小小的脸，小得可爱。脸庞原是相当的窄，可是眉心很宽。一双娇滴滴，滴滴娇的清水眼。阳台上，四爷又拉起胡琴来了，依着那抑扬顿挫的调子，流苏不由得偏着头，微微飞了个眼风，做了个手势。她对镜子这一表演，那胡琴听上去便不是胡琴，而是笙箫琴瑟奏着幽沉的庙堂舞曲。她向左走了几步，又向右走了几步，她走一步路都仿佛是合著失了传的古代音乐的节拍。她忽然笑了——阴阴的，不怀好意的一笑，那音乐便戛然而止。外面的胡琴继续拉下去，可是胡琴诉说的是一些辽远的忠孝节义的故事，不与她相关了。

She turned on the lamp, moved it towards the mirror and studied her own reflection: not bad, she wasn't that old yet. She had that kind of delicate figure that doesn't show age – her waist permanently thin, her breast still budding like a girl's. Her face, formerly as white as porcelain, now had turned to jade – a semitransparent jade tinged with green. Her cheeks, formerly plump, had gradually slendered in time, so that her face, already small, now seemed even smaller and more attractive. Her face was quite narrow, but the space between her eyebrows was quite wide. Her eyes were bright, delicately pretty and seductive. On the balcony, Fourth Master had

⁶¹ Wang Tian, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

resumed playing his *huqin* and Liusu couldn't help but tilting her head to one side in tune with the rising and falling rhythm of the melody: her eyes started fluttering, her hands dancing to the music. As she performed her dance while facing the mirror, the *huqin* no longer sounded like a *huqin*, but flutes and strings playing a secret imperial court dance. She took a few steps to the right, then to the left. Her steps seemed to trace the lost rhythm of ancient melodies. Suddenly, she smiled – a secret, malevolent smile. The music ceased abruptly. Then the *huqin* resumed playing on the outside, but it was telling old and distant tales of filial piety and moral integrity – tales that had nothing to do with her.⁶²

In this mirror scene, Bai Liusu is intently engaged in a cynical appraisal of her own image, performing an imaginary courtship dance which could sweep all traditional values away and establish her control over destiny. While watching her reflection, she already seems to be preparing for a strategic battle array, with beauty and physical appearance functioning as a way to free herself from the shackles of family constraints, but also as possible ammunition to be used against a man to win his assets. The woman smiling her 'secret, malevolent' smile looks more like she's preparing for aggression than for romance, fleeing the past to finally meet the future. In order to do so, she has to transform her 'floating, unconnected' present as a woman with no identity of her own, so her search for a man may also become a search for her own identity, to make her drifting self become whole.

When destiny accidentally happens to send a man along her way – Fan Liuyuan 范柳原, a rich playboy educated in England and wishing to settle down after years of debauchery – Bai Liusu initially has no conscious plan of conquering him, because he has been chosen as the ideal husband candidate for her stepsister. Yet, as soon as Fan Liuyuan shows more interest in her than on the candidate chosen by the family, Bai Liusu realizes she has to use all her weapons to steal him from other women, in a fight over “众人虎视眈眈的目的物” (the prey everyone eyed like greedy tigers).⁶³ Her first, casual attempt at catching the man's attention is a re-enacting of her performance opposite the mirror, being centered again on dancing as both a form of seduction and as a way to escape from family constraints: Liusu spends quite a lot of time at the dance hall enjoying three dances with Liuyuan. This behaviour is easily condemned

⁶² Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., pp. 117-8.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 122.

by her relatives as sinful, implying that no respectable woman knows how to dance: though dance halls were very popular symbols of modernity in Shanghai at the time, they couldn't possibly be seen as spaces devoted to legitimate courtship by traditional families like the Bai household. Yet, no matter what her family might think, the 'prey' seems to be interested in Liusu indeed: he secretly arranges to meet her in Hong Kong, where he has temporarily settled down. So, accompanied by close relative Mrs Xu, Liusu finally sets off for the British colony, hoping to strengthen her conquest strategy and finally secure her role as a married woman.

For all her triumphant glee over leaving home and her dream of conquering a 'prey', though, Bai Liusu has no idea of how to behave or what to do once arrived in Hong Kong: cast away from her usual space, she has no moral compass to guide her in her independence-driven decisions. Alone in an "alien"⁶⁴ place, she is far from being the conqueror she believed she could be and her idea of dealing with Fan Liuyuan as a prey stolen from 'greedy tigers' proves to be just a figment of her imagination. Chinese women in the 1940s (more specifically, *nüren*, the terms Zhang uses to define 'women' in the story)⁶⁵ could be no conquerors, the author clearly implies; men were the only ones in control of the situation and the only ones who could dictate their own terms – which is precisely what Fan Liuyuan does throughout their mutual courtship. The only strategy Bai Liusu has left, then, is to accept the rule of the game in order to secure a role for herself and have a chance at winning the 'war' against Fan Liuyuan and finally conquer his assets. According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, role-playing is not just a token of male rule in the story, but also a key element within Liusu's strategy of survival, and an empowering one too, because it allows her to impersonate an 'alien' (read 'non-traditional') woman displaying 'alien' manners. Yet, like Lee himself admits, this role-playing eventually results in a reversal of roles, with the 'conqueror' Liusu feeling more and more like the conquered one: being a returnee man educated in Europe, in his search for the quintessence of traditional Chinese womanhood, Fan Liuyuan regards Liusu "as as exotic Oriental woman

⁶⁴ Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁶⁵ The following comment by the narrator perfectly encapsulates the typical shrewd and sanguine *nüren* mindset of 1940s women in Japanese-occupied areas: “一个女人，再好些，得不着异性的爱，也就得不着同性的尊重。女人们就是这点贱。” (A woman, no matter how charming she might be, won't be respected by her own sex if she doesn't get the love of the opposite sex. So despicable can women prove to be). Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 120.

under his colonial gaze”,⁶⁶ so the woman rapidly turns into a colonized space and the man into a conquering colonizer. Fan Liuyuan’s answer to Liusu’s candid confession of her supposed uselessness clearly corroborates his form of colonial appropriation of Liusu’s traditional Chineseness and womanhood.⁶⁷ This does not mean Liusu wants to give in easily: she is a natural born fighter and a very aggressive one⁶⁸ and she still believes she can conquer it all – money, marriage, status, and everything else (possibly including a true independent *nüxing* space too). Their whole courtship to one another in Hong Kong is described as a sort of sophisticated abstract war, a set of chess moves whose main purpose ultimately seems to be either the fall or the ensnaring of the opponent⁶⁹ within the trap of ‘romance’: Bai Liusu cautiously treads on this path trying to detect any *faux pas* on the man’s part, possibly unveiling his real intentions, i.e. marrying or playing her. Fan Liuyuan’s constant teasing her with public displays of intimacy is undermined by private cold manners and overt indifference over the possibility of a life together in the future. This game proves so self-consuming that Bai Liusu finally gives in, first by leaving Hong Kong when all seems lost, then by returning once again to come to terms with the prospect of being a kept woman – that is, by accepting the man’s conditions after their interpersonal ‘war’ has ended, because negotiation has failed and one of them inevitably needs to capitulate. In her unveiling of women’s desperate lack of agency in the semitraditional (and semicolonial) Chinese 1940s, Zhang Ailing makes it perfectly clear that Bai Liusu has to be the one to capitulate and eventually be content with anything the rich man proposes, because she has no other choice: securing her own financial stability, Liusu at least can finally live in a house all by herself. But when Fan Liuyuan

⁶⁶Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁶⁷“无用的女人是最最厉害的女人” (It’s the useless women who are the most amazing). Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, *cit.*, p. 123.

⁶⁸Zhang Ailing herself describes the character of Bai Liusu as “一个相当厉害的人，有决断，有口才” (a rather strong person, decisive and eloquent), so not as useless as the character herself might state to be. Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, “*Guanyu ‘Qing cheng zhi lian’ de lao shihua*” 关于《倾城之恋》的老实话 (Frank Comments on *Love in a Fallen City*), in Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, *Zhang Ailing dianceng quanji • 1952 nian yihou zuopin • Dui zhaoji • Kan lao zhao xiangbu*. 张爱玲典藏全集 • 1952 年以后作品 • 对照记 • 看老照相簿 (Collected Works by Zhang Ailing written after 1952. Mutual Reflections: Looking at my Old Photo Album), Ha’erbin, Ha’erbin chubanshe, 2003, p. 122. Originally published in 1944.

⁶⁹“她如临大敌，结果毫无动静” (It was like facing a great enemy who would finish you off standing perfectly still). Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, *cit.*, p. 129.

temporarily leaves for England, war and conquest slowly fade away and she suddenly feels deflated and without a purpose, like “英雄无用武之地” (a warrior without a battlefield).⁷⁰ Her physical and metaphorical journey seems to have ended, bringing her personal war to a close: in a way, she has ‘conquered’ her own life leaving family constraints behind by becoming the (probably disreputable) mistress of a rich man. Yet a new reversal of events will bring *actual* war to her door, turning the whole city of Hong Kong into an empty battlefield.

When war comes on December 8th 1941, Bai Liusu’s selfish drive for self-preservation is amplified by history wrecking time and space. The Japanese invade the island and everything falls apart – walls, houses, existence. Curiously, though, Fan Liuyuan reappears: his ship has never left Hong Kong’s harbor because of the attack and they are forced to be reunited by war – physical, brutal, collective war, not the abstract sophisticated dialogical war they used to play together. This radical change in the fabric of reality creates a shift in their interaction to one another; cold strategy and negotiation make way to basic human weakness and fear of loneliness, so they spontaneously seek shelter in one another because there’s no one else to turn to and nothing left to do:

在这动荡的世界里，钱财、地产、天长地久的一切，全不可靠了。靠得住的只有她腔子里的这口气，还有睡在她身边的这个人。[...]。他不过是一个自私的男子，她不过是一个自私的女人。在这兵荒马乱的时代，个人主义者是无处容身的。

in that unstable world, money, property, the permanent things – they were all unreliable. The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and that person sleeping beside her [...]. He was just a selfish man; she was a selfish woman. In that age of chaos and disorder, there was no place for those who stood on their own.⁷¹

Their unexpected reconciliation in the city wrecked by war functions as a desperate, selfish clinging to one another in a crumbling world. And perhaps it’s precisely because of these exceptional circumstances – the separation between them abruptly interrupted by actual war

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 135.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 139.

and their hungry embracing this sudden reunification – that Fan Liuyuan decides to officially organize a marriage, finally turning Bai Liusu into the *de facto* winner in their personal war against one another, “名正言順的妻” (his wife in name and in truth).⁷² Bai Liusu seems to revel in this unexpected turn of events: she has secured a complete victory over man, family and society, a victory so strong as to cause an entire city to collapse, like the legendary beauties of the past did.⁷³ She feels Hong Kong’s fall was somehow necessary for her to triumph in the end, though it is easy to detect the narrator’s sarcasm behind Bai Liusu’s thoughts.⁷⁴ After all, what the woman protagonist really achieves in the end is very little, as she will depend on a man for the rest of her life. As Jessica Tsui Yan Li puts it, she “becomes an ordinary housewife with signs of the usual frustration with life in a down-to-earth marriage, rather than turning into a heroine to achieve enlightenment”.⁷⁵ In Zhang’s universe, there are no heroes nor heroines; despite her thinking about the legendary *femmes fatales* of the past, implying she might be as powerful, beautiful and dangerous as them, Bai Liusu in the end remains an oppressed Chinese woman of the 1940s with very limited prospects. Her victory is in fact disappointing, because it just reinstates the role traditional Chinese society expected from women, that is, being “附屬

⁷² Ivi, p. 140.

⁷³ The theme of the *femme fatale* causing a whole city to fall, which the title of Zhang’s novella alludes to, stems from two main traditional sources. The first two lines of the third stanza from the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), Ode 264, read: “*Zhefu cheng cheng, zhefu qing cheng* 哲夫成城，哲婦傾城 (A clever man builds cities, a clever woman makes them fall)”. See Couvreur, Fr. S. S. J. (ed.), *Cheu King. Zhong-fa-lading duizhao* 詩經·中、法、拉丁對照 (The Book of Odes. With a Translation in French and Latin), Taipei, Kuangchi Cultural Group, 2004, p. 414. A passage from the *Qian Hanshu* 前漢書 (History of the Former Han Dynasty) reads: “*Beifang you jia ren, jueshi er duli. Yi gu qing ren cheng, zai gu qing ren guo*” 北方有佳人，絕世而獨立。一顧傾人城，再顧傾人國 (In the north there’s a beauty, independent in her ways and unparalleled to any other in the world; with just one look, she will make a city fall; another look, and she will make a whole nation fall). See Ban Gu 班固, “*Wai qituan • di liushiqi* 外戚傳 • 第六十七” (Biographies of the Empresses and Imperial Female Relatives, n. 67), in *Qian Han shu • Juan jiuqi shang* 前漢書 • 卷九十七上 (History of the Former Han Dynasty. Volume 97a). [online]. URL <http://www.xysa.net/a200/h350/02qianhanshu/t-097.htm> (Last access: 2017-11-01, 10:30 UTC).

⁷⁴ Leo Ou-fan Lee explains how Zhang Ailing uses “an almost omniscient narratorial voice that not only hovers or enters into the characters effortlessly but also constantly comments on them with an intimate and *bemused* tone”, using a voice which “places itself both inside and outside the world of fictional characters”. Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-6. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Tsui, Jessica Yan Li, “From page to stage. Cultural ‘In-betweenness’ in (New) Love in a Fallen City”, in Kam, Louie (ed.), *Eileen Chang*, cit., p. 44.

品” (the appendage of men).⁷⁶ Her aggressive quest for social status and economic stability only leads to frustration as the desolate *huqin* sound in the end of the novella suggests: after the war ends, Fan Liuyuan will probably leave again, thus turning Bai Liusu into a concubine again, a wife only in name: “no matter how astute Liusu is, in the end Liuyuan wins out [...]. In the same way that a fallen city can give rise to an unexpected wedding, it can also render a marriage meaningless. Not long after the wedding, Liuyuan leaves for South East Asia and Liusu is left on her own to live the life of a kept woman, in fact if not in law”.⁷⁷ So Liusu’s final victory is at best accidental – a by-product of the world suddenly being wrecked by war – and illusional – because it is ultimately orchestrated by Fan Liuyuan, not by her. Bai Liusu’s real gain is survival and self-preservation, not independence. Hers is a *nüren* tale of a ghost trapped in an empty space but still trying to salvage some pieces of a broken *nüxing* self out of the debris of His-tory, getting on with her life despite everything at all costs, because Zhang Ailing’s ultimate goal in her story was not to describe a woman’s path to awakening and self-awareness but “to capture some stability and constancy in a collapsing world”,⁷⁸ despite knowing this stability might prove to be just an illusion – an empty shell leaving the longed-for *nüxing* self still unconnected and misplaced.

⁷⁶ “就张爱玲的家庭和成长环境而言，女性仍旧是男性生存的附属品” (By analysing the family ambience Zhang Ailing lived and grew up in, we realize that women at the time were still considered to be as nothing more than the appendage of men). Wang Tian, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁷⁷ Kam, Louie, “Romancing returnee men. Masculinity in ‘Love in a Fallen City’ and ‘Red Rose, White Rose’”, in Kam, Louie (ed.), *Eileen Chang*, cit., p. 25.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 24.

4. Empty fragments floating: urban spaces and the unconnectedness of woman

Urban space is a crucial element within *Qing cheng zhi lian*: both Shanghai and Hong Kong provide an important imaginal backdrop for Bai Liusu's fight towards self-preservation and in her war/courtship strategy with Fan Liuyuan, each city symbolizing a different representation of war and also a different version of female unconnectedness.

Being concerned with everyday life, Zhang Ailing's depiction of Shanghai is often allusive and indirect: far from being the hybrid pre-globalised modern biopolis⁷⁹ where East and West imperfectly coexisted,⁸⁰ the city is reduced in size and the narrator focuses on the small "localized world"⁸¹ of confined domestic spaces, characterized by a strange combination of sensuous, elegant timelessness and stifled individual choice. These spaces may occasionally open and reinstate time whenever the main characters "enter into the public arena",⁸² that is when they take part in the modernity of Shanghai by going to restaurants, dance halls, cinemas, coffeehouses. Bai Liusu herself finds access to the modern atmosphere of the city when she and her family go to the movies first and to a dance hall later on the first night she meets Fan Liuyuan. This fictional reduction of Shanghai to a world of detail, as opposed to its reality as a cosmopolitan city,⁸³ indirectly hints at the war hovering on the desolate contrast between

⁷⁹See Kong, Belinda, "Shanghai Biopolitans: Wartime Colonial Cosmopolis in Eileen Chang's 'Love in a Fallen City' and J.G. Ballard's 'Empire of the Sun'", *Journal of Narrative Theory. Special Issue: Narrating Cities*, 39, 3, Fall 2009, pp. 280-304.

⁸⁰ Shanghai was a semi-colony "in the hybrid sense of a mixture of colonial and Chinese elements". Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 271.

⁸² *Ivi*, p. 275.

⁸³ As Leo Ou-fan Lee explains in his book, "Shanghai in the 1930s was the cosmopolitan city par excellence" and also "the largest city in China [...], the place where most of its literature was produced and circulated to the country at large" as well as "the fifth largest city in the world and China's largest harbor and treaty port, a city that was already an international legend ("The Paris of Asia"), and a world of splendid modernity set apart from the still tradition-bound countryside that was China". Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, pp. 315; xi; xiv respectively. The word *modeng* 摩登 (modern) itself was coined in Shanghai, thus making the city and the concept of modernity permanently linked to one another. Here traditional Chinese buildings and Western high-rise American skyscrapers, *art déco* interior designs and neoclassical British imperial buildings coexisted side by side.

indoor decadent (and decaying) immutability and outdoor glittering glamour: despite the city of Shanghai “reached the pinnacle of its urban glory in the early 1930s”, after its partial occupation by the Japanese in 1937-1941 and its entire capitulation to the invaders in 1942 – exactly when Zhang Ailing returned to the city⁸⁴ – its splendor and cosmopolitanism was “already on the wane”.⁸⁵ The reduction of the invaded city to a detailed microcosmos of daily rituals and “atomized lives’ marginality”⁸⁶ was Zhang Ailing’s way of mentally erasing war and its potential threat of wreckage from her writing, creating a small familial (often female-centered) and personal world sealed from within not to face the without of public His-tory. Yet somehow her beloved Shanghai as an occupation-infected city persists in the world of details she creates because it is “a part that is always already broken from a presumed ‘whole’ [...] itself cut off, incomplete, and desolate”.⁸⁷ Everything in the Shanghai segment of the novella seems displaced and cut off from the rest of the world, already falling apart itself: there are no landmarks describing the city at large, only domestic spaces and/or nameless places of entertainment. Trapped in-between these elegant zones tinged with decay and nostalgia, Bai Liusu can’t help but feeling paralyzed within the suffocating enclosure of the Bai household.⁸⁸ Her status as a divorcee (thus ‘failed’ woman) detached from the rest of the family is symbolized by two scrolls hanging on the wall, where “一个个的字都像浮在半空中，离着纸老远。流苏觉得自己就是对联上的一个字，虚飘飘的，不落实地” (each character seemed to float in emptiness, far from the paper’s surface. Liusu herself felt like one of those characters, floating and unconnected).⁸⁹ Woman is reduced in size to a small set of Chinese characters aimlessly floating in the air, lost in an “infinite self-atomizing” strategy:⁹⁰ she is a

⁸⁴ Yu Qing, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁸⁵ Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, pp. 322-3.

⁸⁶ Kong, Belinda, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

⁸⁷ Chow, Rey, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, cit., p. 114.

⁸⁸ “while she lives squarely within a stable domestic environment and a cosmopolitan landscape, a sense of intense *entrapment* and *claustrophobia* permeates her experience of Shanghai”. Kong, Belinda, *op. cit.*, p. 284. Emphasis added.

⁸⁹ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 117.

⁹⁰ Kong, Belinda, *op. cit.*, p. 281. More specifically, Kong analyses wartime Shanghai as a “polycentric” site characterized by a proliferation of boundaries, also focusing on Shanghai as an open city. See *Ivi*, pp. 293-294; 297-8.

fleeting silhouette who may easily be swept away leaving no trace behind, just like modernity and cosmopolitanism were waning from Shanghai, constantly under the threat of evanescing in time and space in the wake of the Japanese invasion.⁹¹ What Bai Liusu ultimately needs is a new configuration of space, not just an opening of her atomized familial enclave into Shanghai's shattered modernity, but a new "spatial imagination"⁹² granting her permanent survival as a woman, and possibly giving her a way out of unconnectedness.

The site Zhang Ailing chooses to stage this new spatial imagination is Hong Kong, itself yet another version of a Chinese city conquered by foreigners, but with one notable difference: Hong Kong was *indeed* a colony, not a semicolonial atomized cosmopolis like Shanghai. The British had officially taken control of the island in 1841 and had been ruling there ever since.⁹³ Its being traditional and utterly colonial, without any of the modern architectural and cultural audacities Shanghai had gone through in the 1930s, certainly had a strong impact on Zhang upon her arrival as a student – a negative one. As Leo Ou-fan Lee puts it, "Hong Kong did not have Shanghai's 'cultivation' (*hanyang*), a word that originally referred to the cultured sophistication of a person who has the elegant appearance of self-restraint"; on the contrary, Hong Kong was "too blatant, too vulgar and flamboyant in its Western imitation, hence producing cultural kitsch".⁹⁴ Seen from a Shanghainese perspective, Hong Kong was an undistinguished cultural desert, a floating Chinese space dominated by Britain, not just a proud treaty port never fully colonized nor conquered by foreign powers. Why, then, did Zhang Ailing choose Hong Kong as the site of a possible new configuration of spatial imagination for her heroine? Was it just to pay a tribute to the city she had found temporary refuge in as a student, or were there other reasons too?

Actually, from 1937 onwards Hong Kong had served as a temporary site for refugees escaping from Japan-invaded mainland China, turning the city into "an important lifeline to

⁹¹ What actually took place after the chaos of civil war of 1945 and the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949: Shanghai inexorably decayed and faded from the new rural-based Chinese nation's memory. See Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

⁹² Kong, Belinda, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

⁹³ Tsang, Steve, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2004, p. 16.

⁹⁴ Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

China”:⁹⁵ historically, Hong Kong represented a *temporary* place of refuge for people who wanted to start life afresh, but conceptually it was “not so much as place but a space of transit”,⁹⁶ granting passage towards elsewhere. Yet Bai Liusu travels to Hong Kong hoping to write her own destiny and leave her mark into existence: to her, Hong Kong first looks like a space of unexpected promises, a space where she can permanently flow and no longer float, mainly because of its distance from home, and thus from Shanghai. Zhang’s description of the city upon the protagonist’s first arrival conveys precisely this sense of promise: her depiction of Hong Kong is somehow already characterized by a postmodern “visual density”:⁹⁷ there are no words drifting unconnected but huge billboards and vibrant contrasts everywhere, creating a picture of wonder in “这夸张的城市” (this city of such hyperboles)⁹⁸ where there seem to be no boundaries but crowded spatial and visual juxtapositions. Whereas Shanghai’s cityscape was only indirectly suggested to heighten its “urban – and urbane – sophistication”,⁹⁹ Hong Kong’s skyline – the Victoria Harbour every ship and boat can see upon their arrival on the island – is vividly described with all its ostentatious exaggeration, “一条条，一抹抹刺激性的犯冲的色素，窜上落下，在水底下厮杀得异常热闹” (a violence of clashing colours plunged in murderous confusion).¹⁰⁰ Hong Kong is hyperbolic excess, with no room for the “*miyan* 秘艳” (hidden colourfulness)¹⁰¹ Shanghai was characterized by. Paradoxically, it is precisely in this saturation of visual elements that a possible new configuration of spatial imagination lies for Bai Liusu: far from the restrained elegance of her family rooms in

⁹⁵ Tsang, Steve, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

⁹⁶ Abbas, Ackbar, *Hong Kong. Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2004, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 35.

⁹⁸ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 122.

⁹⁹ Lee, Leo Ou-fan, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

¹⁰⁰ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 122.

¹⁰¹ Zhang Ailing 张爱玲, “*Tong yan wuji*” 童言无忌 (From the Mouth of Babes), in Zhang Ailing, *Zhang Ailing diancang quanji sanwen juan yi*, cit., p. 8. See Eileen Chang, *Written on Water*. Translated by Andrew F. Jones, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 8. Jones’ rendering of *miyan* 秘艳 as ‘coy allure’, though far more poetic, does not account for the idea of ‘hidden colourfulness’ suggested by the set of two characters.

Shanghai and into the splashing excessive colours of Hong Kong, she can finally hope of stepping out of impermanence and write her own her-story.

This idea of Hong Kong as a city associated to permanence rather than to the impermanence a ‘space of transit’ might suggest is reinforced by the second view on the city described by Zhang, characterized by specific landmarks or spatial symbols, whereas Shanghai’s description was devoid of them. First, she briefly introduces the Repulse Bay Hotel which, as Abbas explains, was “a grand colonial-style building that became a famous Hong Kong landmark”¹⁰² after being built in the 1920s. Consequently, in the late 1930s and early 1940s (when presumably Chang herself visited the hotel), everyone considered it to be “a fashionable meeting place”,¹⁰³ a potent symbol of wealth and entertainment. Then Zhang shifts our attention to another symbol, located beyond the hotel: a wall, something virtually anonymous, almost unreal and out of place, if associated to the glamour of the Repulse Bay Hotel and the excess of Hong Kong’s skyline. Despite being an odd presence, “like a left-over object from another era”,¹⁰⁴ the wall does not suggest any idea of transit nor floating, but rather firmness and durability in its ‘sublime’ elevation. Its description is characterized by “死的颜色” (the colour of death),¹⁰⁵ but it highlights Bai Liusu’s face turning red by contrast, filling it with the colour of life. Fan Liuyuan even hints at the idea that the wall might last longer than the end of the world itself, and Liusu’s tacit acceptance of his hopeful prediction gives an aura of grandeur and ahistorical universality to the wall itself, despite being a residual of history persisting in war times: “有一天，我们的文明整个的毁掉了，什么都完了——烧完了、炸完了、坍完了，也许还剩下这堵墙” (Someday, human civilization will be completely destroyed, everything will utterly eroded, burst, collapsed and ruined, but maybe this wall will still be here).¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Abbas, Ackbar, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰⁴ Lee, Leo Ou-fan Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

¹⁰⁵ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 126.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem.*

The wall evokes the idea of timelessness, as opposed to the ticking of time slowly corrupting and changing things. As Xiaoping Wang puts it, it simultaneously symbolizes the middle class's "strong will to live an eternally peaceful, comfortable life" and "a world in which meaning and life are once more indivisible".¹⁰⁷ So, the wall symbolizes a world and a society devoid of war where the self can finally exist and persist in time and space, but it may also symbolize the soul and the immaterial outliving the body and the material, as well as culture winning over nature, eternity winning over history.

This sense of durability and timelessness is echoed by the fourth stanza of Poem 31, Chapter 3, Section 1, of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), later quoted by Fan Liuyuan. The poem is called *Jigu* 擊鼓 (Beating the war drum) and the original text reads:

死生契闊
與子成說，
執子之手，
與子偕老。

Facing death, life and distance,
I promised to be faithful to you;
Holding your hands in mine,
I swore I would grow old with you.¹⁰⁸

Both the wall and the poem are strong symbols within the courtship strategy between Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan: though used by the man as tokens of a supposedly eternal love vow, they are tacitly accepted by the woman, who apparently is not familiar either with Hong Kong and its landmarks nor with Chinese classical culture. Caught in an aggressive ruthless *nüren* search for durability out of her unconnected status of divorcee woman without a prospect, Bai Liusu can

¹⁰⁷ Wang, Xiaoping, *op. cit.*, p. 574.

¹⁰⁸ Couvreur, Fr. S. S. J. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 36. Zhang misquotes the second line of the fourth stanza, using *xiangshuo* 相說 instead of *chengshuo* 成說. The poem describes the lament of a soldier who is forced to leave his family and beloved to go to war for his prince, yet the ending of the poem (which is not included nor suggested in Zhang's novella) suggests that the soldier will not manage to come back and his promise won't be fulfilled, so the overall tone is one of desolation.

easily believe in something as immortal as a classical poem and in something as strong and fixed as a wall. Like foundations built to last, words and bricks can forge fate and identity against a world afloat, where everything seems to be vague and uncertain. Yet for a woman like Bai Liusu, grown in a traditional late-Qing elite background, to be *both* durable and true, an eternal love vow must include marriage, a further symbol of stability, something Fan Liuyuan seems not so willing to comply to. So the promise and the poetic symbols emanating from “this city of such hyperboles” seem to be void of any actual meaning: the drifting unconnected self Bai Liusu was destined to be for the rest of her life in Shanghai still lingers on, leaving the whole ‘romance’ between her and Fan Liuyuan vague and confused.¹⁰⁹ Hong Kong remains a space of floating colours and void promises vanishing, just like Shanghai was reduced in size to her suffocating room with empty characters floating on a scroll. Thus, Bai Liusu’s decision to go back to Shanghai and face the ‘shame’ of finding a job to support herself comes out of despair and impossibility of permanence, not out of a real *nixing* agency. For a revolutionary May Fourth-oriented woman, looking for a job as a way to survive would mean real power and independence, but Bai Liusu is no revolutionary, she’s just an ordinary woman with no skills nor culture trapped in a male-dominated world, where failing to secure marriage to a rich man can only mean defeat – and eventually disappearance. That is why when Fan Liuyuan calls on her to join him once again in Hong Kong, she cannot choose but go: like a drifting flower, she floats in the upstream current of ‘romance’, hoping to find a space of reappearance where she can finally bloom.

The Hong Kong Bai Liusu goes back to, though, is no longer the city of hyperboles she discovered on her first visit, but a space characterized by absence: the landscape is reduced in size to the moon’s, seen as “仅仅是一钩百色” (merely a hook of white);¹¹⁰ besides, there is no room waiting for her at the glamorous Repulse Bay Hotel this time, just a house devoid of

¹⁰⁹ These acts of courtship “儘是些玩世不恭的享樂主義者的敬神遊戲 [...] 都在心的浮面飄滑” (are nothing but a casual and spiritual game of two hedonists [...] ... they float on the surface of feelings). Xun Yu 迅 雨, “*Lun Zhang Ailing de xiaoshuo*” 論張愛玲的小說 (On Zhang Ailing’s fiction), in Tang Wenbiao 唐文标 (ed.), *Zhang Ailing yanjiu* 張愛玲研究 (Studies on Eileen Chang), Taipei, Lianjing chubanshi gongsi, 1986, pp. 124. Despite Xun Yu’s remarks were meant as a negative critique on the novella, the floating he suggests corroborates my idea.

¹¹⁰ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p.133.

people, an “情空的世界” (empty realm)¹¹¹ where she is destined to live on her own for a whole year, as Fan Liuyuan is actually gone abroad on business and he has rented a place for her to stay and wait for his return.

In her new attempt at escaping her own unconnectedness to life, Bai Liusu ends up living disconnected to anyone else, alone as a kept woman in an empty house echoing her empty heart (and the other way round). Perhaps here more than elsewhere, Bai Liusu acknowledges her situation and the space she inhabits not for its fallacious promise of durability, but for its contingent possibility of self-preservation: why bother becoming the official wife of Fan Liuyuan when she can simply be his mistress and enjoy his money anyway? Being a matter-of-fact ‘space of transit’, again Hong Kong is the perfect location for Bai Liusu’s awakening to women’s limited options in a male-dominated society. In such an unsentimental and prosaic place where “everything floats – currencies, values, human relations”,¹¹² raw survival becomes more important than any pretense of respectability. Her choice becomes merely a practical one, so as to pick up the broken pieces of her female self.

As war comes and Fan Liuyuan unexpectedly returns, though their clinging to one another may function as an extreme attempt to re-connect the past to the present, what is left are just empty fragments floating in a dead city, itself a world of fragmented ruins: “只是一条虚无的气，真空的桥梁，通入黑暗，通入虚空的虚空。这里是什么都完了。剩下点断堵颓垣 [...]；其实是什么都完了” (there was only a stream of empty air, a bridge of emptiness leading to darkness, into the void of voids. Here, everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of desolate wall [...]; in fact, there was nothing left).¹¹³

No matter how hard Bai Liusu imagines the wall may still be standing as a space symbolizing eternity and durability, what we are shown here is just the wall’s non-appearance, its image being replaced by a scene of wreckage instead. If everything else we can actually see has fallen, why should an unseen (and thus unseeable) wall still be there? Despite the *Shijing*

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 134.

¹¹² Abbas, Ackbar, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹³ Zhang Ailing, *Qing cheng zhi lian*, cit., p. 139.

poem's vow proving right and Bai Liusu's original plan – becoming a legitimate wife – coming to pass, her newly found social and financial safety won't grant any wholeness. Clearly functioning as a metonymy for the city of Hong Kong whose space vanishes in the end, the absent wall may also symbolize Bai Liusu's volatile self in its illusion of asserting a true form of *nüxing* power – her supposedly 'dangerous' beauty making an entire city fall – which in fact reinstates her floating status of unconnected woman but which paradoxically helps her survive somehow, alone, with her husband gone and no talent of her own whatsoever. And the possible new configurations of space, from the stifled family room of Shanghai to the excessive flamboyant clashing of colours in Hong Kong, is ultimately dissolved in the ground zero of war – but the broken bits of *nüren* are still standing, and perhaps one day her true *nüxing* independent nature might resurface one day.

5. A (post)modern view on His-tory

In *Qing cheng zhi lian* Zhang Ailing explored the ways through which historical, social and cultural circumstances forced Chinese elite women to “learn to give up their own desires in exchange for their social ‘place’”.¹¹⁴ Consequently, her woman protagonist opted for a spatial quest which still confined her within an oppressive *nei* dimension but which she paradoxically managed to oppose through an aggressive counter-hegemony war-like strategy, thus avoiding the role of victim.

Also, the final collapse of Hong Kong as opposed to the fleeting persistence of woman are both an intriguing testimony to Zhang Ailing's ambivalence towards His-tory with its wrecking

¹¹⁴ Chow, Rey, “Virtuous Transactions”, cit., p. 94.

time, space and the female self. On the one hand, the novella's conclusion proves the author was deeply inside the fabric of history:

her intoxication of the impending danger during the Japanese bombing are all underscored with an acute self-consciousness of her own powerlessness, capsulated by the term '*wunai*' [...] a sense of keen awareness of the ephemerality and arbitrariness of subjective experiences. Self-consuming, personal anguish is ultimately irrelevant in the face of the overwhelming violence of history.¹¹⁵

For instance, both the empty city and the empty heart floating together like meaningless characters on a scroll function as clear symbols of human ephemerality facing His-tory. It is precisely because of His-tory forcing its way inside the novella, building the present literally out of the disintegration of the past, that can the ephemeral status of *nixing* finally emerge outliving the sanguine aggressiveness of *nüren*, conceived as a mere replica of man.

On the other hand, though, "her best works 'The Golden Cangue' and 'Love in a Fallen City' transcend historical awareness and moral judgement, which is precisely what makes these works such remarkable masterpieces".¹¹⁶ As Liu Zaifu further points out, "With its social concern, modern Chinese literature is, in general, focused on condemning the injustices in society, but it does not ask questions about the meaning of human existence. Yet Zhang Ailing masterfully describes many human tragedies as she asks these questions", because her main concern was with "rejecting the historical trend" – ¹¹⁷ which does not necessarily imply rejecting His-tory per se, though.

I rather think that Zhang Ailing was *both inside* His-tory – in her analysis of Chinese society's (and women's) collapse in a period wrecked by war and in her using "a melancholy evocative of the irreversible disintegration of an old China"¹¹⁸ – *and outside* His-tory,

¹¹⁵ Chang, Sung-sheng Yvonne, "Yuang Qiongqiong and the Rage for Eileen Chang among Taiwan's *Feminine Writers*", in Barlow, Tani E. (ed.), *Gender Politics*, cit., p. 223. *Wunai* 无奈 literally means 'having no other choice nor alternative'. In a way, the story also focuses on "the conflict between a single woman's fortune and the fate of the whole nation or whole civilization." Meng, Yue, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹¹⁶ Liu, Zaifu, *op. cit.*, I, 2.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, I, 3.

¹¹⁸ Chang, Sung-sheng Yvonne, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

transcending it as a Chinese elite individualistic *nüren* of the 1940s, that is as somebody still having no defined her-story to reveal but seeing things both from a limited *wunai* perspective and from a lucid and potentially liberating *nüxing* perspective, that same perspective her own mother had helped her foresee in her own self and in women's destiny. As Qiao Yigang puts it:

Chang's description of women's imprisoned soul and analysis of the female unconscious reveals the truth that although the lifestyle of urban women has been revolutionized, the mindset of many women has not undergone any significant change [...]. Such a phenomenon is the result of traditional beliefs and women's lack of self-esteem. Whether they are old-fashioned women, like Cao Qiqiao, or new women, like Bai Liusu and Ge Weilong, women in Chang's works are 'subjects with agency', albeit limited in the worlds. They live under the threat of traditional culture that drives them gradually into 'a corner without light'. Chang senses a crisis in the portrayal of women.¹¹⁹

It is once again this ambivalence between desolation and rebellion, His-tory and her-story, *nüren* and *nüxing*, that ultimately makes Bai Liusu both a powerless, disconnected traditional woman and a would-be optimistic winner in the game of life, floating in perpetuity like a fragment in the empty house of His-tory, both inside it and transcending it in the impossibility of finding a permanent space of her own but constantly suspended in the eternal war-like quest for self-affirmation.

This is yet another example of Zhang's in-betweenness, something making her far too modern and almost on the brink of postmodernism in her focusing on the details of "little narratives":¹²⁰ as a daughter escaping a violent father yet also as a writer celebrating the decadent life of late Qing-influenced male-dominated society; as an admirer of her liberated

¹¹⁹ Qiao, Yigang, "Women as Human vs Women as Women: Female Consciousness in Modern Chinese Women's Literature", in Tam, Kwok-kan; Yi Terry Siu-nan (eds.), *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: issues in Mainland China*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2010, p. 84.

¹²⁰ "Postmodernism refuses master narratives which purport to explain the whole movement of history and social life as a single interconnected totality. Postmodernism offers instead 'little narratives' which do not necessarily add up, but which may be woven together as a succession of short threads into a blanket. The search for the fundamental causes of injustice, oppression, the movement of history, is ruled out of court". Andermahr, Sonya; Lowell, Terry; Wolkowitz Carol (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 208. In a way, Zhang's stubborn refusal of dealing with the master narrative of political liberation shared by most of her contemporaries makes her already a postmodern writer, albeit caught within the frame of a semi-traditional, semi-colonial modern space.

Westernized mother yet also as a cynicist denying women's actual ability to find liberation in a society dominated by men; as a 'Shanghainese, after all' yet writing about Hong Kong as well. As a woman with a double name, one in Chinese, one in English, like two characters floating on a scroll, consciously disconnected from her contemporaries' preoccupations with socially-oriented and political literature,¹²¹ but strongly connected to her own talent, the only constant in a world wrecked by His-tory and war.

¹²¹ 1943, the year Zhang Ailing wrote *Qing cheng zhi lian*, notably was also the same year Mao Zedong wrote his famous *Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shangde jianghua* 在延安文艺座谈会的讲话 (Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art). See Cannella, Shannon M., *op. cit.*, pp. 224-5.

CHAPTER FIVE

The infinite beyond: Fengzi's *Huaxiang* 畫像 (The portrait) and the final liberation of woman

1. A battlefield of ideologies

After the *Neizhan* 內战 (Civil War) broke out, the ‘three-spaced pattern’ of the Chinese nation fell down; more than ever, revolution began to take momentum as a “reorganization of space”,¹ enacted through the physical liberation of more and more areas of the countryside from the tyrannical patriarchal rule of the *Guomindang*, in order to crush it down once and for all. Thus, the Civil War positioned the fight between the Communists and the *Guomindang* as the ultimate war that would change the space of the nation forever at a symbolic level:

Symbolic space, like social space, is a real battlefield of ideologies, of contention for recognition, influence and control over discourse, and thus, to a great degree, perception and experience. Revolution intends to dominate symbolic space, but also is implemented by such dominance.²

Consequently, national space came to be divided into *Guomindang*-controlled urban spaces and Communist-run rural spaces. Echoing the political act of revolution, left-wing literature thus enacted a new configuration of space by positioning China’s rural areas both as a physical and a symbolical map of liberation, hopefully expanding its perimeter to the whole nation, thus including also urban places. Places like Shanghai, being controlled by the *Guomindang*, figured both as psychological symbols of the nation’s “痼疾” (chronic illnesses) and as symbolic impediments to

¹ Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, p.20.

² Ivi, p. 21.

rebellion and change.³ Liberated areas, on the other hand, were often associated to *funii*'s liberation in literature, especially in women writers' works, and peasant women in particular became the most relevant symbol of change as associated to the space of these areas.⁴ In choosing to embrace the space of liberation themselves despite not being of proletarian origins, educated women of the urban areas still controlled by an agonizing and rotten *Guomindang* rule displayed a wish to transform the actual space of decay they inhabited into a space of independence, possibly questioning their role as passive spectators and forging it into something new and truly liberating. Fengzi 凤子 was one of these women, forced into a life of political surveillance and captivity in Shanghai but moulding a different, brave existence in her writings.

³ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 205.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 211.

2. Life on stage and in writing

Born in Hukou, Guangxi, from a traditional and well-off family in 1912, Feng Jiren 封季壬⁵ was given a formal education by her father, an accomplished poet and imperial officer⁶ who “taught her to read and appreciate the classics, an indispensable attribute in a truly educated Chinese.”⁷ Although brought up in a feudal environment, in the 1920s Jiren was granted the possibility to leave home and study Chinese Literature at Fudan University in Shanghai as a sign of the new, revolutionary times approaching:

Well brought-up girls from proper feudal families were rarely permitted to leave home to attend universities, but times were changing. People were looking for new attitudes, new solutions, to save China from its rapidly accelerating decay. Education of the younger generation, even girls, in the methods of the West, was one approach.⁸

As it happened for other women writers who moved from small towns to the big cities, in Shanghai Fengzi joined students’ protests against the Guomindang and in 1927 became casually involved in theatrical performances, first with the *Wuhan Er Nu* 武汉二女 (Female Second Division of Wuhan), then with the *Fudan jushe* 复旦剧社 (Fudan Drama Company) at Fudan University, choosing *Fengzi* 凤子 (Phoenix) as her stage name.⁹ In the 1930s she actively cooperated to overtly feminist

⁵ Fengzi 凤子, *Yinjie jinhun · Bashi zishu zhi yi* 印接金婚·八十自述之一 (Looking Forward to Our Golden Wedding Anniversary – Recollections of Eighty Years), in Fengzi 凤子, *Renjian haishi* 人间海市 (Mirages), Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1998, p. 368. Originally written in 1993 and published in 1994. According to her American-born and naturalized Chinese husband Sidney Shapiro (沙博理), Fengzi’s baby name was *Yamei* 亚美 (‘eastern beauty’, but also ‘inferior beauty’): “Her father, a feudal poet-scholar, was enormously fond of the little girl, the last in a long series of progeny. He wanted to express his adoration, but at the same time he had to be appropriately reticent and modest. He settled at last on ‘Yamei’, since while ‘Mei’ means ‘beauty’, ‘Ya’ can also mean ‘inferior’. So Phoenix spent her early years hailed as a ‘Second-rate Beauty’.” Shapiro, Sidney, *I Chose China*, New York, Hyppocrene Books, p. 63. Fengzi herself mentions her childhood name as Yamei while talking about the birth of her daughter, herself named Yamei as a symbol of her parents’ union: *Ya* 亚 (Asia) and *Mei* 美 (America). Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 378.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 355.

⁷ Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 368. Fengzi recalls her choice of a stage name was “胡乱” (random) and prompted by a youthful fear of being rejected by her feudal family: Fudan Drama Company’s performances actually involved both female and male actors, unlike the previous theatrical projects she had been involved in, like Wuhan’s, where only girls were allowed on stage. The mingling of male and female students might cause a scandal and ruin an educated girl’s reputation, according to her traditional family.

projects becoming editor of the *Nüzi yuekan* 女子月刊 (Women's Monthly), a magazine financed by *Nüzi shudian* 女子书店 (Women's Bookstore), "a small and relatively short-lived Shanghai-based publishing house devoted to supporting female artists and writers in the mid-thirties".¹⁰ As the war with Japan officially broke out, in 1937 Fengzi moved to the provisional capital of Chongqing to escape Shanghai's occupation; once there, she came into close contact with many film and theatre professionals, taking part in the *Zhongguo wansui jutuan* 中国万岁剧团 (Long Live China Theatrical Company) and becoming a professional stage actress.¹¹ Once gone back to Shanghai as Japan surrendered in 1945, after the Civil War broke out she took up a career as "China's first woman war correspondent"¹² for the *Xinmin bao* 新民报 (New People's Herald),¹³ writing essays exposing *Guomindang's* corruption. During the war, she met many Communist leaders and

she felt that what they advocated and practiced was more suited to the realities of China than the political approaches of the West. [...]. Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang's party and government were hopelessly venal and corrupt. They hadn't fought the Japanese invaders; they attacked the Communist forces who did; they oppressed the people. As a patriot, she could only support the Communists.¹⁴

Besides her career as a journalist, in the 1940s she also enjoyed a brief career as a film actress in the "openly leftist"¹⁵ *Shanghai Kunlun dianpian gongsi* 上海崑崙影片公司 (Shanghai Kunlun Film Company), starring in a 1948 film called *Guan bu zhu de chun guang* 關不住的春光 (Unstoppable

¹⁰ Dooling, Amy D., *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 207. See also Dooling, Amy D., "Reconsidering the Origins of Modern Chinese Women's Writing", in Denton, Kirk A. (ed.), *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2016, pp. 133-5.

¹¹ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 353.

¹² Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹³ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 347.

¹⁴ Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Fengzi herself mentions the fact that, while in Chongqing, she only had "一点点感性认识" (a vague perception) of the country's political situation, but gradually realized that "国民党剥削压迫人民" (the *Guomindang* exploited and oppressed people) and the eight year war of resistance against Japan contributed to her joining the Communist fight because theirs was the only righteous political standpoint to choose. Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 363.

¹⁵ Dooling, Amy D., *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 208.

Spring) as an underground worker who is interrogated by *Guomindang*'s officers and then is “只是一个影子了” (reduced to a shadow) by their brutal methods;¹⁶ she also worked as the editor of *Ren shijian* 人世间 (In the World), a magazine connected to the Communist underground movement.¹⁷

3. Corrupt Shanghai, defying intellectuals

Post-Japanese occupation Shanghai was no longer the glamorous pearl Zhang Ailing had so elegantly described in her stories; *Guomindang* greedy officials' confiscation of former Japanese-run areas resulted in an escalation of plundering and physical urban decay, visible everywhere on the streets:

Intermingled with the fumes of cars and buses was the odor of thousands of sweat-stained bodies, the fragrance of tidbits cooking in many street stalls for consumption on the spot, and over all, when the wind was right, the smell of “honey boats” – barges laden with human excrement being hauled to outlying farms for use as fertilizer. [...] If my Chrysler had to stop for a red light at Nanjing Road, beggars would swarm over it, climbing on the running board, thrusting grimy hands in through the open window, pleading for pennies. In winter these poor people died like flies. Garbage trucks went round every morning to collect the frozen corpses off the sidewalks. [...] The city was populated by a large poverty-stricken class, a fair-sized middle class, and a small but powerful group of the very wealthy. [...] Foreign financial giants – the foundation of whose fortunes had been laid on opium running and real estate speculation... big absentee landlords from the provinces... Chinese merchant kings... heads of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang and their coterie who simply used government funds and property for their own private purposes. [...] I met them at parties, luncheons, banquets, receptions. Whether Chinese or foreign, they talked nothing but business or politics. [...] Discussion tended to center around how to squeeze the last possible dollar out of China and get it, and themselves, abroad before the final curtain fell.¹⁸

Fengzi herself described the nightmare the fabulous ‘modern’ city of Shanghai had become when recollecting her first meeting with her future husband (they married in 1948), American-born

¹⁶ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., 355.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 347.

¹⁸ Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, pp. 31; 49; 80-1 respectively.

Jewish lawyer Sidney Shapiro, in 1947: “这时候的上海，物资匮乏，国库空虚，法币贬值，物价一日数涨，人民怨声载道，民不聊生，饿殍倒毙街头，盗贼横行，昔日中外冒险家的乐园，如今却真正成了鬼蜮横行的世界” (At the time, Shanghai was short of everything; the national treasury was empty, prices were soaring and the newly issued “gold yuan” could not save the collapsing economy. The people were protesting, they barely managed to survive. There were corpses of starved people on every corner, crime was rampant. Shanghai had become a paradise for Chinese and foreign speculators, it had indeed turned into a world of ruthless devils).¹⁹

The majority of Chinese intellectuals of the time were angry at the *Guomindang*'s thirst for profit and overt indifference to people's suffering; not only did they consider the Nationalist party's reiterated attempts at bending writers to its will unacceptable but, even more than in the 1930s, they defied censorship as much as they could to stop the government's oppression:

The Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek's ruling party, offered sinecures and well-paying jobs to anyone who would write for their periodicals or do public relations work for them. Only a tiny fraction responded. China's literati scorned and hated the Kuomintang, which had run when the Japanese invaded. Corrupt and venal, it was creating new spheres of influence for foreign capital, and was content to see the country slide into ruin while it lined its own pockets. Few of China's writers were members of the Communist Party, but most were patriots who were infuriated by what the KMD was doing in China. They spoke out against it as best they could, using indirection and historical analogy.²⁰

Fengzi was among those intellectuals; though in the modern era she always worked “在党的外围” (at the margins of the party),²¹ thus not being one of its official members but remaining outside its space,²² she eagerly joined the resistance against the *Guomindang* and the fight to build a new future for China, literally “risking imprisonment, or worse” by running “a Communist-backed

¹⁹ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 348. See Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Shapiro omits a whole page of the original memoir from his version.

²⁰ Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²¹ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 363.

²² Fengzi would actually become a member of the CCP much later in her life, in 1979, despite suffering persecution and incarceration during the final years of the Cultural Revolution. Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-4. For more information about Fengzi's incarceration, see *Ivi*, pp. 176-9; 193-5 respectively, and Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., pp. 371; 380-384. She and the other members of the *Wenlian* 文联 (Literary Federation) of Beijing she worked for were publicly exposed as traitors for the supposedly revisionist drama-related literary activities they had created during the 1930s; she spent seven years in isolation, suffering from a serious ischemic attack and heavily losing weight, then she was finally released in 1975.

magazine under the nose of a fascist government.”²³ A strong admirer of Ibsen’s *The Doll House*, which had been translated in Chinese in 1918, she

had broken many of the rules. She had gone to college, she had become an actress, she had travelled around, alone, as a newspaper correspondent. She had also divorced a young professor when she discovered that he expected her role in their marriage to be primarily that of a housewife and hostess to his guests. “I wasn’t going to be a Chinese Nora,” Phoenix said firmly. She had not remarried because she had not found anyone for whom she could care enough and who would respect her independence.²⁴

4. Fengzi and the Nora question

Actually, Ibsen’s play *The Doll House*²⁵ had been an important source of inspiration for the women’s emancipation movement in China both before and during the May Fourth period. Despite the debate sparked by its publication “was of necessity conducted within the male intelligentsia, women as yet not having their own voices”,²⁶ nevertheless it was a crucial step towards a proto-feminist awareness:

Nora’s abandonment of the patriarchal household [...] announced the primacy of individual fulfillment over social restraints, implied a wide ranging rebellion against Confucian norms, and suggested new possibilities for China’s young, male *and female*. Because women particularly had suffered under the patriarchal order, progress in the androgynous issue of increasing the

²³ Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 46.

²⁵ Often rendered as ‘A Doll’s House’, the title of the play should actually be translated as ‘The Doll House’, according to feminist scholar Joan Templeton. See Templeton, Joan, “The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen”. *PMLA*, 104, 1, January 1989, pp. 28-40.

²⁶ Brown, Caroline T., *op. cit.*, p. 74.

individual's spiritual freedom could be gauged in part by improvements in women's position in society.²⁷

In talking about her first marriage as a form of imprisonment to her, Fengzi emphasizes the fact that her husband agreed she could be an actress

但只是‘玩票’，绝不可以‘下海’。他为了要做研究工作，把自己反锁在屋里，希望我最好一天不回家。当时我年轻，抗战初期，我想加演剧队，不甘于业余玩票。到不了前线、敌后去演出，我就跑到 [...] 重庆 [...] 而成为一个职业演员。两地分居多年，我们终于协议离婚了。一个单身妇女的日子是不好过的，和谁往来，总会被人议论。当时我正忙于写作，写小说、写散文，编辑出版了 [...]；同时，我也想出国，换个生活环境，可又想等着解放的一天到来，可以投入一个崭新的生活。

but only as a frivolous past-time, absolutely not as a professional career. In order to work as a researcher, he locked himself up in his room, hoping I'd stay at home too all day. I was young then, and eager to be part of the war of resistance. I wanted to join the professional theatrical troupe, I wouldn't settle for an amateur pastime. As I couldn't reach the frontline, nor the enemy lines, I managed to flee to [...] Chongqing [...] and] became a professional actress. We had lived in different places as husband and wife for many years, so in the end we agreed to divorce. The life of an unmarried woman wasn't nice. Whoever I came across, I would always get other people's sarcastic remarks. So I immersed myself in work: fiction writing, essay writing, editorial publishing [...]. At the same time, I wished to go abroad and broaden my life's horizon. I probably also wished to wait for the day of liberation to come, possibly *plunging into a brand-new life*.²⁸

It was this thirst for independence and for a brand-new life inspired by the Nora character that fueled Fengzi's passion for writing essays, articles and fiction, including one of her most notable works of fiction: *Huaxiang* 畫像 (The Portrait), published in 1947. Directly inspired by *The Doll House*, it is both a tribute to Ibsen's story as well as a bold answer to the famous dilemma Lu Xun launched in his essay *Nala zouhou zen yang* 娜拉走后怎样 (What happens after Nora leaves, 1923): what happens after Nora leaves her gilded cage as a married woman? For Lu Xun, a woman leaving home only had one road waiting for her:

²⁷ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., pp. 353-4. Emphasis added.

不是堕落，就是回来。因为如果是一匹小鸟，则笼子里固然不自由，而一出笼门，外面便又鹰，有猫，以及别的什么东西之类；倘使已经关得麻痹了翅子，忘却了飞翔，也诚然是无路可以走。还有一条，就是饿死了，但饿死已经离开了生活，更无所谓问题，所以也不是什么路 [...]。所以我想，假使寻不出路，我们所要的就是梦；但不要将来的梦，只要日前的梦。

not degradation, but just return. Suppose a bird flied out of its cage, having no freedom inside; once outside, it would only meet hawks, cats and all sorts of similar creatures; and if its wings felt paralysed while trying to spread wide open, it would forget how to use them, ultimately finding nowhere to go. The bird could still have one more option available, though: starving to death. Yet death would mean departing from life, so no matter which question the bird wished to solve in the first place, it would find no road whatsoever. [...] That is why I think, if we can't find the road we are looking for, our next, imperative move is to dream – not about the future, but about the present.²⁹

In other words

Whereas most May 4th writers conflated spiritual freedom and freedom from physical oppression into a single romantic vision of youthful liberation, Lu Xun's 'Nora' essay separates them into two distinct issues. If Nora is to leave home and survive, she needs financial independence to support her new awareness.³⁰

As we will see, awareness is a key factor in Fengzi's story, triggering the woman protagonist's political awakening.

²⁹ Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Nala zouhou zenyang* 娜拉走后怎样 (What Happens After Nora Leaves), in Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Lu Xun jingdian quanji* 鲁迅经典·全集 (The Complete Collection of Lu Xun's Classics), Beijing, Huawen chubanshe, 2009, p. 300. Originally published in 1923.

³⁰ Brown, Caroline T., *op. cit.*, p. 75.

5. Love, freedom and reversal of roles

Huaxiang is a perfect example of how a woman's dream of the future can be turned into the actual building of the present: by using a highly sophisticated narrative style seemingly focusing on the disappearance of a young wife,³¹ Fengzi actually builds up a story where woman, despite being absent and replaced by a portrait, gradually moves from blurred background to center stage, while the men she has left behind can only ponder on the possible reasons for her abandoning them. Fengzi thus creates a reversal of the stereotypical male/female roles of abandoning tormentor /abandoned martyr, answering Lu Xun's question on *nüxing* in a subversive way: not only does she enable her heroine to leave home and dream about the present without being forced into degradation or return – apparently showing no interest in financial independence either, as in the 1940s the fighting for revolution had replaced the 1920s emergence of woman's economic survival. She also enacts a scenario of infinite possibilities, where *nüxing* can finally reclaim her own ontological freedom and “rewrite the story of a woman's destiny so that independence rather than romantic attachment to a man will become her priority”³² – in short, she can finally write her-story.

To do so, Fengzi ingeniously chooses to reverse the whole picture by focusing most part of the story on the men the female protagonist has left behind, thus focusing on men's perspective, in order to finally reveal woman's unswerving and uncompromised revolutionary liberation. This literary device heightens the subversive impact of woman's flight towards freedom on those who wished to tie her down to defined (and defining) roles: wife, confidante, lover, object of an overwhelming desire, all roles condensed in a symbol – the portrait – which is the only visible mark of her presence in the household and as such easy to access, admire and subject to permanent appropriation. All men in turn start interrogating the portrait as if it was not just a surrogate for the woman, but rather the tangible proof of her coexistence with them in the room, her image not simply replacing her presence but *becoming* her presence, In ‘fixating’ their thoughts on the painting, they can only hope of appropriating the woman's presence thanks to the portrait's fixity in space and time, as opposed to the elusiveness of the flesh and bone woman who has fled in the

³¹ Dooling, Amy D., *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 208.

³² Liu, Lydia H., “Invention and Intervention”, cit., p. 43.

space and time beyond the portrait and whose protean presence cannot be contained nor confined within frames nor colors. Yet, far from being just a mere object the male onlookers can manipulate with the specific aim of owning the woman it represents, the portrait itself resists their appropriation game by sending back all their fears and frustrations to them, thus turning into a mirror of their own failure and also testifying to how any male attempt at confining woman in the *nei* constraints ultimately proves to be fallacious.

The story is divided into four chapters, the first three focusing on a different male character and on his past relationship with the female protagonist Li Ziwei 李紫微, who suddenly disappeared fifteen years before. Chapter 1 is devoted to Zhong Yuguo 钟煜国, current owner of the portrait and Ziwei's first love interest before they both got married with different people; Chapter 2 is dedicated to her husband, You Mushi 尤慕诗, while Chapter 3 shed lights on painter Chen Yiyang 陈意扬, author of the portrait who eventually discovers he is himself madly in love with Ziwei like the other male characters. After focusing on the three men's ruminations about the disappearance of the woman, in Chapter Four Fengzi carefully stages the unexpected and sudden apparition-like visit of Ziwei herself to her original household. As she confronts Chen Yiyang, she finally reveals the true motives of her departure, only to vanish forever soon after.

Actually, though apparently focused on the male characters, the first three chapters also shed light on the woman's past hopes, fears and aspirations. The abandoned men's pondering on her choices thus functions as a screen and a surface behind which the real focus of the story – the woman's thoughts and actions – lies. Consequently, while overtly writing about the men's past dreams and present regrets, the author gradually builds up the whole personality of the female character, slowly emerging in-between the lines as a vibrant, independent woman who refuses to accept men's love as her ultimate purpose in life. At the same time, the portrait, supposedly transfixed on the wall for everyone to admire, constantly denies the three men what they wish for, averting its gaze from their attempt at owning it in perpetuity.

The very start of the story focuses on the portrait's potent refusal of men's appropriation: in his first attempt at creating a dialogue with the absent woman through her simulacrum, Zhong Yuguo says talking to the portrait (and to the woman beyond the portrait): “你为什么老是这么忧郁地望着? 可是, 你的眼神从来也不肯扫视一下我!” (Why do you always gaze so gloomily far off in

the distance? *Can't you just look in my direction?!*)³³ Despite being an inanimate object hanging on a wall framing the woman who has fled into fixity forever, the portrait shows no sympathy for the man nor willingness to bend to his will, an idea further corroborated by the ensuing description of the woman painted:

这位青年少妇，家常打扮，颊上正闪耀着青春的光。许是画家着笔时失去了把握，那碎花布旗袍裹着一个过于纤细的身体，那本是晶莹的眼睛，却漾溢着一层雾似的忧郁。她凝神地望着不可知的远方，从来也没有扫视一下借这幅画来陪伴自己孤寂晚景的老朋友。

Dressed in everyday clothing, the young woman radiated a youthful glow rising from her cheeks. Perhaps, while holding his brush, the artist had lost his touch here and there – the *qipao*, rashly decorated with imperfect flowers, revealed an overly slender body; the eyes, that should have sparkled with youth, were instead glazed over with a fog-like melancholy. *She gazed off into the unknown distance attentively. Not once did she set her eyes on the old friend who was sitting in lonely contemplation beside her portrait that evening.*³⁴

The woman is consciously not looking in the man's direction, thus refusing the male gaze³⁵ and its wish to appropriate her by deliberately choosing to look farther, shifting her gaze into an unknown space beyond, while the man, in his longing to be acknowledged by her stare, seems to display a desperate wish for the woman to acknowledge his presence by returning his glance. The idea of Ziwei as a woman characterized by a quest for the infinite beyond is further explored in the narrator's description of Yuguo's first meeting with her fifteen years before, after his return from abroad: as a young teenager, she is described as “活泼，一对充满了幻的眼睛，开始投向这新奇的世界” (vivacious, with *a pair of eyes which looked out into her new world in anticipation*).³⁶ Though still ignorant about life, she eagerly accepts Yuguo's letters to empower her knowledge

³³ Fengzi 凤子, *Huaxiang* 畫像 (The Portrait), in Shu Yi 舒乙, Yao Zhuzhu 姚珠珠 (eds.), *Fengzi. Zai wutai shang zai renshi jian* 凤子. 在舞台上在人间 (Fengzi: being on stage, being in the world), Beijing, Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2007, p. 266. Originally published in 1947. Emphasis added. Unless otherwise stated, the translations are all mine.

³⁴ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

³⁵ My reference here is to Laura Mulvey's analysis of the cinematic gaze as based on scopophilia, thus on “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze”, and as based on the equating of “sexual imbalance” with pleasure “split between active/male and passive/female” and with the “determining male gaze [which] projects its fantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly”. Mulvey, Laura, “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema”, in Braudy, Leo; Cohen, Marshall (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 835 and 837 respectively.

³⁶ Fengzi, *Huaxiang*, cit., p. 267. Emphasis added. Fengzi, *The Portrait*. Translated by Dooling, Amy D., in Dooling, Amy D. (ed.), *Writing Women. The Revolutionary Years*, cit., p. 210.

about the meaning of existence. Yet, as she realizes he loves her, she also understands she is not ready to share a life with him:

爱是什么呢？爱是两个人精神生活走向一致的开始，爱的结果，必然是两个不同生活范畴的人，走向一个共同生活的藩篱去。恋爱、结婚，一个不到二十岁的女孩子，人生刚刚开始的女孩子，就该这么早地结束她充满了生命阳光有活力的一段生活吗？紫薇不住自己独立运用她的思索能力，来解答这个她困惑的难题。

what was love after all? To love was two people entering a shared spiritual world and consciously deciding to start a life together. Its result inevitably meant that these two people coming from two different standpoints merged into a single being, heading for a shared confinement. Love, marriage... How could a girl not yet twenty, who had just begun to live, deserve so soon to put an end to such a vivid and bright moment of her life? *Ziwei was determined to use all her abilities to ponder and find an explanation to these questions troubling her.*³⁷

Still on the margins of life, Ziwei wants to learn how to brim with its shining, infinite beauty, all the while realizing that love and marriage would only mean putting an end to this learning. So, she suggests to Yuguo they wait ten years before deciding whether to marry or not. In her thinking, Ziwei shows extreme lucidity and self-awareness, something Yuguo, being almost fifteen years older than her, cannot consider to be acceptable: he simply dismisses her fully-formed point of view as ‘childish’, thinking he can win her over and “用行动来占有她” (*possess her through his own actions*)³⁸ aimed at persuading her. No matter how a woman makes up her mind, Fengzi seems to suggest, a man won’t accept her ideas as being as perfectly reasonable and mature as his own. In an additional explanation focused on Ziwei’s real feelings towards Yuguo, we also come to know how her decision to wait ten years is not dictated by a lack of feelings; on the contrary, Ziwei is madly in love with Yuguo but, being a sensible young woman who longs both for knowledge and for empowerment, she puts her own free choice first, dreaming of how, “自己大学结果了，独立生活了，她会要求父母给她选择婚姻的自由，不用说，他，就是她的结婚的对家。她幻想着五年后的生活，幸福象一杯斟满的酒” (once graduated from college and living on her own, she would talk to her parents and demand the freedom to choose her own husband. Naturally, he would be a

³⁷ Fengzi, *Huaxiang*, cit., p. 267. Emphasis added.

³⁸ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

partner deliberately chosen by her. She imagined her life five years from now, brimming with happiness like an overflowing glass of wine).³⁹

Yet, unexpectedly, Yuguo betrays their love by marrying somebody else; in marrying Mushi, Ziwei's reaction results in a new way of perceiving reality:

她呢，现实教育了她，他早已不是一个爱幻想的女孩子，早已不是仅仅读情书的女孩子，美丽的情书满足不了她，少女时候的恋爱在她荒诞可笑的回忆。不，她根本就不再回忆过去。她承认，是他，教给她懂得了恋爱，而现实却教给她懂得生活。

As for her, reality had taught her a lesson. She was no longer a girl who loved fantasizing. She was no longer the girl who lost herself in love letters; beautiful words did not capture her interest anymore. Her youthful love looked now like an absurd and ridiculous memory to her. No, actually those memories didn't exist anymore. She admitted that it was he who had taught her how to love, but reality had taught her how to live.⁴⁰

The lesson she learns from Yuguo is also a lesson on how to cherish her own independence, something which eventually leads her to desert Mushi as well, eventually leaving everyone speechless and pining for her return. Her ultimate act of freedom, which ultimately erases not just Yuguo or the memory of him but also any man she has ever loved, can only be interpreted as “冷酷” (heartless),⁴¹ that is as ‘unfeminine’ and incomprehensible by a man who has chosen to live only in the past instead: “回忆几乎是钟煜国的全部生活” (Memories were Zhong Yuguo's entire life).⁴² In his current clinging to the past after displaying overt selfishness by marrying somebody else instead of waiting for Ziwei, Yuguo shows yet another form of selfishness by deciding to own the portrait first and also, more significantly, to oppose his verbal rants to the obstinate silence of the woman in the painting, trying to reduce her to a simple object by constantly keeping the portrait – and possibly the woman it symbolizes – on display: “他珍视这幅画像，他展览这幅画像，谁也知道他有这么一个爱人” (He treasured that portrait and kept it on display. Everybody knew that he had once had such a lover).⁴³ In doing so, the first man described in the story is

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 268.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 269.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 268.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 269.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

deliberately trying to punish the independent woman for her double transgression – walking out of love *and* out of marriage – hoping to chain her down to his will by purportedly reducing her to a mere inanimate, silent and fixed object. Yet woman, as the ensuing chapters will prove, won't answer to anyone's will but her own.

6. “Our woman warrior”

Chapter 2 shifts the narration's focus from Zhong Yuguo to Ziwei's husband, You Mushi, and on his relationship with her; as for Chapter 1, the description of Mushi's past and present feelings function as a pretext to actually highlight Ziwei's further growing sense of awareness about herself and her place in the world. The chapter puts the life-changing experience of war to the forefront: not only does the conflict with Japan (an enemy never explicitly mentioned) bring bombs and destruction along with it, but it also brings a compelling and acute commitment to the defense of the nation against corruption (and against the *Guomindang*, also never explicitly mentioned in the story): “既然不能持枪上前线，就打点着在自己能力之内替国家、为战争默默地尽一份自己的力量” (Despite many couldn't rush to the front line, gun in hand, still everyone gave every ounce of strength they had to be part of the nation's and the war's effort).⁴⁴ Many people, including Ziwei and Mushi, find refuge in China's interior to escape the ravaging of time and space caused by the war; the couple thus finds a new space of their own in a small town of the southwest, described as a beautiful vision full of “彩色的婴” (colourful parrots) where the sky is “一方永远” (perpetually azure), the spring is “四季” (never-ending) and people “不善于言语，可是他们善良的心胸同当地的天色一样的开阔” (didn't enjoy talking, but the breath of their kindness rivaled the vastness of the sky).⁴⁵ Suddenly, Ziwei finds herself in a vast space where thoughts and desires can stretch beyond the limited horizon she was used to, the very vastness of the sky and people's kindness encouraging her to step outside the restrictive frame of marriage life. Yet, much like Yuguo, Mushi wants to frame her inside a decorative pattern devoid of meaning, his own vision of their new life in

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 269-270.

the small town completely different from Ziwei's; to him, the house their bodies and minds find rest in is vast enough to contain his joy and fulfill his days: he sees the house as a “避风雨” (shelter from the storm), content with the “小屋子” (tiny room) he has carved out for himself and the “多两三个” (few friends) he has singled out from the whole world, themselves enjoying the ‘refuge’ of his home as an isolated island devoted to art, youth and happiness.⁴⁶ And, like an icing on his personal cake, he has Ziwei beside him, who everyone praises for being “一位贤慧的太太” (an amiable wife), devoted to cleaning, cooking and entertaining guests with her witty conversation: in short, “她尽了女人应尽的本分” (she is all that a woman should be)⁴⁷ – a beautiful decoration on life's perfect surface. A woman whose very identity is reduced by her husband to a mere decoration, as he constantly refers to her as “他的彩色的鹦鹉” (his colourful parrot)⁴⁸ (in a way very much reminiscent of Helmer's addressing Nora as his “sweet little lark” or “my scared little song-bird”⁴⁹ in *The Doll House* by Ibsen), that is a cute little animal he can leave behind at home while taking up a new career in a local school. He'll come back only for sleeping and eating, and she'll always be there for him, ready to provide shelter, warm conversation and bright happiness.

Yet Ziwei seems not to enjoy this small-scale version of herself: the space surrounding her has suddenly turned into a trap again, her momentary escape reduced to the act of gazing far away, averting her eyes from everyday life: “她整日地凝神地望着，望着不可知的远方。那眼神是深不可测的湖，尽管湖面是平静的，这湖却象征着紫薇同一切人之间的距离，甚至她的丈夫尤慕诗” (All day long, she gazed off into the unknown, lost in rapture. Her eyes were like an unfathomable lake: their surface may have looked calm, but their abysmal depth symbolized the distance separating Ziwei from others, including her husband You Mushi).⁵⁰ The distance between her conscience and other people's grows thicker and thicker, until she realizes the warm scents of spring and the enchanting, apparent limitlessness of her new life is but a fake, as it only results into hiding the atrocity of war from sight. Despite the dizzy perfume of the spring garden constantly

⁴⁶ All citations *Ivi*, p. 270.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Ibsen, Henrik, *A Doll's House*. Translated by Archer, William. London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1889, pp. 26; 111 respectively. Originally published in 1879.

⁵⁰ Fengzi, *Huaxiang*, cit., p. 271.

ensnaring her in the trap of colorful immobility, Ziwei's thirst for truth finally helps her go past the fog of supposed happiness and find lucidity again:

她向往于一个新的精神生活，她向往着冰雪的北方，向往着严寒的冬日。她向往着听到前线的炮火，她向往自己在这个大时代的熔炉中能够被陶焙成一件器皿。她没有隐讳她的向往，她天真地要求着丈夫，一块从这个安静的小屋子冲出去。

She yearned for a new spiritual life. She yearned for the ice and snow of the north, for the severity of winter. She yearned for the sound of gunfire on the front line. *She yearned to be molded anew inside the brave smelting furnace this new age was.* She didn't hide her desire, but sincerely asked her husband to leave their peaceful little home behind and rush off elsewhere.⁵¹

The vastness of the southern sky, which actually proves to be nothing but a small confinement in the realm of innerness, a suffocating *nei* allowing no other horizon, is thus replaced by the limitlessness of rebirth through the experience of fighting, the only possible way woman can find outerness, thus becoming her ultimate *wai*. Fengzi uses no simplistic rhetoric here, but clearly envisages the possibility for a privileged, educated woman to walk a different path, leaving wealth and peace behind to consciously play her part in the harsh struggle against Japanese invaders (and *Guomindang* corruption), asking more than just poetic conversations and embellished survival for herself, thus demanding from herself a strong political response to an emergency situation. In a time when most male and female intellectuals were caught up in the wave of destruction caused by war, contemplating escape from a quiet life removed from the wreckage of His-tory was more than a legitimate choice for a woman: it was a courageous one, literally aiming at forging a new path for herself, joining the collective space of war to hopefully create her own personal space as a land yet to come, a new *wai* for a new kind of woman, more than just another Nora leaving her home behind, but finally breaking the chain of His-tory to make her-story.

Ziwei's yearning to join the fight echoes Fengzi's genuine interest in fighting with her fellow countrymen and countrywomen against the Japanese invaders, as she fiercely recalls in her memoir on the occasion of a visit to Pyongyang, Northern Korea in 1951. She went there as a member of a *weiwentuan* 慰问团 (support group) to support the Chinese volunteers fighting during the 1950-

⁵¹ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

1053 war between Southern and Northern Korea (with the U.S.A. supporting the former and China supporting the latter):

抗战期间我没有亲历战场的生活体验，在重庆遭到日本飞机的轰炸，几次死里逃生；在香港从梦中被日本侵略军的炸弹声惊醒 [...]，从九龙乘小划子偷渡香港，又从香港化装逃到九龙进入游击区。我[...] 饱尝了战争给予无辜平民的苦难。[...] 真恨自己不能携枪上前线。现在到了朝鲜战场，虽然自己只是手无寸铁的慰问团团员，可是我见到了志愿军战士 [...]。这次能到前线慰问抗美援朝，[...]，补偿了我青年时代抗击日本侵略者的火线梦。

Although I had never been on a battlefield during the War of Resistance against Japan, I had nearly been killed several times in Chongqing by Japanese bombing. Japanese troops' bombs had blasted me from my dreams in Hong Kong [...], then I fled from Kowloon, disguised as a peasant woman, and reached the guerrilla areas. [...] I had a bellyful of the war and of the misery inflicted on innocent civilians. [...]. *I hated myself for not being able to go to the frontline with a gun in my hands.* Now, in the battlefield of North Korea, despite being unarmed, as a member of the support group I could at least see our volunteer soldiers [fighting...]. This time I would reach the frontline and see our volunteers aiding Northern Koreans in their war against Americans. [This time...], *I would be able to realize the dream of my youth to fight back against the Japanese invaders.*⁵²

Far from being a shallow desire, Ziwei's wish grows within her mind as the ultimate, authentic plunge into life, so as to shape her spirit and will anew. Of course, being a traditional man unwilling to let a woman live her own life and make her own decisions, Mushi can't accept Ziwei's resolve to leave the south and join the frontline; not only does he fail to understand her points of view but, worse than Yuguo, he even openly ridicules her in front of his friends by saying “瞧! 我们的女战士!” (Look here! Our woman warrior!)⁵³ – as if a woman was necessarily incompatible with and incapacitated into fighting for specific physiological and psychological limitations supposedly inherent to her biological sex. In other words, despite *nüxing* as a socially and culturally acceptable male-centered construct had long been erased by both left-wing intellectuals and nationalist politicians, here the male onlooker still tries to confine woman into an essentialized frame, failing to see the unlimited beyond she is ready to step into – a space yet to be written and beyond all possible limitations and constructs.

⁵² Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 373. Emphasis added. See Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-6. Shapiro omits some sentences from his version and later on adds a whole paragraph to the original Fengzi's version.

⁵³ Fengzi, *Huaxiang*, cit., p. 272.

The game at essentializing woman is so imprinted in men's mindset that even Chen Yiyang, the painter friend that often visits the married couple, is willing to play it: his decision to create a portrait of Ziwei in order to engrave her melancholy mood for everyone to see actually functions as a vehicle to let people linger on the object of the painting, consequently allowing people to objectify the woman: “人们欣赏着这幅画像，欣赏着画像中的少妇” (People praised the portrait and admired the woman in the painting).⁵⁴ The act of observing the painting makes the onlookers pry into Ziwei's past, reducing her to a pining woman who has lost the romantic love of her youth. A seemingly harmless gesture, that of painting a female friend just to please her husband, actually turns into a cruel display of the woman's life, subtly inviting everyone to turn into potential voyeurs of the woman's inner being, spying on her hidden suffering and debating about her past love as if it was the most natural, innocent thing to do. Everyone thus comes to see her as a bird in a cage, as the painting legitimizes their voyeuristic attitude; just like Mushi, all Ziwei's 'friends' don't seem to be interested in her possible escape but only wish to avidly witness her imprisonment.

As Ziwei finally comes to her ultimate resolve, leaving her safe home behind, the letter she writes to Mushi gives evidence to the fact that her wish to take part in the war was not just a childish fantasy, but her own personal quest for truth:

我怀疑爱情，家庭是不是人们生的全部，在爱情、家庭之外，似乎还应该有点什么。既然你不能同意我的做法，你不可能同我一块跳出这旧的生活，希望你能原谅我的单独行动。假如，你认为我遗弃了家就是遗弃了你，我无需多辩白，实在爱情同家庭都填补了我的空虚 [...]。有很多声音在呼唤着，我无法具体说出我的感想，我只有用行动来证实我所要追求的现实。。。

I doubt that love and home are all that life is made of. There certainly must be something else beyond their horizon. Since you don't agree with my course of action and you refuse to run away from this stale life with me, I hope you'll forgive me for leaving on my own instead. And if you think that in abandoning this home I'm forsaking you, then I can offer you no better explanation. Neither love nor home can fill this void I feel. [...] There are so many voices calling me. I can't explain my thinking more in detail. I can only use my actions to forge the reality I'm looking for...⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 271.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 272.

Finally awakening from a hazy lethargy, Ziwei can plunge into the ultimate escape, opposing her own invisible freedom (thus not to be appropriated by anyone) to the visible token of female slavery in the three men's world: the portrait. The decision of extricating herself from the male gaze and from the three men's appropriating strategy leaves them completely powerless and stupefied, as it deprives them of any possibility to access her new life: while ruminating on the past and on how the two years of his marriage have soon gone, extinguished as they were by the storm of Ziwei's final resolve, Mushi still fails to comprehend how, instead of choosing the easiest path to life, she opted for the complicated unknown: “象一艘躲避风雨的小舟，永远停泊在他这个港口里” (Like a small boat avoiding the storm, *she should have been anchored in his port forever*).⁵⁶ Mushi refuses to give Ziwei some credit for her choice; woman's search for independence can't be accepted by man, as “女人的命运同笼里的鸟是差不了多少的，无论飞得多远，总有一天她受不了风雨的折磨，总有一天需要休息，需要一个家” (a woman's fate was just that of a caged bird: no matter how far she could fly, one day she would no longer be able to endure the storm. One day she would need to rest; she would need a home).⁵⁷ He can only sink into despair first and forgetfulness later, trying to erase her presence from his life and home entirely, her constant absence reminding him more and more of his failure and lack of understanding. He finally seems to acknowledge and accept her choice – until the only token of her existence left, the portrait, vanishes too.

7. In search of the painting

In Chapter 3, painter Yiyang sets off on a journey to find where his painting might be; as he finally discovers it in Yuguo's living room, he decides to pay a visit to his friend. At first, Yiyang has trouble recognizing his own work, being the portrait encased inside “一架金边雕花的框子” (a luxuriously carved, *gilded* frame)⁵⁸ – Yuguo's personal version of Ziwei's gilded cage and also (in

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 273.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*. See Fengzi, *The Portrait*, p. 216. Emphasis added.

his view) the ideal abode for her (or rather a tamed version of her). As he looks into Ziwei's eyes reproduced in the painting, Yiyang wonders if the rumours concerning the woman's reconciliation with her first lover might be true: could Ziwei be back and, as everyone says, could have she turned into Yuguo's mistress? Apparently praising Ziwei's intelligence and insight over reality while analysing Yuguo's inability to love and truly understand people, Yiyang eventually rejects this hypothesis: “一个向上的女性快不会走上堕落的歧途 (Such a determined woman would never sink to such a base level).⁵⁹ In defining her a *nüxing*, Yuguo acknowledges Ziwei's status as an independent woman defying social rules; but then, as he looks directly on the portrait once again, his ruminations take a completely different turn, actually diminishing Ziwei's subjectivity altogether: “然而，不知什么力量把他吸引住了，他两脚怎样也移动不了。他呆望着，望着画家，他考虑怎样从这客厅将这幅画像拿走。‘这是我的作品，我有这权力’” (But some strange force pulled him towards the portrait: he stopped, his feet unable to take a single step. He stood there motionless, gazing at the portrait. He considered how he might leave the parlour and vanish with the painting. “This is my work! I have every right to take it with me”).⁶⁰

As it happened for the other men, the objectified version of the woman bewitches the painter with its reassuring reduction of her personality to a fallacious fixity. More importantly, being the one who actually moulded woman's subjectivity into a reified object, Yiyang feels he is entitled to decide where this moulded, tamed version of Ziwei should be displayed: he may well have created the ideal image of woman for everyone else's cannibalistic pleasure and consumption; he and only he can be the true owner of the artifact and, consequently, of the woman lying beyond the artifact itself. His initial praise of Ziwei's unique and strong insight into life is in fact just a pretext to discredit Yuguo for not being able to really own the woman he loved: “犹如他追求过许多女人，而他并未真正爱过一个。甚至他的太太，也终于离了婚了。至于紫薇，说是爱过，却未得到过的” (He had courted many women, but hadn't truly loved any of them. Even his wife had divorced him in the end. As for Ziwei, he said he loved her, but *he had never truly possessed her*).⁶¹ To really love a woman, Yiyang seems to imply, a man must possess her, own her very soul or, should this not be possible, at least own the representation and simulacrum of her identity – the painting – which literally reduces Ziwei to his own personal creation.

⁵⁹ Fengzi, *Huaxiang*, cit., p.274.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, pp. 273-4. Emphasis added.

As Yuguo comes in the room and discovers Yiyang musing before the portrait, the two men start talking about the past. Their discussion eventually creates a sort of fraternal bond, a male solidarity aimed at restoring order and ultimately casting woman aside as the epitome of unsolvable mystery, a mere enigma no man can understand:

“可惜我画出来的纸是她的外形，我无法理解她的为人。”

“谁又真的理解 她呢？煜国也深深地叹息了。”

真的，不仅意扬、煜国不理解她，就是慕诗，她的最亲的人也从未懂得过她。她看起来似乎爱着她的丈夫，也喜欢着这些朋友，可是，她的精神却仿佛生活在另一个范畴里。[...] 她给人第一个印象是活泼的，易于接近的，但，人们真心想接近她时，更多的沉默把她隔膜在另一个天地里。[...]

“我没法理解她，她变得太多，也太怪了！”

“It’s too bad that *I could only paint her outer appearance, but I wasn’t able to truly know her inner being.*”

“*Who really knew her after all?*” Yuguo sighed deeply.

It was true. Not only did Yiyang and Yuguo not understand her, but even Mushi, her own husband, had never figured her out. She seemed to have loved her husband and friends in the past, yet her spirit probably inhabited another world altogether. [...] The first impression she gave was that of a lively, kind and sociable woman. Only those who genuinely tried to get closer to her recognized the silence separating her from the rest of the world.[...]

“I didn’t understand her. She had changed too much. *It was just too strange!*”⁶²

In men’s eyes, so used as they are to mould woman as their personal object of desire and own her in perpetuity in their minds if not in their flesh, a woman who shows no interest neither in love nor in marriage ultimately is nothing but an utterly incomprehensible, ‘strange’ creature.

As Yuguo reveals how the portrait came into his possession, we come to know it was Ziwei herself to steal the object from her home and deliver it to her friend, before leaving on her quest for freedom. Traditional as he is, Yuguo believes Ziwei must automatically be travelling with a man, for no young and beautiful woman could possibly ‘waste’ her beauty by being all alone; little does he understand about the change she has gone through and the bravery she had in leaving home: “‘你上哪儿去？你一个人？’我问她。她笑了，自然是一个人。否则我也不带这幅画出来了”

⁶² *Ivi*, pp. 274-5. Emphasis added.

(Where are you going? Are you by yourself ?” I asked her. She answered, smiling. “*Of course I’m by myself.* Otherwise I wouldn’t have brought the portrait with me).⁶³

Facing man’s astonished, prejudiced gaze, the liberated woman can only use her smile and certainty, something he refuses to understand though he keeps repeating to Yiyang her real expression, her real eyes are not the ones the painter tried to reproduce in his work – “可是有一样，她的眼神却不同于这幅画上的。她的眼神是那样明朗，坚定” (but there’s one thing I’m sure of: *her expression wasn’t the one captured by the portrait. Hers was so clear, so determined*)⁶⁴ – as if to suggest that no portrait can capture her true essence, thus implying that woman cannot be held captive by any man. Yiyang further corroborates Yuguo’s impression by finally acknowledging Ziwei’s independent spirit: “紫薇追求的是一个生活内容，而不是一个生活的形式。她可能不再结婚 [...] 。她的性格是那样地强，她不会为了感情生活毁掉她自己的前途的。” (What Ziwei is searching for is a true purpose in life, not an empty shell. Probably she won’t marry again. [...] She has such a strong personality. She would never ruin her own future for love).⁶⁵

Finally, Yiyang gives Ziwei full credit for her brave decision to leave home and search for authenticity elsewhere; that is why he decides to leave the painting in Yuguo’s custody: his journey to the past has come to an end, while Yuguo’s will last forever, the portrait being his only consolation for a vanished love he will never fully understand.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 275. Emphasis added.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 276.

8. Revelation and revolution

The fourth and final chapter of the story brings the three men all together and also discloses the woman's presence and motives. Unexpectedly, Yuguo finds the portrait is missing from his house. A note by Mushi explicitly states the reason for this action: “我希望带着这画像，借这画像，我相信知道她的人会告诉我她是否仍然活着” (I'm taking the portrait with me, hoping with all my might its presence will help me understand whether or not she's still alive).⁶⁶ Once again, Ziwei's simulacrum is used as a tool to pry upon her and fulfill man's ultimate dream, that is revealing the hidden, 'mysterious' depths of a woman's soul. Being the painting Yuguo's only companion, he inevitably sinks into despair: “失去了画像，也就失去了他的精神生活的主宰。确实，他不能没有这幅画像，因为他不能不借回忆来满足自己空虚的心灵 (*Losing the portrait was like losing a deity*. Actually, he couldn't be without that painting, because, he couldn't live without the memories he needed in order to fill the emptiness inside his soul).⁶⁷ Left behind by the woman he loved, Yuguo can't help but turning her into an god-like idol, the portrait functioning both as the god's icon and as the shrine dedicated to her worship. So Yuguo decides to visit Mushi to confront him about the theft; in his actual meeting the man Ziwei decided to marry, Yuguo's heart is suddenly filled with hatred and jealousy: “他恨慕诗，恨慕诗的残醒，慕诗一次再次撕毁了他的幻景，慕诗占有过紫薇这个人，如今，又要来占有紫薇的影子 [...]。用强盗手法来偷这本应属于我的画” (He hated Mushi; he hated his cruelty. Time and time again, Mushi had torn his illusions apart. *He once possessed Ziwei and now he wanted to possess her reflection*. [...]). Like a highly-skilled thief, *you stole a painting that's rightfully mine*).⁶⁸ His thoughts reinforce the idea he considers Ziwei more like an object than like a person, a woman who can only be 'possessed' by one man or another – and if she cannot be possessed directly in the flesh, her portrait must be passed on from illegitimate thief to rightful owner, until order is finally restored with woman (or her portrait) reduced to the status of man's property.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 277.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*. Emphasis added.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 278. Emphasis added.

In order to convince him to restore the portrait, Yuguo promises Mushi he will return the object once Ziwei decides to come back; this way, they will become a family again. Yet Yuguo's words prove to be useless: Mushi can't accept to let go of the portrait, because he can't let another man 'have' the woman once was his own exclusive possession. Thus Yuguo can only resume his private conversations with the wall, once filled with the portrait and with the memories of the woman it represented, hoping one day he will be able to have the painting back and destroy it to put an end to the whole story, thus figuratively killing the woman's body and spirit forever. At the same time, though, Yuguo secretly hopes Ziwei might one day come back to him, his belief so intense and heart-rending to make Yiyang decide to paint another portrait for his friend as a consolation for his loss – yet he has to find a model resembling Ziwei first.

With an unexpected turn of events, Ziwei herself shows up in the painter's studio. What we see is not a woman ravaged by time and war, but a resolute woman, whose inner beauty resonates stronger and bolder than her outer beauty once did:

眼前的她，象春天的阳光，那样的活跃，那样的富于生命力。是的，她已不再年轻，在她身上已找不回旧日的影子。可是娇艳的青春敌不过久经磨练的智力，她的眼神是那样的明朗，坚定。她是变了，至少，她的心情却更年轻了。她那样坦白，那样热情，从别后的生活谈到对现实的认识，每句话都有力地吸引着意扬。

The Ziwei that stood before his eyes *was like the sun in springtime, full of energy and enthusiasm*. Certainly, she was no longer young – the Ziwei of the former times was gone forever. But *youth's delicate beauty can't compare to the intelligence acquired through experience*. Her eyes were still bright and determined, yet she had changed indeed: *her spirit had become much more youthful*. She looked so frank, so warm. As she spoke of her life after leaving and of how she had come to understand reality, every sentence pulled Yiyang closer like a magnet.⁶⁹

The painter realizes he too loves her, just like Mushi and Yuguo do; despite being the only one who actually tries to go beyond his personal feelings and past her youth and outer appearance to see her real self, in the end Yiyang fails to acknowledge Ziwei's presence past any possible portrait. In fact, he actually *wants* (and begs) to create another painting out of her, hoping this would give him one last opportunity to possess at least her older self, her youthful self being forever locked in Yuguo's embrace. Yiyang's cry: “我甚至嫉妒煜国，因为你初恋的爱人是他而不是我” (I even envy

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 279. Emphasis added.

Yuguo because he was the one you loved first, not me)⁷⁰ actually bears witness to yet another man's attempt at owning Ziwei, to which she can only react by refusing the man's plea.

Ziwei's subsequent speech reveals her motives for leaving a conventional life behind. Her words are not meant to reduce her status as an independent woman; on the contrary, they tell us that no painting can rival nor contain her spirit:

不要画我，我是一个平凡不过的人。我的生活也是平凡不过的生活。不同于过去的是，我不再情感的小圈子里游泳，我有我的工作，说得好听一点，我有我的事业。我愿意为更多的人做点事，如此而已。并没有什么神秘。你想，给我留张画像有什么用呢？这张像能够影响谁个呢？象煜国整日对着画像自话，精神生活囚在过去的圈子里，你说你同情他，你骂我冷酷。对于这么一个固执而又自私的人，不冷酷又将怎样呢？我真奇怪在我年轻时爱过他。一个年轻女孩子的思想真是不可思议，一个年轻女孩子的感情现在想起来是可笑的。

Don't paint me. I'm just an ordinary person. Mine is but an ordinary life, but it's different from the one I had in the past. I no longer swim in that tiny pool of feelings. I have my work, or perhaps I should say, *I have my career*. I'm willing to do more for others. It's as simple as that, there are no complicated nor mysterious explanations to find. Think about it: what's the point in convincing me to stay and paint my portrait? Would such a painting change someone's life? Yuguo would probably spend all day staring at the portrait talking to himself. His spiritual life would be forever imprisoned in the past. You say you pity him, and curse me for being cold-hearted. But is it really wrong to be cold-hearted towards such a stubborn, selfish person? I just don't understand how I could have ever loved him. The mind of a young woman really is unfathomable. As I think back about those times now, that young woman's emotions seem just ridiculous to me.⁷¹

Not only do Ziwei's words and her choosing career over love clearly echo the choices literary heroines were confronted with in the 1930s, struggling between revolution and love; they actually symbolize women's ultimate embracing the revolution in the 1940s, knowing it would actually change the course of His-tory, by inscribing their own 'her-story' within the tracks of its flaming path. Ziwei's resolve also somehow foretells what Fengzi would accomplish in her own life, as her lifetime husband remembers:

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 280.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 279. Emphasis added.

In addition to having been a fine essayist, she was an actress on stage and screen, an author, an editor, a play doctor, a supporter of local theater, a film and drama critic, a developer of budding talents, and able administrator [constantly characterized by] her unswerving devotion to China's cause, her outspoken fury at dishonesty and corruption, her concern for others, her complete disinterest in fame or personal gain.⁷²

While Zhang Ailing's heroine, though stemming from a 1943 disillusioned woman author who had managed to survive war and its wake of wreckage and demolition, tried to fight against the space politics dictated by man but ultimately reinstated her place within this space's stifling confinement, Fengzi's Ziwei, created in Civil War China by a pro-Communist revolution author, takes a completely different turn for the best: in *Huaxiang* the woman protagonist shows how she can and must "refuse to be written back into patriarchal discourse either as a wife or as an extramarital lover."⁷³ Finally confronted with the men who want to reduce her to an object of 'romantic' love, Ziwei answers with the self-evident power of personal freedom: she reclaims her need to gallop into life and forge existence with her own hands with no man by her side, unbridled energy rushing into the future. Just like Nora awakens to life in Ibsen's play, finally discovering neither her father nor her husband had ever loved her but only treated her like "your doll wife, just like at home I used to be papa's doll child,"⁷⁴ Ziwei knows none of the three men will ever come to understand "今天的她" (the her of today),⁷⁵ but she soldiers on, aware the leap forward is to be walked alone. Consequently, she finally disappears from everybody's life, her eyes "烈日一样的明澈, 坚定" (now as bright and determined as the scorching sun),⁷⁶ forever branded on Yiyang's memory yet impossible to reproduce (and reduce) on canvas, finally forcing him to give up in his endless attempt at recreating her presence to keep her close forever: "他曾经希冀过借记忆临出这个可宝贵的印象来, 可是, 他却无法把这印象复活在他的笔底!" (At one point he thought to reclaim the precious memory with his paintbrush, *but alas, he was unable to bring that final impression back to life*).⁷⁷

⁷² Shapiro, Sidney, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

⁷³ Liu, Lydia H., "Invention and Intervention", *cit.*, p. 52.

⁷⁴ Ibsen, Henrik, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

⁷⁵ Fengzi, *Huaxiang*, *cit.*, p. 280.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*. Fengzi, *The Portrait*, *cit.*, p. 222. Emphasis added.

9. Utopia, future actuality and *nüxing*

From a symbolical and psychological point of view, Fengzi's discourse (and the space of her own she creates) can be interpreted as aligned to the Communist-generated and soon-to-be PRC's major narrative on *funü jiefang* 妇女解放 (women's liberation), thus Ziwei's final stepping out of the heterosexual normative of marriage and/or dependence on man can be seen as acceptable if interpreted according to the CCP code. The men she is confronted with throughout the story are clearly non-revolutionary men, thus representing negative male roles in their lingering to such bourgeois notions as love or feudal practices as male landowner-like possessiveness towards female proletarian-like subjectivity, thus hinting at a class-struggle interpretation of Ziwei's breakout from heterosexual, marriage-based (or marriage-like) relations with men. Actually, no matter which man the narrator focuses her attention on, all three of them share "a typically male-centered capitalist dream",⁷⁸ that of owning several pieces of material (or intellectual) property to prove their success: money, real estate, fine art objects and, to top it all, a beautiful wife/mistress – the same dream Ibsen so brilliantly exposed as fake and hypocritical in 1879. Ziwei's final speech to Yiyang, in particular, and her words "I no longer swim in that tiny pool of feelings", are clearly aligned with the 'big I' narrative created by the League of the Left-wing writers, positioning literature as a great sea of fire and blood, devoid of any personal sentimental feelings because these are pool-shaped, thus limited and not revolutionary enough. On the other hand, men's conscience, being locked inside the enclosure of their 'small I' feelings, will be "forever imprisoned in the past", in a world where revolution, and consequently liberation, is not possible. In this reading, gender roles as traditionally conceived by a male-centered perspective are ultimately reversed, with Ziwei representing a 'manly' subjectivity and the men she leaves behind figuring as 'feminized' objects.

More specifically, analysing the story from a male-centered (but purportedly 'universal') CCP political perspective, Ziwei can also be interpreted as a Communist hero(ine) fighting against class

⁷⁸ Liu, Lydia H., "Invention and Intervention", cit., p. 52.

oppression, the men she breaks free from representing a bourgeois, *Guomindang*-centered (thus outmoded) lifestyle. This may also be the reason why her story on a woman's quest for spatial freedom wasn't censored by the CCP intelligentsia, unlike Yang Gang's was. In this respect, Fengzi's 1993 account of her (and Shapiro's) attempt to reach the liberated areas in 1948 after temporarily staying in Beijing implies a configuration of the liberated areas space as a "utopia – a kind of utopia constructed on tropes toward which outsiders were attracted".⁷⁹ Despite she never managed to reach the 'promised land', the very fact that she longed to leave the urban space to join the glorious fight in the rural countryside gives evidence to how this utopian fantasy was both imprinted in the writers' minds and re-enacted in their writings during the PRC years.⁸⁰ The entrance of the Red Army in Beijing in 1949, in particular, in Fengzi's words comes to symbolize the tangible sign of a utopian future turned into an everlasting utopian present, where all dreams of liberation are finally accomplished – as it happens for Ziwei in the end of *Huaxiang*, woman's utopia figuring as a moving away from the bourgeois simulacrum of the portrait.

Fengzi's (and Ziwei's) alignment with the Communist macro-narrative of liberation, though, does not necessarily undermine her own contribution to a gender-specific narrative, as it also implies the possibility of going beyond the man-made macro-narrative positioning itself as a feminist statement. Ziwei's stepping outside the romantic love logics can actually be interpreted also as a way to transgress the *nei/wai* boundary to gain outerness in terms of *nüxing* independence. The space she chooses in the end paradoxically overlaps with the ideological perimeter of spatial consciousness established by the CCP, foretelling the future re-building of the nation's space in the People's Republic of China as *jia* 家 (home, the very word Fengzi and her friends use in 1948 to describe the liberated areas as opposed to the estranged space of corrupt Shanghai and collapsing Beijing)⁸¹ and as *quanguo* 全国 (the entire country),⁸² thus entering an all-encompassing *nei* without a *wai*. Yet, in the end, Ziwei's invisible space can also be seen as the ultimate breaking free from the inner/outer dichotomy altogether, so that her final leap into the infinite beyond may not

⁷⁹ Zhang Enhua specifically uses the 'utopia' definition as referring to The Long March-related mythological discourse, but also to Ya'an "as revolutionary simulacrum", thus implying all subsequent actions performed by Communists to forge a new China could be (and indeed were) seen as 'utopian'. Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

⁸⁰ Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., pp. 356-366. See also Shapiro for his own version of the story. Shapiro, Sydney, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-59.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 356.

⁸² Especially while talking about post-1949 events in her memoir, Fengzi proves to be extremely conscious about the symbolical implications of the words she chooses. Fengzi, *Yinjie jinhun*, cit., p. 370.

represent “the individual witness being sublimated into the collective identity of the people”⁸³ but the actual victory of *nüxing* against patriarchy and its male-centered drowning force.

In this sense, Fengzi’s story bears witness to an unparalleled gender-specific strength not yet crystallized in a strictly defined PRC pattern, which encased women in the 1950s asexual narrative of mass liberation. The mobilization of women as a relevant labour force contributing to the economic development of the country actually resulted in an “不全解放” (incomplete liberation) for *nüxing*, as gender was completely erased from the CCP political agenda and from its master narrative based on “无差异的平等” (equality without difference), eventually generating “一种权力结构” (one monolithic block of power only) created by men and enforced by men.⁸⁴ In 1947, when Fengzi wrote her story, though, the endless promise of space represented by the liberated areas had a completely different meaning, potentially differentiated in terms of gender: a whole new generation of post-war-of-resistance 1940s women could actually dream and simultaneously realize the dream of no longer being landlocked from within in the suffocating, desolate no (wo)man’s land inhabited by Zhang Ailing. They could choose to inhabit an open wide space of their own, still free from a definite, man-made, CCP-sized national space yet to come, and they could choose it because of its actual and factual availability in the liberated areas. The infinite space lying beyond the portrait can thus be interpreted as the unparalleled fully accomplished freedom of *nüxing* in terms of social, cultural and representational power, herself a possible alternative version of utopia attracting generations of future women towards an uncompromising form of liberation.

Fengzi’s story can thus be seen as exploring the true liberation of woman, one that can go far beyond either Lu Xun’s statement “I am my own mistress” or Ibsen’s Nora and her decision to leave home. None of the two male authors mentioned ever conceived the idea and theory of liberation of *nüxing* as the liberation of a whole social category of ‘people’, nor did the true situation of women ever take shape in their work as a real concept – as *language*.⁸⁵ Significantly, Fengzi didn’t choose to linguistically define ‘woman’ in the story as *nüren*, like other women authors of the 1930s and the 1940s did (Zhang Ailing among them), their choice apparently signaling egalitarianism with man but actually not implying any true independence for woman, as the so-called ‘myself’ used to define female characters referred to nothing but a replica of the man-

⁸³ Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁸⁴ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., pp. 215-6.

⁸⁵ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 29.

related expression *nanren* with a female flavor.⁸⁶ Instead, Fengzi opted for a diversified language, mainly using *fu*, a choice consistent with the Communist-oriented ‘big I’ narrative space, but shifting to *nüxing* when she wanted painter Yiyang to emphasize Ziwei’s independence. Though uneven in their occurrence (and occasionally accompanied by a third option, *nü haizi* 女孩子, ‘young woman’ when referring to Ziwei’s younger self), the two terms testify to a symbolic and semantic ambivalence of ‘woman’, opening Fengzi’s story to a specific feminist interpretation. What actually emerges in analysing Ziwei’s evolution as a character is her subversive power as *nüxing*, finally managing to surpass art and replacing it with the vibrant urgency of revolution, never mentioned explicitly but visible in her willingness “to do more for others”. More importantly, the unknown space beyond the portrait opens up unlimited, yet-to-come revolutions, becoming the canvas where Ziwei (and other women) can create ‘a space of her own’: a new configuration of space takes form in the infinite beyond, invisible to others but manifest in her final words and decision.

Compared to Ding Ling’s late 1920s heroines, whole tale of rebellion ending in death and/or defeat positioned woman’s fate and subjectivity as ‘future anteriority’, in creating Ziwei’s story Fengzi is actually creating woman’s future actuality: in other words, Fengzi describes the future of Chinese women as it is or should be, transforming it into an actual truth for the protagonist. Her existence do not represent what women’s life might have been in a future utopian world free from social and cultural constraints, nor is it a “prefigurative space,”⁸⁷ that is a space suggesting a form yet to come for woman to inhabit in the future; it rather constructs the life of women in a real future, seen as a site of unlimited choice for the liberated female self, that is for ‘woman’ as focused on herself and her career, no longer on children, partners or her own beauty. Thus, in writing her-story, as a woman Ziwei can finally be granted a space for herself because she has accomplished what the other four characters couldn’t: she has gone beyond the need of *qing* 情 (feelings, love) as a supposedly inherently ‘feminine’ quality, but also beyond the urge to find an egalitarian relationship with man, because of its irrelevance within her project of self-awareness and self-(re)construction. In conclusion, not only does Ziwei prove to move beyond Nora and men’s inability to see her real self; she’s also literally showing us how *nüxing* as a politically conscious and gender-specific-

⁸⁶ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Fuchu lishi dibiao*, cit., p. 34.

⁸⁷ Srnicek, Nick; Williams, Alex, *Inventing the Future. Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, London and New York, Verso, 2015, p. 35. Revised edition published in 2016.

identified woman can embody future actuality as a space reinstating modernity's optimistic drive into a ravaged His-tory, thanks to the revolution of her-story.

CONCLUSION

A woman's space: reclaiming agency and *nüxing* specificity for 1927-1949 Chinese women writers today

As we have seen, the five short stories examined in this dissertation are extremely diverse in terms of style, content and ideological constructions of a woman's space. For instance, in Ding Ling's *Ah-mao guniang* space is mainly associated to the "ideology of the interiority of self"¹ as symbolized by the female protagonist's conflating with opaque, blurred or shapeless tropes like fog, curtains and human silhouettes, so as to highlight the extreme and narcissistic individuality of the modern girl's feminist and non-nationalistic spatial quest. In Xiao Hong's *Qi'er*, instead, the quest for space is deeply rooted within a relational view on the self/other interaction aimed at restoring an egalitarian re-theorization of human/elemental relations while trying to gain a feminist form of survivorship against His-tory. Besides, in Yang Gang's *Fragments from a Lost Diary/Rouxing*, the woman protagonist tries to create her own space within the politics of revolutionary discourse as opposed to the *Guomindang*'s space of surveillance and of ideological and physical repression, but also positioning herself as potentially outside the manly space of CCP revolution. Moreover, in Zhang Ailing's *Qing cheng zhi lian*, woman's spatial quest is enacted by breaking free from the suffocating household perimeter and as a de-constructive compromise with the traditional ideology of marriage, configuring space as a fissure of incomplete (and deplete) but still feminist-oriented, survival. Last but not least, in Fengzi's *Huaxiang*, woman's spatial quest stems from and simultaneously leads to a kind of revolutionary freedom which is neither focused on individualistic drives nor on relational ones towards society and the world at large, effacing man's ideological tendency towards appropriation while dealing with woman on the one hand and woman's penchant for compromise on the other through the protagonist's trespassing of the *nei/wai* boundary, doing away with the whole dichotomy as such.

Despite the differences among these stories, though, all five authors explore the possibility for woman to reclaim some sort of agency and outerness in a world constantly trying either to send her back to the inner sphere of traditional China's spatial ideology or to erase her gender-specific

¹ Larson, Wendy, *Women and Writing in Modern China*, cit., p. 109.

version of space altogether. Finally stepping out of the male intellectuals' realm, where woman was conceived just as "the symbol of moral and practical alternatives for China's future"² – thus as a male-oriented ideological construct – these five modern Chinese women writers managed to build their own rebellious space, no matter how imperfect, incomplete and unfinished a task it might prove to be. In particular, in their attempt at finding a personal solution to women's social, political and cultural immobility as determined by men and man-made nation (be it a *Guomindang*-centered or a CCP-centered perimeter alike), these five authors chose a deliberately feminist-oriented and/or female-centered construction of gender as a site of constant struggle in negotiating woman's personal space within the "power relationships in society",³ thus denouncing the limitations caused by these same relationships, hopefully destroying and building them anew through new forms of representation for woman.⁴ All these five women writers consciously generated "conflict [...] with the male power order,"⁵ trying to go beyond the "correct political identity"⁶ established by male intellectuals and/or party members⁷ for women to let contradiction emerge, all the while engendering their own gender-specific world. In doing so, they showed political consciousness and identity as associated to space, turning the private and the personal into the political and escaping fixed codes of what a 'correct political identity' had to be for a Chinese woman of the late modern period according to man-made cultural and social categories. As we have seen, during the modern era all male power holders wanted to enclose women within a supposedly correct notion of identity (or lacuna of identity) as associated to the idea of devotion to family/husband/national cause/revolution/party and invariably based on the prerequisite of self-sacrifice and the inevitable final erasure of all forms of gender-specific prerogatives and traits.

Analysing these five modern Chinese women writers and their stories can also help us "establish the collective identity of women writers" of the pre-1949 era, as well as to "pinpoint their difference from male writers, rescue them from the lacunae of historical memory, and restore them to their

² Brown, Carolyn T., *op. cit.*, p. 80.

³ *Ivi*, p. 87.

⁴ Such a task implies for the feminist scholar to be fully aware of "the constant slippage between Woman as representation, as the object and the very condition of representation and, on the other hand, women as historical beings, subjects of real relations, are motivated and sustained by a logical contradiction in our culture and an irreconcilable one: women are both inside and outside gender, at once within and without representation." De Lauretis, Teresa, *op.cit.*, p.10.

⁵ Meng, Yue, *op. cit.*, p.121.

⁶ *Ivi*, p.123.

⁷ Here Meng Yue refers to post-Yan'an CCP mostly.

rightful place in literary history,”⁸ so that they are no longer drowned in the simplistic de-gendered class/group category of *funü* as constructed from the 1930s onwards in China⁹ and adjusted to the new PRC context with a collective-based flavor, nor are they reduced to an essentialist reading of the *nüxing* signifier, which can finally be restored to its potentially subversive meaning highlighting women’s political difference and otherness. Besides, when confronted with the early People’s Republic of China’s “elimination of literary possibilities”¹⁰ which has influenced post-1949 literary criticism in dealing with the modern literary period, we can finally see how the five women writers analysed in this dissertation managed to explore a woman’s space as a literary – and *literal* – possibility and the ‘I’ as a fully-gendered subjectivity.

Taking feminist methodology into account, both tasks of “establishing the collective identity of women writers” and establishing ‘woman’ and/or ‘women’ as the main political signifier in our analysis can be seen as a contradictory goal; as Judith Butler points out

There is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. [...The term “women”] fails to be exhaustive, not because a pre-gendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.¹¹

Actually, as used by Chinese women’s studies scholars like Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue, *nüxing* (referring to both ‘woman’ and ‘gender’) is a political and spatial construct whose aim is to reclaim agency for ‘women’ and to question men’s exclusive prerogative to define and embody symbolic power. Consequently, throughout the dissertation my focus on the term *nüxing* as a marker of otherness inspired by Dai and Meng’s work implies a multilayered vision of ‘woman’ in modern China both as a collective, class-like Marxist concept and as an individual, Western feminist-inspired standpoint. In particular, Dai and Meng’s positioning of *nüxing* as somebody who “包含了

⁸ Liu, Lydia H., “Invention and Intervention”, *cit.*, p. 33.

⁹ Taking inspiration from Confucian theories, *funü* designated “the collectivity of all women in the patrilineal family”. See Barlow, Tani E., *The Question of Women*, *cit.*, p.40.

¹⁰ Meng, Yue, “Female Images and National Myth”, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹¹ Butler, Judith, *op. cit.*, p.5.

一种对封建父系秩序的反阐释力，她自身是反阐释的产物” (carrying the inherent ability to critically analyse the feudal-patriarchal order, she herself being the result of this same critical analysis) and historically functioning as “一切专制秩序的解构人” (the deconstructing factor of the whole despotic [patriarchal] order)¹² creates the possibility for a fascinating post-structural interplay between Western feminist theories and Chinese Marxist theories while analysing these five late modern Chinese women writers, in order to reveal the modern-era *nüxing* as “被排斥者和异己” (the rejected and the different), whose critique and subversive analysis on social, historical and cultural constraints can finally emerge as “分歧乃至冲突” (divergent and even in opposition to) the male modern nation as a group.¹³

The analysis carried out in this dissertation also implies late modern Chinese women writers’ literary discourse is a political statement, connecting woman’s spatial quest to a political struggle against oppression and erasure. In particular, my work tries to connect these modern women writers’ feminist struggle at articulating their own political representation and ontological difference in literature to China’s original Marxist-based, pre-1949 ideology. Given the potential Marxist pre-assumptions of any form of theoretical and political analysis of conflict and oppression in post-1949 China (though extensively reduced after 1976),¹⁴ I think Marxist ideology can still be useful to enact a feminist form of critical thinking against oppressive systems for Chinese women today, in order to enable them to re-connect their own everyday experience to their past (in this case centered on literature) and reach self-awareness as a tool for true liberation and revolution in their present and future.

When revolution started becoming the be-all and the end-all of spatial reconfiguration within the construction strategy of the new Chinese nation both in the late-Qing, pro-Republican era and in the post-White Terror period, it was conceived and enacted as “a redefinition of the possible”¹⁵ for the majority of Chinese intellectuals, including women. In particular, revolution’s space ideology in China was inherently linked to modernity and to its “introducing a rupture between the present and

¹² Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, cit., p. 28.

¹³ Ivi, p. 29.

¹⁴ Today, in Xi Jinping’s China, political discourse is notably more focused on Confucian-oriented concepts like ‘social harmony’ than on contradiction and its possible revolutionary implications, as it used to be in the 1930s with Mao Zedong’s works. See Xi, Jinping, *The governance of China*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2014, pp. 14, 81, 225 in particular.

¹⁵ Srnicek, Nick; Williams, Alex, *op. cit.*, p.59.

the past. With this break, the future is projected as being potentially *different from and better than* the past.”¹⁶ Yet, as the *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo* 中华人民共和国 (People’s Republic of China) was created, revolution “headed towards a singular destination”¹⁷ – a destination which eventually erased women from the national map of spatial consciousness in Maoist China. This female-centered alternative spatial consciousness managed to re-emerge somehow in post-Maoist China through *funiüyanjiu* 妇女研究 (women’s studies), which can be considered as a potential means to go beyond the PRC’s non-differentiated and de-gendered spatial ideology, but also as “residual particulars”¹⁸ without any real chance of attaining political transformation, notably because “revolution [...] ceased to be a real historical possibility by June, 4, 1989”, and because it was soon “replaced by capitalism and entry into the sphere of the World Trade Organization – in a word, globalization.”¹⁹

It is true that in order for any feminist critique to turn into a whole feminist reshaping of reality, writers should not limit themselves or their characters to “negotiation or accommodation with existing power structures.”²⁰ In other words, in choosing (or being forced into choosing) to remain marginal, any feminist discourse in the long run proves unable to actually transform society, and thus unable to “extirpate gender and sex hierarchy altogether, and with them all forms of domination” so as to transform “the social organization of work, property, and power”²¹ altogether. Yet, I think the very fact that these five women authors questioned woman’s role within and without the existing power structures in modern Chinese society and culture is proof enough of their wish and commitment towards a utopian, and *utopian*, reshaping of reality. Also, in analysing the possible feminist and liberating implications of these authors’ literary choices, contemporary Chinese scholars can hopefully reinstall a gender-specific language within the nation’s macro-narrative as a tool for political transformation.

¹⁶ Ivi, pp.71-2.

¹⁷ Ivi, p.72.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 76.

¹⁹ Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, p. 20. Also, as Srnicek and Williams point out, today “Throughout the world, markets, wage labour, commodities and productivity-enhancing technologies have all expanded under the systemic imperative to accumulate. Capitalism has become the destiny of contemporary societies, happily coexisting with national differences and paying little heed to clashes between civilizations”, thus including China as well. Srnicek, Nick; Williams, Alex, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

²⁰ Srnicek, Nick; Williams, Alex, *op. cit.*, p.19.

²¹ Kelly, Joan, *op. cit.*, p.60.

As far as *nixing* subjectivities are concerned, throughout the Maoist period the Party has “retained an authoritarian establishment and a paternalistic cast”²² while dealing with ‘the woman question’, initially emphasizing “the temporary nature of gender-based conflict”²³ in the 1950s and progressively attacking and eliminating all “autonomous cultural elements”²⁴ in the country’s cultural and ideological narrative – including the woman question itself – and focusing instead on

a concept of sameness, or the nondifference of the two sexes. This notion – and it can only be understood as a distortion of the notion of the equality – lodged itself in the socialist state and was embedded in a range of policy formulations. Nondifference, combined with the unshaken power of the male discursive tradition, produced [a situation in which hierarchies] were never really challenged by images of gender.²⁵

This attitude inevitably has had a profound impact on the way the official history of literature and literary criticism have dealt with woman-centered modern Chinese literature created by women, on women, and for women and, although many things have changed in Chinese culture and society since the inception of the post-Maoist era, “China is today more repressive than at any time since the post-Tian’anmen 1989-1992 period”²⁶ – thus allowing no deviation from the Party’s macro-narrative. In particular, women’s writing and their point of view still today tends to be “cut off and still excluded as an alternative subjectivity perspective, independent from male subjectivity”²⁷, that is why is it extremely important to analyse the multiple and complex ways late modern Chinese women writers used their creativity, because they consciously tried to 除去受主流意识形态空制外，还包含着来自女性自身的非主流乃至反主流的世界观、感受方式和符号化过程” (get rid of a passive acceptance of and control by mainstream ideology, embodying a self-created

²² Ivi, p. 17. Despite Srnicek and Williams specifically refer to Western societies and to the civil rights’ movements developed there in the 1960s-1970s, I believe the CCP’s strategy has been molded along a similar paternalistic and authoritarian cast in its excluding women and their need to elaborate a gender-specific discourse within the party-oriented liberation movement, including the 1950s *funü jiefang* 妇女解放 (women’s liberation).

²³ Larson, Wendy, “The End of ‘Funü Wenxue’”, cit., p. 63.

²⁴ Meng, Yue, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

²⁵ Ivi, pp.118-9.

²⁶ Shambaugh, David, *China’s Future*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016, p. 118.

²⁷ Zhang, Enhua, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

alternative and subversive *nüxing* ideology concerning views on the world, emotional patterns and the process of creating symbols)²⁸ which proved to be new, unusual and gender-specific. Besides, despite the CCP's repressive attitude in today's China, "such Hard Authoritarianism only serves to *accelerate* the Party's existing atrophy and decline. Tightened control reflects a zero-sum approach to power and a highly insecure regime that lacks intrinsic confidence and does not trust its own population. Repression reflects weakness, not strength."²⁹ This can give Chinese women scholars (and readers) the opportunity to operate within a space of resistance to analyse all the ways women in the past struggled to 'emerge from the surface of history', so as to let today's Chinese women and their specificity emerge as well.

Last but not least, in their subversive feminist attitude towards society and culture, all consciously *nüxing*-identified women writers of the modern era can help contemporary feminists in China to reclaim revolution as a tool for transforming culture and society and include women in their de-essentialised difference. Their questioning man's language and his *nei/wai* ideological division of space can be an inspiration to salvage the 'I' of woman from the lacuna His-tory has trapped her in, and also to salvage her from submergence and "淹没" (drowning) under "他人话语" (man's language),³⁰ finally re-installing revolution as a possibility in the here and now of Chinese women.

²⁸ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²⁹ Shambaugh, David, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-6.

³⁰ Dai Jinhua; Meng Yue, *Xulun*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

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