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The “Little Woman” as Exorcist: Notes on the Fiction of Huang Biyun

Joseph S. M. Lau

We will begin our consideration of Huang Biyun’s (b. 1961) fiction with a quote from her autobiographical essay “My Lasting Love Affair with Airports” (*Wo yu jichang de wangnian lian*) :

黃碧雲

我與機場的忘
年戀

I was scheduled to fly to New York. My elder brother wanted to see me off, probably because he was afraid that he might not be able to see me again. I prattled on and on with him until we came close to the immigration counter. Then I suddenly blurted out: ‘Feel like I am on my way to die.’ His eyes moistened. I felt terrible. Tears coursed down my cheeks. . . .(Huang 1996: 4-5)

As a reporter Huang Biyun has visited war-torn Vietnam and Cambodia on assignments. After the war she returned to Phnom Penh. “Now it is peacetime in Phnom Penh,” she writes in the same essay, “though I can still hear gunshots in the middle of the night. To me, however, these gunshots are no different from [songs of the] nightingale. True, I was once unnerved by the gunshots at Tiananmen [on June 4, 1989], but now having returned to Cambodia I realize that gunshots can just be as much a part of daily life as Coca Cola. They can be found in every corner of the world, like it or not. . . .” (Huang 1996: 6)

She also admits that, while toying with a Czech-made automatic pistol during her visit, she was struck by a “sudden impulse to kill someone” (1996: 6). The essay ends by noting that it is the experience of hopping from one airport to another that enables her to savor the wisdom of “watching the flowers by the roadside” (1996: 7). Detached and uninvolved, she takes the attitude of watching flowers from a distance to be the “most beautiful and tender of gestures” (1996: 7) one can make amidst the barbarities of this un pitying world.

As can be seen from the above, looming large in the imagination of Huang Biyun are the shadow of death, the

tyranny of violence, and an abiding awareness of the precariousness of existence. Along with the confessed “impulse to kill someone,” her unsettling remark to her brother about dying moments before boarding the aircraft also betrays a peevish nature and an impetuous proclivity to inflict pain: on herself as much as on those close to her.

失城
陳路遠

趙眉

Such habits of mind are reflected in her fiction. “Lost City” (*Shi cheng*)¹ will serve as a good example. The story tells of the murder of four children and their mother by Chen Luyuan, respectively the father and husband of the victims. Before emigrating to Canada, Chen had worked as an architect in Hong Kong. Zhao Mei, his fiancée, was a nurse. With the Sino-British negotiations on the future of Hong Kong repeatedly ending in impasses, the stock market and the Hong Kong dollar had taken deep plunges. When local residents began making runs on the supermarkets to stock up food, Zhao Mei rushed into Chen’s arms in panic, sobbing: “I can’t go on like this anymore. Let’s get married and leave Hong Kong” (Huang 1994: 199). Chen obeyed. Being in love with her, he didn’t have the heart to say “no.”

Unemployed, they took up residence in Calgary, Alberta, and lived on their savings. On snowbound days, Zhao Mei would pass the time by doing something like counting their savings in coins. As she counted them, she would sigh with satisfaction and mumbled to herself something like: “Enough to feed us for two years, four months, and five more days” (1994: 192).

Glued to the TV set, Chen Luyuan in his turn measured out his days listening to the drop of coins. Murderous thoughts would flash through his mind: “Split her head with a cleaver . . . the purple fetus will spew out from her belly . . . then it is Mingming’s [the first son] turn in his sound sleep” (1994: 192).

He would shudder at such thoughts. They moved to Toronto, and shortly after that San Francisco. With more children to feed, the former Hong Kong architect took on such odd jobs as accounts payable clerk. Loss of sleep and anxiety for the future finally took its toll on Zhao Mei. To stop Mingming from

¹ Translated as “Losing the City” by Martha P. Y. Cheung, this story is included in her anthology (Cheung 1998: 205-32). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Chinese texts are by the author.

crying in the middle of the night, she stuck a whole banana into the child's mouth, nearly choking him to death. When she began to feed the children with raw chicken hearts and cow liver, she was nearing the state of insanity.

Unable to "shoulder the cross of love" (1994: 203), Chen Luyuan took leave for Europe, finally making his way back to Hong Kong. He had little trouble teaming up with his former business partner, and began taking steps to reshape his life. But just as he thought he was pulling himself together, his wife, pregnant with their fourth child, descended on him.

Despite the tension arising from Zhao Mei's sudden appearance, on the same night Chen Luyuan made love to her, "against the strange and evil swollen belly" (1994: 204). It was during those moments of intimacy that the decision to eliminate her and the children was made. One moonlit evening after the fourth child was born, he smashed the heads of his wife and children with an iron cudgel. One daughter, still in bed hugging her teddy bear, had her head battered so badly that it barely hung on her neck.

After the carnage, Chen went to inform his neighbor Zhan Keming, an ambulance driver. As Zhan stepped into Chen's sitting room, Bach's Suite No.1 in G Major for Violoncello was playing on a laser disk. "Chen listened attentively, emitting a luminous, peaceful, Christ-like aura" (1994: 186). Courteous and unfailingly considerate, Chen personified the model of a gentleman in Zhan's eyes. He offered the ambulance driver coffee, and apologized profusely for causing him all the trouble to bear witness to the carnage.

If Chen appeared at peace with himself, it was because he had convinced himself that he acted out of love: "I love my family, so I made the decision for them" (1994: 206). One would think that, given his education and exquisite taste for music as a source of humanizing spirit, such an act of atrocity could have been avoided. Sadly, Chen's self-righteous justification for this abominable crime lends credence to George Steiner's view that "[t]he spheres of Auschwitz-Birkenau and of the Beethoven recital, of the torture-cellar and the great library, were contiguous in space and time. Men could come home from their day's butchery and falsehood to weep over Rilke or play Schubert" (Steiner 1984: 11).

詹克明

魯迅

藥

Violence in modern Chinese literature, to be sure, has been commonplace. Indeed, as Andrew F. Jones has stated, “[f]rom its very inception, modern Chinese fiction has been rife with depictions of mayhem, murder, and violence. In the works of May Fourth-era critical realists like Lu Xun, execution grounds, battlefields, riot-torn streets, and homes sundered by domestic violence are privileged sites through which politics, society, and culture are indicted and calls-to-arms issued” (Jones 1994: 570). However, commonplace though it is, it must be pointed out that, for the May Fourth writers at least, violence is more a matter of metaphorical signification than an indulgence in gory sensationalism. In Lu Xun’s “Medicine” (*Yao*), for example, in which a young revolutionary’s blood is sold as a “cure” for tuberculosis soon after he is beheaded, violence functions as a double-edged metaphor for ignorance and cruelty. Lu Xun’s depiction of violence is characteristically low-key: the execution stays in the background, leaving the picture of violence to be drawn by the readers.

吳組緝

After Lu Xun, writers of the May Fourth period took to assessing the meaning of violence on their own terms. In the hands of Wu Zuxiang (1908-1994), for instance, acts of violence are no longer performed backstage: they are brought to the foreground, full of sound and fury. What must be pointed out is that although the strategies of their representation might differ, they never lose sight of the moralistic value in the politics of violence.

官官的補品

陳小禿子

The same cannot be said of Huang Biyun’s “esthetics” of violence. So that we may be in a better position to appreciate the peculiar character of her writing, a brief look back at Wu Zuxiang’s “Young Master Gets His Tonic” (*Guanguan de bupin*) (1934) is in order.

Young Baldy, a poor peasant who has to sell blood to make a living, is sentenced to die by beheading on banditry charges. Since no professional executioner is available in the village, a pork butcher is picked to do the job.

[H]e hacked away three or four times like splitting firewood, turning the edge of his blade until it looked like a row of fangs. . . . A few of the hacks had got to Young Baldy. His blood was spattered all over the jumbled rocks. He lay there stiff and

motionless, and the executioner staggered off supported by some of the other militiamen, when suddenly the corpse struggled up, raised its arms, and began to scream in a wild shrill voice like some evil demon. (Lau, Hsia and Lee: 1981: 380-81)

Though it is doubtful that a corpse could struggle up and raise its arms, the purpose behind the graphic description of violence cannot escape us. In the eyes of his overlords, the worth of Young Baldy's life is less than that of a pig. That he should meet such a painful end in the hands of the executioner can thus be seen as sardonic fulfillment of the internal logic: that pigs should be slaughtered by pork butchers. According to Mark Edward Lewis, “[t]hrough knowing what forms of violence were permitted, who could perform them, . . . one learns about the locus and exercise of authority in a given society . . .” (Lewis 1990: 5). The violence done to Young Baldy is, of course, an exercise of authority and assertion of power. It is also an oblique indictment against the cruelty of the “authority”: the more lurid Young Baldy's execution is presented, the deeper the impression of the landlord's inhumanity.

With ideology-driven writers such as Wu Zuxiang, violence harnessed in the service of a cause can be considered, to borrow a term from Lewis, “sanctioned violence.” Wu has provided us with another example in “In Fan Village” (*Fan jia pu*). In technical terms, Xianzi's gruesome murder of her mother in this story is an act of matricide. Ideologically understood, however, the “loan shark” of a woman she killed is not her mother. Rather, she is the class enemy of the daughter and of her class. Indeed, as Henry Y. H. Zhao maintains: “As long as it functions effectively in normalization, any ideology can be regarded as reasonable. Ideology is supposed to provide answers to all queries about meaning—from cosmological problems to personal behaviors” (Zhao 1995: 1).

A May Fourth writer with leftist sympathies, Wu Zuxiang was committed to the reformist role he was expected to play in the China under Kuomintang rule. His vision was focused, his voice unequivocal, assuming in his narrative the posture and authority of what Zhao calls “the confidently subversive narrator” (1995: 4). If it was ideology that empowered Wu Zuxiang to

樊家鋪
線子

pursue his “subversive” course to such violent extremes, one wonders what “ideology” had taken possession of Huang Biyun for her fictional world to be so suffused with violence.

黃念欣

If she had only one story to tell, it would be easy to answer that the violence recounted in “Lost City” is not a reflection of ideology but a dramatization of the dictum that “art imitates life.” According to Huang Nianxin, “Lost City” is drawn on material which Huang Biyun collected from a criminology conference in England. A man in sound mental health killed his wife and four children, then made a confession to his neighbor. He gave only one reason: “*I just don’t need them anymore*” (Huang Nianxin 1996: 39).² Huang Biyun was shocked and grieved by this finding. Upon returning to Hong Kong, she had the murderer reincarnated in the person of Chen Luyuan, and tested his limits for suffering induced by the syndrome initiated by the impending change of sovereignty in 1997.

其後
溫柔與暴烈

But “Lost City” is but one of seventeen stories by Huang Biyun included in her two anthologies, *Hereafter (Qi hou)* (1991) and *Tenderness and Violence (Wenrou yu baolie)* (1994). Violence still figures prominently in her other pieces, topped up with occasional doses of cannibalism and scatology. While devouring the flesh and blood of one’s hated enemies is understood and practiced by the “heroes” of *Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan)* as an act of vindictiveness, cannibalism in Huang Biyun’s fiction reveals a more sinister dimension. The flesh that Cao Qiqiao in “Twin Cities Moon” (*Shuangcheng yue*) deposits in her mouth is her own conception: “a lovely pinkish dead fetus” (1994: 86). And in “Plenitude and Sadness” (*Fengsheng yu bei’ai*), Zhao Mei³ confesses to Yousheng rather matter-of-factly: “I have eaten human flesh. Do you still want me? . . . The baby died and I was hungry, so I ate it” (1994: 104). Zhao Mei is the mother of the dead infant.

水滸傳
曹七巧 雙城月

豐盛與悲哀
幼生

Huang Biyun’s unremitting attention to the excesses of human depravity prompted critics such as Yan Chunjun to wonder—why a “little woman” (*xiaonüzi*) from Hong Kong, at such a tender age, brought up in a prosperous capitalist city,

顏純鈞
小女子

² The English is in the original.

³ It should be noted that Huang Biyun has the habit of giving the same names to different characters in different stories. Thus this Zhao Mei is the namesake of the Zhao Mei in “Lost City.”

would "show such an undiminished interest in ugliness and evil At her age, it shouldn't be like this, but since this is the case, the question of right or wrong is no longer relevant" (Yan 1995: 62-63).

The reference to Ms Huang as a "*xiaonüzi*" is, of course, "politically incorrect." It is also ironic. For, as the title of her first collection of essays indicates, she is actually a "woman with raised eyebrows" (1987), a woman in the worthy company of Lu Xun who is unafraid of taking exceptions to popular views.⁴ Apparently, it is Yan's inability to reconcile the ostensibly incompatible claims of violence and femininity that is responsible for such an unbecoming remark. What is at issue is the question of "gendering" in the writing of violence or, for that matter, pornography. In the words of Isabel Cristina Pinedo: "Active desire and aggression are the prerogatives of masculinity. . . . Because violence is gendered male, the violent woman is defined as masculine" (Pinedo 1997: 82).

揚眉女子

When it comes to exploding male stereotypes about gender writing, no critic is as straightforward and down-to-earth as Margaret Atwood, a Canadian novelist:

A hard-hitting piece of writing by a man is liable to be thought of as merely realistic; an equivalent piece by a woman is much more likely to be labeled "cruel" or "tough." . . . Work by a male writer is often spoken of by critics admiring it as having "balls"; ever hear anyone speak admiringly of work by a woman as having "tits"? (Atwood 1982: 197-98)

We have seen how eschatology is played out in Huang Biyun's fiction through the agencies of violence and cannibalism. Scatology also figures in her fiction. Our stereotyped image of her being a *xiaonüzi* writer is indeed pitifully antiquated, as is evident in the case of "The Butterfly Catcher" (*Bu die zhe*). Chen Luyuan,⁵ a nineteen-year-old college student, visits a Thai prostitute after committing a random murder. As the woman

捕蝶者

⁴ Lu Xun's "self-mockery" (*zichao*): "Eyes askance, I cast a cold glance/ at the thousand pointing fingers; Head bowed, I gladly agree,/ an ox for the children to be" (Lee 1987: 45).

自嘲

⁵ Here is another case of Huang Biyun's fondness for using the same name for a different character.

spreads wide on her bed, taints of menstrual blood are still visible in her private parts, “emitting a seductive bloody stench” (Huang 1994: 168). Chen Luyuan laps clean the excretion, and immediately has an orgasm.

丁玉生

Sinners become uncomfortable at the faintest hint of saintliness. One of the classes Chen attends is taught by Ding Yusheng. A gentle, soft-spoken woman, Ding is a vegetarian and environmentalist. She wears no makeup, and when she walks to school in the summer, her body exudes an aroma of herbal fragrance. “Growing up is very painful, but it will be fine afterwards,” she tells him with a smile one day. “If you’ve problems with your course work, come to see me. You know where my office is” (1994: 175).

He decides he should own her, because he is in love with her. Late one evening, he steals into her university quarters when she is sound asleep. With a dagger in hand, he sits by her bedside, sobbing. “Ding Yusheng . . . you . . . are getting old . . . I . . .” (1994: 176). But the words stick in his throat, and he is unable to finish what he wants to say.

He finally “owns” her, amid fits of mad passion. “In a sense,” the narrator comments, “[ownership recognizes no distinction of] corpse, prostitute, lover, or [one’s] mother. Being terribly thirsty and restless, he uses blood and destruction to make offerings on the altar of violence” (1994: 176-77).

After stabbing Ding to death, he staggers to the bathroom to wash himself, putting on a loose-fitting jacket she used to wear to class. Standing in front of his victim, he bids her goodbye, “To die this way or that way, it is all the same. Now I must go” (1994: 175).

Though dictated by “ideology,” Xianzi’s murder of her mother in “In Fan Village” is nonetheless an instance of matricide, if only because it “subverts” the ethical bond invested in the mother-daughter relationship. For his slaying of his teacher, and a “saintly” woman at that, Chen Luyuan has not only violated a code of traditional ethics but, symbolically at least, committed a horrendous act of sacrilege. The enormity of his crime finds a parallel in the defilement of Changsheng, a gentle, saintly woman in “At Fortune’s Way” (*Wanfu xiang*) by Li Yongping. “Metaphorically,” as I have written elsewhere, “the sin of sacrilege as enacted in the rape of the heroine [Changsheng] who, in her meekness, symbolizes the saintliness of the

長笙
萬福巷
李永平

bodhisattva Guanyin" (Lau and Goldblatt 1995: xxxi).

Changsheng commits suicide; Sun Sifang, her rapist, is apprehended and jailed. After serving his term, Sun is devastated by hallucinations, with visions of Changsheng's husband coming to him seeking vengeance. Justice, both in legal and providential terms, has been meted out equitably. Chen Luyuan in "The Butterfly Catcher," however, escapes unscathed. He boards a United Airlines evening flight for San Francisco on a forged passport under the name of Chen Dalai.

孫四房

陳大來

That Chen Luyuan is allowed to go scot-free signifies the triumph of evil. The ending of "The Butterfly Catcher" thus reveals another solitary gesture in Huang Biyun's writing: that she would rather disappoint the expectations of the general readers for a "happy ending" than compromise her vision of reality. For her, ugliness in the form of violence is not a metaphor, but a concrete presence; it has no backdoor that opens to beauty or redemption. It is in her unblinking readiness to stare ugliness in the eye, and show it as it is, that sets Huang Biyun apart from popular Hong Kong women writers like Yi Shu, whom she considers to be "the opium for women" (Huang 1987: 119).

亦舒

Understandably, sensitive souls like Ding Yusheng cannot survive in a world where evil prevails and violence is rampant. However, for people fortunate enough to be endowed with a tinge of moral obtuseness, this selfsame world is not only fit to live in, but also to prosper in. Let's revisit "Lost City" and recall Zhan Keming along with his wife, Aiyu, to bear witness. Zhan Keming, we remember, is an ambulance driver. Aiyu happens to be a funeral parlor agent. Pregnant with a child, she can be seen every day chasing after ambulances to scare up business.

愛玉

One of the games Zhan often plays with Aiyu during her pregnancy is called the "Bloody Pond" (*Xue tang*). After filling the bathtub with warm water, they open a bottle of red wine and play poker. The penalty for the loser is to pour wine into the bathtub until it becomes a "pond" of blood. Then they make love on the spot. "Aiyu's tummy," Zhan Keming discovers, "was big, like a spider" (Huang 1994: 213).

血塘

Aiyu gives birth to a "mentally challenged" child, or, in plain language, an idiot, who seldom cries. Nonetheless the parents dote on him, taking turns to play with him, cuddle him, and kiss him. Zhan Keming ends his story with a note of self-glorification.

"Life is really great!" thus proclaimed the ambulance driver. "Aiyu my beloved wife would exclaim in jubilation whenever news of someone's death reaches her . . . Some people have emigrated or are in the process of emigrating, while others are still in a state of perplexity. But Aiyu and I will be able to live happily. . . . We cannot but go on living, living with hope, with caring for others, with tenderness and love. . . ." (1994: 216).

董啟章

For Dong Qizhang, the prevalence of violence in "Lost City" is unHINGING enough, but what really terrifies him are the satirical implications lodged in the paragraph quoted above. He confessed that he almost tossed up his book in shock, unable to finish (Dong 1996: 201). Hope, caring for others, tenderness, and love are of course admirable tributes that define a civil society. What proves to be so alarming to Dong Qizhang must be the recognition that such gospel is preached, of all people, by none other than Zhan Keming the clown.

Even more unsettling is the fact that in contrast to mothers who devour their own flesh and blood, and husbands who resolve to dispose of their wives while making love to them, it is intellectual morons like Mr. and Mrs. Zhan who seem to be genuinely capable of love and tenderness. For people with more discerning taste, the "Bloody Pond" game they play may seem repugnant, but for those who are madly in love, doing "rub-a-dub-dub" in the tub may not be that bad an idea to communicate affection. As parents, they also command respect, considering the tender loving care they lavish on their half-witted child.

Other than the intoxicated intimacy of the Zhans, whose love for one another is sustained by animalist energies as well as the unquestioned acceptance of their lot, relationships between the two sexes in Huang Biyun's narrative seldom generate enough warmth to nurture a modicum of nominal friendship. If love is travestied, it is because the parties involved have little faith in it. In "Love in a Peaceful World" (*Shengshi lian*) (hereafter "Peaceful World") Fang Guochu, a university lecturer in his mid-thirties, asks for Zhao Mei's⁶ hand in marriage right after telling her in earnest that his protestation of "I love you. I love only you" was a big hoax (Huang 1991: 28).

盛世戀
方國楚

⁶ A namesake of the Zhao Mei respectively in "Lost City" and in "Plenitude and Sadness."

It should be noted that of the seventeen stories included in Huang Biyun's two collections, only "Peaceful World" is invested with some potential to develop into a "love story," if only because it has something to do with the rituals of courtship. But the "potential" does not materialize. A political activist of the "Protect the Diaoyutai Movement" in the seventies, Fang celebrates his wedding night by carousing with his former "comrades-in-arms," drinking and shouting profanities.

Dead drunk, he consummates his marriage in premature ejaculation, and in no time falls asleep, snoring heavily. Zhao Mei takes her own pillow and blanket to spend the night in the guest room, resigned to the fact that she has married a man buried in the past. In her eyes, with the student movements long over, a Ph. D. degree in hand, and a substantiated position to guarantee security, "the only thing Fang Guochu could do well in his boredom was to get fat" (1991: 31).

Convinced that Fang is finished, she realizes that if she were to stay with him she too would be finished, "like ashes from a smothered fire" (1991: 35). Still burning with some kind of amorphous aspirations, she decides to save herself by asking for a divorce. Fang Guochu, for whom love and marriage are nothing but a "big hoax" to begin with, proves to be as gracious as he is cooperative.

After signing the papers, Fang Guochu escorts Zhao Mei to the street, where they part. In spite of herself, she bursts into tears. Taking a deep breath, she raises her head to face the sun.

That was the way it should be. In a peaceful world, the most traumatic war-torn experience one could go through was nothing more than disillusionment. . . . The tears that gushed out a while ago had already dried up. . . . What a fast-moving city [Hong Kong] is, not even leaving enough time for a teardrop to linger on one's face. . . . We had no idea where Zhao Mei had gone. Maybe when she felt she was young no longer she would meet someone less desirable than Fang Guochu, get married and have kids. In an age like ours, it looked as if that was the only way she could be. In a peaceful world, the most earth-shaking love story could only be like this. Hong Kong in the eighties. (1991: 47)

張愛玲

Echoes of Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) are unmistakable in the paragraph above. The limpid prose, the desolate imagery, the rhythmic movement, the feelings of existential fatigue, and most significant of all, the resigned readiness to live a life that is tragically understood—all these are the distinguishing stylistic hallmarks of *la grande dame* of modern Chinese fiction.

祖師奶奶

But the purpose of my extensive quote from this tale is not so much to verify Huang's indebtedness to Chang, but to bemoan the fact that "Peaceful World" remains the only narrative in which love is not drenched in violence. Perhaps it has something to do with the date of composition, 1986, in a period, as Huang noted in a caption next to the title of the story, "still full of hope for China." True, the relationship between Fang Guochu and Zhao Mei fizzled, but at least it was a relationship supported by courtesy and goodwill. On the same evening she asked him for a divorce in a fancy restaurant, Zhao took Fang to her new home to spend the night with her. In this respect, "Peaceful World" must be seen as a sentimental watershed in Huang's writing, a lone exception in which the key players of the love game are allowed to exit without getting bruised.

葉細細 嘔吐

For Ye Xixi in "Vomit" (*Outu*), love is a sickness that must be cured before she can hope to lead a normal life. Half-naked, she confronts the man who had repeatedly rejected her advances: "Zhan Keming, can you disabuse me so I won't love you anymore?" (1994: 58)⁷ The way she goes about getting Zhan to "disabuse" her is to manipulate him into having sex with her. Moaning, she assures him, "I hope to be a normal person, Zhan Keming, I don't want to love you anymore" (1994: 59). As he comes close to a climax, Zhan is suddenly overwhelmed by a violent impulse: "If I had a knife or a gun at this moment, I would have killed her without a second thought" (1994: 59).

It is such eruptions of conflicting extreme emotions that validate Yan Chunjun's claim that what distinguishes Huang Biyun from the average Hong Kong writer is precisely her fascination with the "borderline between life and death, love and hate. . . . It was at the moment when he entered into the state of emotional extremity, where a sense of beauty and feelings of religiosity converged, that Chen Luyuan [in "Lost City"] killed his

⁷ A different Zhan Keming than the ambulance driver in "Lost City."

wife and children” (Yan 1996: 69). With Huang Biyun’s characters, borderlines seldom translate into moral dilemmas. The capacity of love to endure suffering and to generate self-sacrifice is put to the test in “Lost City.” Thus, when love proves to be a burden heavier than he could bear, it is little surprise that Chen Luyuan resorts to violence to get rid of his burden.

In *Love in the Western World*, the forbidden love between Tristan and Iseult is described by Denis de Rougemont as one of “exquisite anguish” (Rougemont 1956: 39). Regrettably, as we have seen, there seems to be nothing “exquisite” about the “anguish” in the love experienced by Huang Biyun’s characters. Love is either seen as a burden, or as symptoms of foolish impetuosity and sickness. Against such a background of emotional sterility, if one “beautiful and tender gesture” must be located, perhaps the peculiar way of saying goodbye to a family member in “Hereafter” can be counted as one. Ping Gang is suffering from terminal cancer. His older brother bids farewell to him at the train station, urging him: “Ping Gang! Quit smoking. Go to bed early. Die a good death!” (1991: 198)

平崗

Reading Huang Biyun, like reading Yu Hua, is a nightmarish experience. Constraints of space and time won’t permit me to elaborate on the spiritual affinity between these two writers. Suffice it to say that Yu Hua’s texts are “characterized by detailed descriptions of physical violence and bodily mutilation, [evoking] a cold and callous world of death and severed limbs” (Wedell-Wedellsborg 1996: 130). Andrew F. Jones, translator of Yu Hua, confessed how he often grappled with the ethical dimension of Yu Hua’s work. “Is it right,” he asked himself, “to loose these sorts of [brutal and violent] representations on an unsuspecting world? . . . If we find ourselves enjoying Yu Hua’s fiction, are we somehow guilty of complicity with his aestheticization of violence?” (1996: 270)

余華

In the case of Huang Biyun, I must confess that I am “guilty” of the kind of complicity that Jones referred to. For, just as I am repelled by the frequent appearance of violence that adorn her tales, I find myself irresistibly drawn to her particular blend of lyricism that lends shape to a landscape in which fragile beauty meshes with hard-core brutality. Hers is a distinctly new voice, stylistically and thematically. By daring to remove all pretenses to moralizing in her depiction of violence and human depravities, our *xiaonüzi* of a writer has echoed the view of Alain

Robbe-Grillet that “the world is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply. That, in any case, is the most remarkable thing about it” (Robbe-Grillet 1965: 19). She has thus carved out a unique place for herself in Hong Kong literature by representing what hitherto has appeared to be the unrepresentable, which is neither significant nor absurd. Violence *is*, quite simply.

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