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# Writing “the Strange” of the Chinese Modern: Sutured Body, Naturalized Beauty, and Shi Zhecun’s “Yaksha” \*

Hongbing Zhang

The historian of the strange comments:  
A yaksha wife is indeed rarely heard  
of, but on thorough second thoughts it  
is not so rare, for on every bedside  
there is a yaksha.

Pu Songling, “The Yaksha  
Kingdom” (Pu 1994: 379)<sup>1</sup>

The fact that I have said that the effect  
of interpretation is to isolate in the  
subject a kernel, a *kern* to use Freud’s  
own term, of non-sense, does not  
mean that interpretation is in itself  
nonsense.

Jacque Lacan, “The Field of the  
Other and Back to the  
Transference” (Lacan 1992: 250)

## “But I Doubted Very Much This Kind of Explanation”

An essential dimension of the metropolitan “I,” the narrator

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\* I would like to thank Professor Xiaobing Tang of the University of Chicago, for whose class “Literature and Disease” the idea presented here was originally conceived and from whose encouragement and advice the present paper has benefited. Thanks also go to my classmates Jason McGrath and Ling-hon Lam and the anonymous *JMLC* reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Chinese texts in this paper are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

老施 施蟄存  
夜叉

[Lao Shi] in Shi Zhecun's 1932 story "Yecha" [Yaksha], is his distrust and doubt. To the German doctor's diagnosis and the nurse's description of the symptoms of his friend's illness as those of a mental disorder, resulting from some setback in love, the narrator's response is: "But I doubted very much this kind of explanation, because I knew my friend had not had any love affairs before" (Shi 1991b: 323). According to the doctor and nurses, his friend would sometimes act strangely, as if he were pushing someone away with his two out-stretched hands. He would talk nonsense in his delirium: "Horrible woman! Strange woman! Don't come close to me!" (323)

The narrator's distrust and doubt resonate well with what Georg Simmel designates as "reserve," one of the two attitudes metropolitan people would have toward one another and toward metropolitan life on the whole. Because of the swift change of outer and inner stimuli in metropolitan life, Simmel asserts, most people living in a metropolis rely increasingly on their intellect and rationality to preserve their subjective life. Consequently, the split in their mental life between rationality and emotion renders urban life more and more impersonal. However, if the external stimulation is too intense and rapid, a metropolitan will lose his or her intellectual capacity to react to new sensations appropriately. The essence of this behavior, which Simmel calls the "blasé" attitude, lies in "the blunting of discrimination" and an inability to perceive "the meaning and differing values of things" (Simmel 1950: 414). In the "Yaksha," instead of betraying his lack of the intellectual power to discriminate between different meanings and values, the narrator shows his determination to use his own intellect and search for a difference that may ultimately reveal the true cause of his friend's illness.

Metropolitan life in Shanghai, which serves in the story "Yaksha" to frame the strange encounter the narrator's friend has in the countryside, produces indeed the intensification of nervous stimulation among people living there. But, as Perry Link has observed, from the end of the nineteenth century up to the middle of the twentieth, for people in Shanghai, like people in other colonial and semi-colonial cities, "severe psychological pressures also arose from the city's cultural and historical crisis vis-à-vis the West" (Link 1981: 198). This crisis could not be contained within the coordinates of the country and the city, to

which Simmel resorts as the major frame of reference for his study of the metropolitan. As “Paris of the Orient,” Shanghai in the late 1920s and early 1930s was still a treaty port of divided territories where the Chinese sections and the foreign concessions—the International Settlement (British and American) and the French Concession—were separated. Although for the Chinese the foreign concessions represented “not so much forbidden zones as the ‘other’ world” (Lee 1999: 8), and Shanghai, as an international metropolitan city, came to constantly challenge its inhabitants in identity politics, the cultural, social and political differences between the Chinese and the foreigners were still a persistent, everyday theme of metropolitan life. “The Chinese and foreign residents of Shanghai might mingle at work when it was mutually beneficial,” Betty Peh-t’i Wei remarks, “but almost invariably they spent their leisure hours separately” (quoted in Lee 1999: 8).

In the story “Yaksha,” the reference to the nationality of the German doctor and the comment on his “clumsy and awkward English” (Shi 1991b: 323) are meant, among other things, to be an indication of the quotidian presence in metropolitan life of the difference between the Chinese and the Western. The words the narrator uses to show his reserved attitude toward the German doctor—“I knew my friend”—register the same kind of difference, though from another perspective. In saying these words, he obviously places himself, as an *insider*, in the personal, subjective and interior space of “my friend,” and keeps the German doctor as an *outsider* in the social, exterior space. The basis on which the narrator claims to know his friend better is first and foremost the fact that, like himself, his friend is also Chinese, a fact so self-evident that he chooses to delete it from his narration.

What the German doctor represents in a manifest manner is Western medical knowledge, which the narrator’s hospitalized Chinese friend needs. “Isn’t the doctor returning from Germany the most reliable?”—this question raised by a female character in Shi Zhecun’s story “Shizizuo liuxing” [A meteor in the sign of Leo] (Shi 1991a: 3) suggests that, for urban people at that time, German medicine was the best and thus most reliable among Western medicines. But, the reliability and efficacy of German medicine—and Western medicine in general—was not accepted

without any trace of doubt. In fact, much more than a mere modicum of disbelief, registered in the form of a question raised by the fictional female character, there was in reality a huge debate carried on between Western and Chinese medicine during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Though Western medicine had gained much ground in urban China, many Western-styled doctors “repeatedly pointed out that the Chinese people held a ‘belief’ in Chinese medicine over Western medicine,” and the medical environment in Shanghai was said to be “chaotic” during this time (Lei 1999: 59, 103-18).

This competition between Western and Chinese medicine could be seen, from a wider historical perspective, as an extension of the controversy over “science” and “metaphysics” in the early 1920s. Pursuant to Liang Qichao’s articles written in 1919 on the bankruptcy of the dream of the omnipotence of Western science,<sup>2</sup> Zhang Junmai (Carsun Chang), in his 1923 speech at Qinghua University, argued that “no matter how far science develops, it cannot solve the problem of one’s outlook on life,” for the fundamental characteristic of the view of life, centered on the self, “is subjective, intuitive, synthetic, free-willed and singular,” which could not be fully contained within the logic of science (Zhang 1980: 9). This argument was, as expected, severely challenged and criticized by scientific-minded intellectuals at the time. For instance, Ding Wenjiang, a leading geologist, took Zhang’s position as a “metaphysics ghost” (*xuanxue gui*), the ghost which “had loitered in Europe for more than two thousand years and, now being unemployed there, is striding toward China with newly forged signs and deceptive advertisements” (Ding 1980: 15). Though Ding traced Zhang’s anti-science stance back to Europe, what Zhang really stressed through his advocacy of the autonomy of the “view of life” was, as Chow Tse-tsung has pointed out, that “as Western civilization of the last few centuries, which he considered a material civilization achieved by science, had been doubted and ‘detested’ by Europeans since World War I, China should value her own spiritual civilization” (Chow 1960: 334). This polemic became complicated and even chaotic as many other people,

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<sup>2</sup> For a useful discussion of Liang Qichao’s involvement in this debate and his response to World War I, see Tang (1996: Chap. 5).

such as Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Liang Qichao and Wu Zhihui, were involved, but its fundamental issue concerning the difference between Chinese and Western civilizations remained unchanged, and the intellectual implications in this respect well survived the demise of the debate. In his 1932 article "Xiandai de weiji" [The crisis of modernity] published in the popular magazine *Dongfang zazhi* [Eastern miscellany], where Shi Zhecun also published his story "Yaksha" in the same year, Yu Zhi, in his analysis of the significance of global economic crisis for the Chinese, translated this concern into a rallying call for the Chinese to prepare for the day of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Yu 1932: 1-3).

The narrator's perception of his relationship to the German doctor is by no means as antagonistic as Yu Zhi's, but his attitude, so far as we have seen, can be read as not so distant an echo of the controversy over "science" and "metaphysics" and the conflict between Chinese medicine and Western medicine. His doubts can be extended, in this connection, to Western science and even the overall Western symbolic system as a true, adequate representation of Chinese reality. Behind his manifest distrust is an implicit belief that the subjective experience of his friend lies beyond the scientific diagnosis by the German doctor. His decision to go and visit his friend in the Western-styled hospital can be seen as a desire to go beyond Western medical discourse and find a narrative more appropriate for the Chinese.

That Shi Zhecun has his narrator in the story question and challenge the adequacy of the Western representation of the Chinese does not necessarily mean that Shi himself subscribes to the idea of going native. The aspiration to return to the native tradition, just like the wish for going totally Westernized, comes from the desire to totalize. In Shi's eyes, the desire to totalize, and the logic of binary opposition between the Western and the Chinese, cannot represent the various types of differences whose complexities are woven in a much more delicate and subtle way into everyday metropolitan life. What Shi aims to do in his own creative writing, for instance in his story collection *Jiangjun de tou* [The general's head], is to problematize those clear-cut racial, class, cultural or ethical boundaries that are endorsed by the desire to totalize and by the logic of binary

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opposition. In doing so, he also wants to render visible the tensions and conflicts, the differences and paradoxes, that are to subvert those boundaries. However, Shi's work has often suffered from appropriation by various totalizing narratives. "Some critics came to examine the proletarian consciousness in my stories; some said that I was promoting nationalism [in the stories]," Shi complains in his preface to *The General's Head*. "If they continue to interpret like this, even I myself will doubt their methods and purposes" (Shi 1996a: 804-805).<sup>3</sup> What these critics attempt to do is to oppose the proletarian consciousness against other types of consciousness, and the Chinese against the Western. Metropolitan reality, especially the often ambivalent and ambiguous psychological experience generated by such an environment, cannot be exhausted by a literature aspiring to the totality either of class or of nation. Refusing to let his stories be explained in this way, Shi Zhecun claims that they are just some "psychological stories where I used some *Freudism* [sic]" (Shi 1996c: 57).

Insisting on Freudian psychoanalysis, Shi Zhecun seems to fall into the logic of binary opposition that he claims to oppose, and uphold just one side of the opposition. But if we are to see, as Alfred Kazin does, that the so-called "Freudian revolution" came into being in an environment of "growing skepticism about civilization and morality" after the First World War (Kazin 1957: 13), and that Freudian psychoanalysis challenges the separation between rationality and irrationality through introducing the unconscious, we may be able to understand that Shi's insistence does not necessarily imply that he is for total Westernization. Rather, Freudian psychoanalysis, as an alternative to boundary-bound narratives, gives Shi the very tool to move beyond the logic of binary opposition between "science" and "metaphysics," the Chinese and the Western, and to question a totalizing literature.

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<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that Shi Zhecun wants to distance himself from the proletarian literature advocated by Leftist writers during the late 1920s and early 1930s, and also from the so-called "Minzu zhuyi wenxue" [Nationalist literature] promoted by the Nationalist government at the time to undermine the Leftist literary movement (see Qian 1998: 191-93).

The story "Yaksha," like some of Shi Zhecun's other stories, certainly presents a psychological exploration of the reaction of metropolitan inhabitants to the contradictions and conflicts in their everyday life. In the story, Bian Shiming, the friend of the narrator, falls strangely ill at the sight of the narrator's female cousin and is thus sent to a Western-styled hospital. Three weeks after Bian is hospitalized, the narrator, as we have seen, distrusting the German doctor's diagnosis, visits his friend at the hospital. As an explanation for the cause of his sudden illness, Bian tells the narrator his own adventure in the countryside near Hangzhou, where he believes he met a female yaksha and then, mistaking a mute country woman for the yaksha, he killed her. Even after he comes back to Shanghai, Bian believes that the yaksha or the spirit of the murdered woman continues to haunt him. Strange as it is, the story forces us to look into the production of "the strange" in a modern time and space. The narrative of "the strange," appropriated here by Shi Zhecun to structure the experience of Chinese modernity as a pathological and cultural symptom and to interpret the same experience as an aetiological and semiotic object, touches upon some larger problems about Chinese modernity. Will the desire to be a modern Chinese person inevitably lead to the desire to totalize? If not, how should these two be distinguished and separated in the formation of a modern Chinese subjectivity? What kind of role should women play in the effort to achieve a Chinese modernity? To these questions, the story offers us some "strange" phenomena, together with symptomatic descriptions rather than aetiological diagnoses, but even these "strange" phenomena and enigmatic symptoms are worth examining in our reconsideration of Chinese modernity, especially literary modernity, in the twentieth century.

卞士明

### **"It Figures There as the Element Which Is Lacking"**

While questioning the German doctor's diagnosis, the narrator comes to the hospital in the hope of finding out the real cause for Bian Shiming's sudden illness, a cause that he suspects the Western medical narrative may have failed to represent truthfully. But to see in the relationship between the

叮囑

doctor and the narrator only the latter's distrust of the former, as well as the latter's suspicion of a possible Western misrepresentation, is incomplete and misleading. For, at the very beginning of the story, the narrator tells us that he decides to visit his friend three weeks later simply because "I obeyed the doctor's instructions" (Shi 1991b: 323). Placed at the very beginning of the story, the narrator's abiding by the doctor's "instructions" (*dingzhu*), though overshadowed by his subsequent compulsion to seek some alternative explanation for the illness, functions to control the way the story develops and the way readers read it.

The narrator's observance of the doctor's instructions registers an implicit distancing from Bian. Although the narrator believes that the doctor does not really know Bian from the vantage point of an insider like him, he himself does not know much about Bian's personal life, either. He only knows that Bian is an "innocent middle-aged man" (323) who works in an office and practices fencing after work. Another thing he knows is that Bian likes to make fun of other people being frustrated in love. But, as for Bian's own subjective, emotional life, especially his love affair, the narrator does not know anything. He merely surmises that, even if it had something to do with women, Bian would not be suffering from any mental disorder, as the doctor asserts. In his eyes, Bian is a typical modern man who will by no means be afflicted by love. Yet Bian's strange behavior, his sudden illness at the sight of the narrator's female cousin, suggests that there is something that lies beyond the narrator's knowledge.

The distance from his friend Bian leads the narrator not only to see the latter's behavior as "really strange" (323) but also to frame within the narrative of "the strange" what Bian tells him. This method also allows him to see Bian as a patient, a man who may now be suffering from a mental disorder. However, his illusion that he is in a position to better understand Bian functions, in his mind, to shorten the distance between the two of them, while it increases the distance between himself from the German doctor. Though the narrator has had to obey the doctor from the very beginning, he can distrust and doubt him as much as he wishes. In his relationship to Bian and the German doctor we see his double yet dislocated identification with both the symbolic and the imaginary. If in imaginary identification, to use

Slavoj Žižek's words, "we identify ourselves with the image of the other inasmuch as we are 'like him,' while in symbolic identification we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance" (Žižek 1989: 109), what we see in the narrator here is a quotidian battle of split identification with both the symbolic and the imaginary. He has an imaginary identification with his friend, who is "like him" and whom he believes he knows well as his co-national, and a symbolic identification with the German doctor as the dubious other, a foreigner whose instruction he has obeyed but who does not bear any resemblance to his friend and himself.

It is no wonder that, with this split identification with both the symbolic and the imaginary, the narrator feels that something is missing in his communication with the German doctor. This he blames on the doctor's poor English: "Doctor Liszt (Lie Xide), other than saying in his clumsy and awkward English that [my friend] was suffering from a mental disorder as a consequence of his being exposed to some great horror, said nothing about the cause [of the illness]"(323). This split identification also finds the narrator in confusion in the Western-styled hospital.

烈希德

I stood in front of the door of Room 437. The white wall and the white door gave me a sense of horror. These should be black, but the white color in the hospital—not only the white wall and door, but also the white beds, white bedding, white instruments, white operating table—made me feel as if I had walked into a house full of mourning arrangements for the recently deceased, and it made me so nervous that I had to hold my breath. I took out my handkerchief and, thanks to the blue squares on it, I felt a little relieved. Then I bent my index finger and knocked at the door slightly. I could not imagine what I would see when the door was opened. (323-24)

As if intent on avoiding the inadequacy of language that he has detected in the German doctor's bad English, the narrator not only dutifully records everything he sees but, more importantly, transcribes truthfully his own sense reactions. The narrator's sense reaction to the white color is revealing here.

Although it has become normal today, especially in the West, for this color to be used in a hospital, it was not so self-evidently “normal” in China in the 1920s and 1930s. The competition between Chinese and Western medicine mentioned above can certainly serve here as a symbolic map on which we can locate the narrator’s “fear” of pigments. In traditional Chinese cultural practice, whiteness is mostly connected with death and funerals, where relatives and friends wear white clothes or scarves to see the deceased off to his “eternal home” in the other world. This is why the narrator believes everything in the hospital should be black, and he associates almost instinctively whiteness with “the mourning arrangements for the recently deceased.” He feels nervous and terrified, and becomes grateful and relieved at the sight of the “blue squares” on his handkerchief. The handkerchief, whose significance in modern metropolitan life Shi Zhecun defines in another context as “helping you to present your natural gesture” when you feel nervous or insecure in public (Shi 1996b: 113), saves the narrator from his disorientation. It also returns him to a state of equilibrium among the pigmentary forces and to his calmness as he walks on inside this Western-styled hospital.

Yet, the cultural difference as reflected in the color, as well as the nervous feeling generated in the narrator, can hardly be covered up by a blue handkerchief. The white color is so pervasive that the narrator cannot divert attention from it. After the door of the ward is opened, the narrator first sees two black eyes, then a lovable red mouth, and finally the white face of a nurse. However, against the whiteness of the wall, the face and the bonnet, the nurse’s two black eyes and red mouth appear, in his eyes, like “two longans and a water chestnut” left on a white towel (Shi 1991b: 324). This description of a nurse’s face against the white background further reinforces the narrator’s fear of whiteness in the hospital. Indeed, the constant recourse to sense reaction as a register of cultural shock in the narration demonstrates a characteristic that Lou Shiyi observed in his 1931 article about Shi Zhecun’s writings; he notes in them a “New Sensationalism” (*xin ganjue zhuyi*), a designation that has now become widely accepted as a description of the style of Shi Zhecun and his like-minded writer-friends. Tracing the source of influence to French surrealism, Japanese New Sensationalism

樓適夷

新感覺主義

and the "Nonsense" school, Lou regards Shi's New Sensationalist writing, nevertheless, as a direct product of a particular social class living off bank interest in a capitalist society. He asserts that the fictional characters representing this class, since they are alienated from social production, understand life only in terms of consumption and enjoyment. Although they are well-educated and know about the disintegration of the old society, they do not entertain any personal fear at all. They only "search for new and strange beauty amidst the disintegration," Lou remarks, "and use this new and strange beauty to cover up their own inner emptiness" (Lou 1988: 305-306).

What Lou Shiyi says about the use of sensoria (especially when obtained through seeing) in Shi's writings is an appropriate characterization of how the narrator in "Yaksha" narrates his experience in the Western-styled hospital. However, to say that Shi implicitly views literature as a struggle for an unalienated, ideal life, at the expense of precluding the possibility, for instance, for "life to dissolve literature," is hardly acceptable to Shi himself. Shi dismisses Lou's comments as exaggerations that are not true of his work (Shi 1996c: 57). In the story, the narrator's fear of whiteness registers, by means of a complicated sensorium indeed, how fear arises as a result of the disintegration of the traditional Chinese symbolic system, as a consequence of the invasion of Western cultures. It may also have arisen from his realization of the threat of a mental disorder in himself not so dissimilar to that diagnosed by the German doctor with regard to Bian.

In recording cultural difference and its related anxiety by means of his own sensorium, the narrator also articulates his own desire. In his depiction of the nurse, he first presents her eyes, mouth and face as fragmented by the pervasive whiteness and then sutures them onto her body. In doing so, he manages to first direct his desire for food against the nurse's fragmented facial features, which become for him fruits such as longans and chestnuts. Then he transforms it into the desire for love, for the narrator tells us that "[they] talked as if [they] were a couple of secret lovers in a tryst" (Shi 1991b: 324). The swift narrative transition from the fear of whiteness to the sweet feeling of lovers in a tryst shows, in a vivid manner, the ideological and

existential function of writing for metropolitan people, a function which Lou Shiyi has called “using a new and strange beauty to cover up their own inner emptiness.” But, in order to displace the “inner emptiness,” or the lurking anxiety over the threat of some mental disorder, writing as a transparent description of social reality has to be transformed into a transcription of one’s sense reactions to the surrounding reality. For Shi Zhecun, such a sensorial turn is required not only because (as Lou Shiyi suggested) the metropolitans have undergone a shrinking of experience due to their alienation from social production and are overwhelmed by the consumer culture in the reified life of financial capitalism, but mainly because the social reality of the city has already been so fragmented and dislocated that it does not leave much room for the construction of an unalienated, ideal life. The narrator here uses the senses “as the medium through which reality became image, the terms into which the broken data and reified fragments of a quantified world were libidinally transcoded and utopianly transfigured” (Jameson 1981: 239).

The narrator’s eye, just like that of a camera, moves along as he walks down inside the hospital, and the description of the nurse’s face is indeed a final close-up shot.<sup>4</sup> The series of shots here is, however, constantly intercut to a series of reverse shots of the narrator’s sense reactions; these shots and reverse shots are organized and edited by Shi Zhecun, using the technique of suture. This technique allows Shi Zhecun, to quote Jacques-Alain Miller, to “name the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse” and “it figures there as the element which is lacking, in the form of a stand-in” (Miller 1977: 25-26).<sup>5</sup> For the narrator, the technique enables him, in his effort to turn the metropolitan world into a narrative-image, to suture such colors as blue,

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<sup>4</sup> In her study of film culture and vernacular experience in modern China before 1937, Zhen Zhang points out that Shi Zhecun’s writing, together with the writings of others of the New Sensationalist school, can be viewed as “cinematic writing,” writing that derives a lot of its techniques from the cinema, such as montage, mobile points of view, and rhythmic editing (Zhang 1998: 72).

<sup>5</sup> For discussions concerning the application of this concept of suture in the cinema, see Jean-Pierre Oudart (1977), Heath (1977), and Silverman (1983).

black, red and white in the hospital. More importantly, it figures there in the form of a stand-in for his fear of whiteness and for his otherwise disembodied desire arising from his dislocated, double identification.

However, the narrator's desire here ought to be better understood as the desire to gain access to the sensorial surface—the true face—of contradictions and ambiguities in metropolitan life or, in Lacan's words, as "the metonymy of our being" (Lacan 1992: 321), as it is caught up in a fragmented urban existence. Even though suture as a technique of writing helps the narrator transcode libidinally the fragmented world into a narrative-image, it does not succeed, however, in displacing his anxiety and moving him into a linguistic utopia where an idealized harmony and totality can be found. It manages, rather, to turn it into an awareness of an insufficiency in the narration. Here, after the description of the nurse's face, seen as a "strip" through the narrowly opened door, the narrator immediately adds: "When I said a strip of a face, I meant the part of her face in the narrow gap between the door and its frame, which was not so easily seen" (Shi 1991b: 324). These words, supposed to perfect the previous description, betray the narrator's anxiety over the inadequacy and inaccuracy of his language.

The narrator's self-conscious attitude toward his own narration prompts him to pay all the more attention to the description of what he sees, hears, touches and feels; the more exact and detailed, the better. After he enters the ward, the narrator zooms in on almost every detail that comes his way: the movements of his friend Bian's head and lips, their eye contact, the slightly audible groan coming from Bian, Bian's outstretched hands, and their handshake. From the dutiful transcription of all these physical appearances and activities, the narrator concludes that Bian has lost the strong and healthy physique that he used to have. In order to see if Bian has recovered from the mental disorder as diagnosed by the German doctor, he asks Bian time and again, "Do you recognize me?" (325) This repeated question seems to show that he will "have peace of mind" (*xin'an*) if Bian is able to recognize him. He feels, however, that Bian is still shrouded in an "air of derangement" (325). Bian recognizes him immediately and tells him that he is going to leave the hospital in two or three days. At Bian's words, the

narrator seems to feel relieved and starts to ask Bian what really happened the other day when he saw his cousin. Here, it seems that, with the successful verbal exchange between them, the narrator's distance from Bian disappears and his anxiety about language is gone. In fact, Bian not only recognizes him but also welcomes him as a trustworthy person, perhaps also as a prospective Freudian psychoanalyst equipped with the "talking-cure" method who is to be admitted into the fortress of derangement to hear the unspeakable horror: "This was a horrible event, which I should not speak about. But, if I do not tell you, soon I will really go mad" (325).

### **"I Wanted to Seek Some Natural Beauty out of the Unnatural Event"**

With Bian Shiming coming down center stage to tell his own story about what has led to his sudden illness, the setting of the whole story shifts from the Western-styled hospital in Shanghai to the countryside near Hangzhou. The narrator's narration of his experience in the hospital recedes into the background, serving as a distant but powerful frame for Bian Shiming's story. The significance of the location of the story in a rural environment outside of Shanghai will become obvious as we follow Bian in his journey into the countryside.

Bian travels to the countryside because he has to take her grandmother's remains to their home-village for burial. Such a move is a traditional Chinese practice, because a dead person is always expected to "go home," to join other deceased members in the family. This also indicates that, for most metropolitan dwellers, the emerging modern metropolis is still a temporary dwelling place and only the countryside is an "eternal home." That is why Bian wants to stay for some more time when the funeral is over. For him, the countryside "was really a good place for a hermitage"; there is a lot of bamboo, an ancient pond and a creek, the sound of whose running water "gave [him] more pleasure than anything else" (Shi 1991b: 325-26).

After the funeral, Bian writes a letter back to Shanghai, requesting an extension of his leave for another ten days. He wants to take a good rest, to "cultivate the mind and heart," and make full use of this opportunity to "enjoy the natural scenery"

(326). It is apparent that, in his mind, the best cure for the fragmented and alienated metropolitan life he lives is staying in the countryside, where people can not only derive pleasure from nature but, more importantly, live a harmonious life. However, for Bian, the countryside is more than merely a natural environment for such a primitive, organic life; it is also the repository for a tradition exiled from its central position in China. As he tells us, "From the Pine Logging Ground to Liu Xia Village, about eighteen *li* long, on both banks of the Creek Xi, there were all kinds of unknown, wonderful historical relics and sites for us to explore" (326).

In such a frame of mind, Bian Shiming checks out from the West Lake Library many books on "the old anecdotes and stories" (*zhangu*) about the place. He also rents a boat to go and visit the local temple, where he sees paintings by such painters as Ni Yunlin (Yuan dynasty) and Tang Yin (Ming dynasty). The short stay in the countryside allows him to recall some classical poems such as Du Fu's "The spring water has just grown four to five feet / The wild boat could allow only three to four men" (326). It also revives his own poetic sensibility, and he manages to narrate this part of his story in beautiful poetic language. The countryside and inland towns, according to Perry Link in his sociological study of Chinese popular fiction in the early twentieth century, not only represent the values of a life of the past from the perspective of Shanghai; they have even become "ontologically prior," coming before the modern city and yet in some sense still lying beneath it. "A person could rise and fall and be hurtled about in the city, and the city itself might entirely collapse, but the countryside would always be there" and "one could count on it" (Link 1981: 202). In light of this, to stay and travel in the countryside means, for Bian, not only to live a hermit's serene and meditative life, but also to recover and revive a marginalized and repressed tradition (as an ontological prior) in China.

But, during the trip to the local temple, Bian encounters the "woman in white" (Shi 1991b: 326). She haunts him all the time, from the moment he happens to cast an eye at her in a small boat next to his. As he describes it, "a shadow glittering with a brilliant white light would forever dance before my eyes, just like a speck of dandruff on the lens of my eye-glasses" (327). He

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掌故

倪雲林 唐寅  
杜甫春  
水才添四五  
尺，野航恰  
受兩三人

cannot concentrate on the paintings, because the white woman would go inside them; she would distract and disturb him by emerging from behind the temple buildings or the bamboo forest in the paintings. This “bewitching woman” appears not only in the paintings but also wherever he goes and her dancing image “made [him] feel an irresistible melancholy” (327). She blocks his view of the natural scenery, the paintings and other “wonderful historical relics and sites”; she makes him stumble in his imaginary effort to approach and revive the marginalized tradition as an ontological prior. It is this blocking of access, visual or otherwise, to the nexus of countryside-nature-tradition that marks Bian’s melancholy.

邪念

The erotic dimension of this melancholy is obvious here, though in the beginning Bian denies that he indulges in any erotic fantasy, since both his mind and his physique are strong and he has not been moved by hundreds of similar prostitute-like women he met in Shanghai. Then, he acknowledges the presence in his mind of some “wicked ideas” (*xienian*) about her, for her crouching posture in the small boat has an “unseen, sweet charm” (327). Bian feels confused: “In Shanghai, no woman would seduce me like this, but here I could hardly control myself. Does it have anything to do with me or with the place?” (327) Unable and perhaps also unwilling to come up with a satisfactory answer, he then proceeds to “impute all the blame to [his] unhealthy eyes” (327). Unlike the narrator, who would single out his sense apparatus as more reliable than his use of language in grappling with the surrounding world, Bian considers his sensory apparatus as the least dependable tool in dealing with the external environment. Instead of questioning the adequacy of language, he embraces the power of language: “the power of written words could penetrate the insulation of time and space” (328).

It is apparent that, by faulting his unhealthy eyes, Bian chooses to blame himself, rather than the place, for his erotically disastrous encounter with the woman in white. But he tells the narrator, “I do not believe that my nerves would rebel against my true nature all of a sudden” (327). Though he later suspects he is suffering from neurasthenia (a disease that many Chinese at the time believed had something to do with excessive nervous

stimulation), it is the eye that he believes to be the arch-criminal rebelling against his own "nature" (*benzhi*). Positioned in the liminal space between the somatic-psychological economy, within which an individual's "nature" is supposed to reside, and the external world, the eye poses a challenge to any claim concerning the autonomy of the individual's deep-seated "nature." But, as we are already told, in his daily life in Shanghai, Bian defends such an autonomy by doing frequent exercise, laughing at those in love, and reminding himself not to allow his rationality to be overwhelmed by his sentiments. In a Simmelian sense, he is indeed a normal metropolitan in the city, who would do anything possible to protect the autonomy of his subjective life, though his autonomy is based upon a well-defined and well-defended division between the inside and outside of his psychosomatic territory, between the self and the other.

本質

The woman in white is, to be sure, the *unheimlich*, the uncanny or unhomely, that "ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 1955: 225). The exploration of the uncanny experience of the metropolitan reveals in a most conspicuous manner Shi Zhecun's touch of Freudianism in the text. Despite all his effort to build a home for his subjective life (his "nature"), however, Bian fails to prevent the uncanny from intruding into his subjective territory once he goes to the countryside. From an orthodox Freudian perspective, this irrepressible force is essentially an illicit sexual desire for one's parent or even grandparent, which Bian has endeavored to push away but which has managed to come back through the woman in white after the death of his grandmother. His grandmother's death might well mean the permanent loss of a love object for Bian and the appearance of a bottomless abyss where an "irresistible melancholy" is located. However, shifting the focus from sexual desire to the order of the Real, a Lacanian perspective would regard the uncanny as "the gaze as such, in its pulsatile, dazzling and spread out function," a gaze of "the anamorphic ghost" (Lacan 1977: 89) that looks back perhaps from the grave of Bian's grandmother, blots the idyllic scene of the countryside, embodies itself in the woman in white, and remains meaningless like a filthy stain on his eye-glasses. It renders everything suspicious, thus "opening up the abyss in the search for a meaning—nothing is what it seems to be,

everything suspicious, thus “opening up the abyss in the search for a meaning—nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning” (Žižek 1991: 91). Such a psychoanalytical interpretation certainly helps us understand the apparition of the woman and the “non-sense” of Bian’s “wicked ideas” about her. But, by calling the woman a “yaksha” and engaging subsequently in chasing after her, Bian also forces us to examine Shi Zhecun’s Freudianism in a broader social context and stake out the historical conditions for his “psychologizing [of] the fantastic” (Liu 1995: 133).

In reading a book about the history of the countryside, Bian finds a record of some yaksha haunting the area. It is said that, about one hundred years ago, a yaksha appeared in the mountain; it often transformed itself into a beautiful woman, seducing passers-by and eating them after capturing them. At one time, one person would be missing from the nearby village every night, believed to have been eaten by the yaksha. Then the villagers burnt down all the trees in the mountain and the yaksha disappeared. But Bian suspects that the yaksha has not died and the woman in white is just its latest incarnation. The yaksha is a hideous and dangerous intruder into the peaceful life of the countryside.

The woman in white, now suspected to be an incarnation of the yaksha, becomes a dangerous figure both “alien” and “unnatural” to the native community, unhomely to “the home,” and exactly what the whiteness in the Western-styled hospital signifies for the narrator. But, as a yaksha and an other, she is meant to embody here, as in the tradition of writing / reading / retelling yaksha stories, a desire for a homogenized, purified life, a life without the disturbing presence of the other.<sup>6</sup> As Theodor

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Pu Songling records a story called “The Yaksha Kingdom” (Pu 1994) in which a Chinese merchant, lands on a yaksha island because of a shipwreck. He marries a female yaksha, who gives birth to two children. Later, the merchant manages to bring his yaksha wife and children to China. One child grows up to be a famous general, and the other, an excellent scholar. Though Pu’s story tells how the yakshas (the minority) are “assimilated” into Chinese culture, it registers the same mechanism of desire to homogenize and purify the space involved, and also to expand that space, for the self.

Adorno has said, "The archaic is appropriated as the experience of what is not experiential. The boundary of experientiality, however, requires that the starting point of any such appropriation be the modern" (Adorno 1997: 349). In the fragmented and reified metropolitan life of semi-colonial Shanghai, what is archaic and what is not experiential is the very homogenized, purified life of the Chinese self. The woman in white, a survivor from the past in the countryside, seems to articulate, however, just such an otherwise impossible desire for a homogenized life. To make her forever alien and strange, so as to sustain his own desire, Bian refuses to see the true face of the yaksha woman, no matter whether it is hideous or beautiful (Shi 1991b: 331).

Bian's decision to tarry with ambiguity and indeterminacy, as well as his adherence to an "ambiguous vision," which Tzvetan Todorov sees as the necessary condition for the production of "the fantastic" (Todorov 1975: 33) or "the strange,"<sup>7</sup> mark a significant change in his attitude to the woman in white. In the beginning she is a "horror" that makes him irresistibly melancholic because she blocks his access to the nexus of

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<sup>7</sup> In her study of Chinese classical tales of "the strange," Judith Zeitlin argues that it is problematic to apply Todorov's schema of the fantastic, the marvelous and the uncanny to the Chinese literature of "the strange" in general and to *Liaozhai zhiyi* in particular. She believes that we cannot assume the same "laws of post-Enlightenment scientific common sense" in the Chinese context. Also, Todorov's chosen narratives are, according to Zeitlin, based on clear-cut distinctions between realism and fantasy, whereas in Chinese literature the boundary between the strange and the normal is never fixed but is constantly altered, blurred, erased, multiplied or redefined (Zeitlin 1993: 6-7). Zeitlin's argument is convincing in the case of classical tales of the strange in Chinese literature. In twentieth-century China, as Chinese literary writings were undeniably influenced by Western cultures on a large scale, I believe it is possible to use Todorov's theories to analyze modern Chinese narratives of the strange. In the case of Shi Zhecun, the use of Western theories will be fruitful, as Shi acknowledges his writing has been greatly influenced by Western writers such as Arthur Schnitzler (Lee 1999: 166-68) and Western theories such as Freudian psychoanalysis (Yan 1995: 140-42).

countryside-nature-tradition, but after she has been appropriated as a yaksha, as a tool to articulate his desire, she becomes a welcome love object. "I knew loving a female yaksha means I would have to sacrifice myself," he tells us, "But before the arrival of the final punishment, what strange delights I would have" (331)! These strange delights are certainly attractive for him, but what appeals to him even more is the opportunity to make a heroic move toward his utopia—his ultimate home—of naturalized beauty and totalized harmony. Therefore, we hear him proclaim ecstatically, "I wanted to seek some natural beauty out of the unnatural event. I had really completely taken leave of my senses. I had fallen in love with this beautiful yaksha who was forever before me, seducing me with her graceful gait" (332).

The female yaksha therefore leads Bian forward, moving so fast that he sometimes feels that he keeps lagging behind: "My heart was burning with a strange desire. . . . I wanted to expand the realm of love for all human beings" (331-32). But, no matter how closely he follows her, he never manages to catch up with her. The moment when he thinks he is embracing her with his two hands, reality sets in with a pull that turns out to be deadly. The woman in white turns out to be a mute country woman. "How could I believe myself that I had come to this place to strangle and kill a country woman on her way to meeting her lover?"(334) This unexpected turn from the heroic pursuit of love to the gruesome crime of destroying his real love reveals the bankruptcy of the wish to return to the native tradition in the countryside, and it also puts an end to the escape from what is considered fragmented and dislocated modern metropolitan life. For a moment, it also halts the further production of "the strange" in the narrative. Bian suspects he has been bewitched by the yaksha or the spirit of the killed woman even after his hurried retreat back to Shanghai. The sense of being bewitched comes as "the final punishment" when Bian collapses at the sight of the narrator's cousin, who has just come from the countryside. He mistakes her for the yaksha, or the revengeful spirit of the murdered woman: "All my nerves became confused; horrors, worries and frightened haste assaulted me. So I came to this place. . ." (335).

### **“Horrible Woman! Strange Woman! Don’t Come Close to Me!”**

The place that Bian Shiming reluctantly comes to, at the end of his supposedly fantastic journey into the countryside, is the Western-styled hospital, where he has been staying for over three weeks. Shi Zhecun has his characters stay in a place they do not like, talking about a fantastic journey elsewhere, in order to convey an unmistakable sense of irony, but the primary irony is to be found in the imagined relationship between an urban dweller and the countryside. In regarding the countryside as a hermitage where one can cultivate the mind and heart, Bian identifies with it both physically and metaphorically. His trip there signals a physical identification with it, though not one as thorough as his grandmother’s, since death literally removes any possible insulation between herself and the “eternal home” of the countryside. Metaphorically, Bian identifies also with the countryside as an ontological prior, in contrast to the city as a phenomenological posterior—and with it as a repository of marginalized Chinese culture in a context of the disturbing presence of Western influence in the city.

This kind of relationship to the countryside is closely linked to a view of metropolitan life, experienced by Shanghai inhabitants like Bian and the narrator in the 1920s and 1930s as an essentially fragmented and *unhomely* existence, so that they are stricken with the desire to “go home.” But Bian and the narrator have different attitudes. Bian’s pursuit of the female yaksha in the countryside shows how he changes from a reserved attitude, embodied in his rational life style, to what can be called an “exposé” attitude whereby, for the yaksha’s sake, he would throw away all the rational and intellectual constraints that are supposed, à la Simmel, to protect the “personal core” of a metropolitan subject. The acting-out of this metropolitan expose attitude and the discharge of welled-up anxiety in the countryside serve, however, to effectively highlight his totalizing desire to construct a purified space for the self, an absolute autonomy beyond the pale of quotidian life in Shanghai. The woman in white, named and appropriated as a yaksha, embodies Bian’s desire to go beyond uncanny or unhomely metropolitan experience, a desire for a *beyond* of naturalized

beauty and totalized harmony. But this has proven to be historically impossible, as exemplified in his bloody murder of the mute country woman.

The narrator, on the other hand, accepts the unhomely existence and his split identification with both the Chinese and the Western, embracing these two as a series of living ambiguities and contradictions. He packages up and unleashes his anxiety in the act of suturing, which is the everyday practice of a modernist aesthetic in the city, *here and now*. Even in his libidinal aestheticization of metropolitan life, he is not prepared to construct a linguistic home for a naturalized beauty and totalized harmony; rather, by acknowledging the inadequacy of his language and the “element that is lacking,” he leaves open a space for ambivalence.

However, Bian’s account of his encounter with the yaksha in the countryside, as a “strange” explanation of the cause of his mental disorder and as a sort of talking-cure for it, leaves the narrator in even greater confusion. After Bian finishes his story, the narrator comes out of the ward and gives his wife a call, asking her and his cousin, who are supposed to come to the hospital in an hour, not to make the trip. This is an ambiguous gesture, and can be related to his own view of whether Bian is still suffering from a mental disorder, or has really recovered from it. If he believes what Bian says and no longer sees him as a deranged person, the arrival of his wife and his cousin (especially the latter, whom Bian once mistook for the female yaksha or the spirit of the mute woman) ought not to be a problem for Bian any longer. If he accepts the German doctor’s diagnosis and thinks that Bian is still insane, then what Bian has just told him about the female yaksha and the murdered mute woman should not be taken as true. Maybe the narrator has stopped his wife and his cousin from coming to the hospital out of fear that there might be some problems besides what the German doctor and Bian have suggested. However, no matter what the reasons are, the narrator here betrayed his suspicious attitude toward both Bian and the German doctor, perhaps due to his split identification with both the symbolic and the imaginary. This also closes the door on any further effort to verify Bian’s account. But, with his suspicion uncorroborated and the true-or-false question unanswered, the narrator finally closes his

narrative of Bian's account of "the strange," an account that remains essentially in the ambiguous and indefinable "changing zone between history and fiction, reality and illusion" (Zeitlin 1993: 10).

This way of ending the narrative of "the strange," with the narrator preventing the two women from coming to the hospital, is, however, just one example in the story of the price paid in writing "the strange" of the Chinese modern at the expense of Chinese women. In the hospital where whiteness is all-pervasive, the nurse becomes a sutured body, rescuing the narrator from his fear of whiteness and embodying his otherwise disembodied and "unhomely" desire. In the countryside, the woman in white becomes either a filthy stain on Bian's eyeglasses or a seductive yaksha who inaugurates the strange experience that he would like to have. And the mute woman becomes a direct victim of his fantasy,<sup>9</sup> while her death serves to intrude into the fantastic world of his pursuit and send him back to the reality of metropolitan life. In all these cases, women are employed just as a vehicle for the narration, as "the symptom of man"<sup>9</sup> who lives an unhomely metropolitan life and writes about his own anxiety and desire. For the sake of unity and to end the narrative, women are presented as fragmented, mute, ambiguous or dead, not given any chance to speak out as a subject.

This is a debt that modernist writing owes to Chinese women.<sup>10</sup> In his retreat back to Shanghai, Bian senses the inevitable need to repay the debt: "My life has become a debt

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the violence in Shi Zhecun's literary texts, see Jones (1994).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this Lacanian notion, see Žižek (1992: 154-56).

<sup>10</sup> Although I do not want to generalize about all of Shi Zhecun's stories, this debt can be found in many of his modernist stories collected in *Jiangju de tou* and *Meiyu zhixi* [On a rainy evening]. Even in his *Shan nüren xingpin* [Exemplary conduct of virtuous women], it is still debatable if women occupy a subject position, for as Leo Lee has pointed out, "none of the heroines has an identity of her own apart from her man, and Shi's probing of their minds reveals no feminist consciousness" (Lee 1999: 172).

that has to be paid back, and now the creditor is coming” (Shi 1991b: 335). The potential of woman to become an active subject is (mis)recognized here to be a powerful, uncanny and unhomely force, coming to settle accounts with the man caught in an unhomely existence yet desiring to “go home,” and threatening to break through the forged closure of the narrative of “the strange.” This is perhaps one of the reasons why, in the beginning of the story, Bian behaves as if he is pushing someone away with his two hands stretched out, and speaks of a frightening truth like someone talking nonsense in his delirium: “Horrible woman! Strange woman! Don’t come close to me!”

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