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# Feminizing Politics: Reading Bai Wei and Lu Yin\*

Liu Jianmei

The emergence of images of “New Women” shows the intimate relationship between politics and gender in Chinese society around 1930. The way in which male writers such as Jiang Guangci and Mao Dun deal with sex roles is closely related to the manner in which they articulate the field of power. In order to present a uniformity, albeit false, to serve the utopian aim of the revolution, they link gender identification to class identification. Thus, the subordinated position of women in the sex/gender system is reconsolidated through a pre-established notion that requires women to have politically coherent identities based on alliance with other subordinated groups, a position that romantically subsumes all differences. However, can the signifier “woman” ever reach final, full unity if the notion itself symbolizes castration or lack/loss and bears illusory promises? Can this identity be stable and coherent if the subject position of women never existed in the symbolic order of sexual difference to begin with?

Some images<sup>2</sup> of New Women produced by leftist male writers, such as Wang Manying in Jiang Guangci’s *The Moon Forces through the Clouds* (*Chongchu yuntuan de yueliang*) and Sun Wuyang and Zhang Qiuliu in Mao Dun’s *Eclipse* (*Shi*), incarnate the combination of seductive femininity and revolutionary ideas. These famous fictional New Women possess carnal desires, alluring breasts and beautiful figures;

蔣光慈 茅盾

王曼英  
衝出雲圍的月亮  
孫舞陽 章秋柳  
蝕

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they also wear fashionable modern clothes. They embody new ideas, urbanization and a revolutionary ideology. In this sense, the powerful and sexual bodies of these *femmes fatales* carry positive and progressive connotations. They also convey male anxiety during the transition from the May Fourth movement to the era of revolutionary literature.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, these New Women's bodies cannot be uninvolved in a power dynamic. They are closely associated with male writers' various responses to and representations of social and political change, even if sometimes these appear conflicting and confusing.<sup>2</sup> The narrative language used by male writers to describe these women's bodies combines the features of voyeurism and an atmosphere of celebration. The celebration of the emancipation of women's bodies is not unrestrained but occurs through the gaze of male leftist writers, when revolutionary discourse is engaged in negotiations with Chinese patriarchy.

The cultural association of mind with masculinity and body with femininity actually reinforces the hierarchical system. The bodies of the women in question are subordinated to their revolutionary minds. While these New Women confidently use their bodies to achieve romantic revolutionary purposes, their sex constitutes what Luce Irigaray calls the *unrepresentable* (Irigaray 1997: 23-33). In other words, within a language of univocal masculine signification, the female cannot speak; she is linguistically absent. Therefore women, as empty signs in male leftist writers' treatment of the theme of "revolution plus love," can only express masculine illusions and operate within heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions. But can male writers engender women without succumbing to phallogocentric

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the projection of male anxiety onto images of New Women, see Chan (1988) and Lin (1998).

<sup>2</sup> Some Chinese male writers' designation of New Women's bodies coincided with their disillusionment with May Fourth ideology after the failure of the First National Revolution in 1927, but many did not have a clear idea how to represent the new ideology. Therefore, some images of New Women reveal male writers' ambivalent attitudes toward both the political situation and the women at that time. For instance, Mao Dun's representations of New Women are more ambivalent than Jiang Guangci's.

politics? If we assume that male writers sever female bodies from their inherent meaning, how do female writers deal with gender and power? Can they speak for the female sex in a more authentic way? Is there a more authentic way to talk about gender?

Among those who pursued the fashion of writing about “revolution plus love,” some females, such as Bai Wei and Lu Yin, contributed their interpretations of gender within the matrix of power. Full of anxiety, Bai Wei’s *A Bomb and a Bird on an Expedition* (*Zhadan yu zhengniao*) presents her perplexed attitude toward the complicated relationship between female bodies and politics. In Lu Yin’s biographical narrative *Ivory Rings* (*Xiangya jiezh*), the famous love story of Shi Pingmei and Gao Junyu, the rhetoric of sentimentalism shapes and limits the ideology of revolution. Although these two female writers inevitably repeat the “revolution plus love” formula, their works force us to rethink the gender/power relationship and consider the differences and similarities between their own treatment of the topic and that of male writers. However, we might trap ourselves within the framework of male/female sexual difference if we believe that the female writers construct gender more authentically or more originally than do the male writers. Is it possible for these female writers to redefine their sexuality if, according to Irigaray, the feminine can never be understood as a “subject” or “other” since it is already excluded by conventional masculine language (Irigaray 1997: 23-33)? Obviously, this question is difficult to answer, since we have to ask: Who bestowed upon Irigaray the privilege of seeing through gender politics? So the puzzle remains: Does Bai Wei’s melancholy claim that “there is no truth for the feminine” mean that there is an original truth, though she just cannot find it within the dominant masculine language? Or is there simply no truth at all for the feminine, in both female or male writings?

In my reading of the representations of gender and power by Bai Wei and Lu Yin under the rubric of “revolution plus love,” I will discuss how revolutionary discourse formulates the subject, the narrator, and the identity of women. I will analyze how these two female writers, rearticulating the normative category of the so-called New Women, redefine it within the gaps and fissures of such discourse. I consider these two women’s writings as a

白薇 盧隱

炸彈與征鳥

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石評梅 高君宇

critical resource in the struggle to reiterate and replace the very term “symbolic order.” The way these two female writers deploy gender to represent and interpret revolutionary discourse opens to question the myth of the Third-World woman with a stable and coherent identity. Such an inquiry sees revolutionary discourse and the feminist point of view as conditions of articulation for each other. Thus we can create a dynamic map of how power forms women’s identities, and of how revolutionary discourse is shaped by feminist expressions of love.

### Bai Wei: The Hysterical Mode of Writing

Neither Chinese nor Western scholars have paid much attention to Bai Wei, even though her plays and fiction are closely connected to the beliefs in progress and revolution in her time.<sup>3</sup> A female leftist who joined the Wuhan revolutionary regime in 1927 and the League of Leftist Writers in 1930, she was not recognized in the literary field until Lu Xun published her play *Struggling Out of the Ghost Tower* (*Dachu Youlingta*) in his journal *Torrents* (*Benliu*) in 1928 (Bai Shurong 1983: 81). The sharp female voice is a primary characteristic of Bai Wei’s writing, which never allows social critiques to overshadow women’s concerns. Unlike female revolutionaries in the works of Mao Dun and Jiang Guangci, who are merely used to depict Chinese revolution and modernity, Bai Wei is a purveyor of new ideas of womanhood in the revolutionary context. What is intriguing is that her role as a real spokesperson for female revolutionaries was perpetually disrupted and “disqualified” by one fact: her body itself was infected with venereal disease.

Bai Wei’s personal romance, as well as her disillusionment with both love and revolution, were documented in her confessional autobiographical novel, *Tragic Life* (*Beiju shengya*), which, for Amy Dooling, “can be read as a conscious reclamation of the private as a simultaneously social and political subject” (Dooling 1998). In this 900 page novel, Bai Wei told the complete story of her ten-year romance with the poet Yang Sao: their first encounter, her contraction of

打出幽靈塔  
奔流

悲劇生涯

楊騷

<sup>3</sup> The scholarship on Bai Wei during the last decade can be found in Meng and Dai (1998), Dooling (1998), Jianmei Liu (1998) and Wang (2001).

gonorrhoea from him, their quarrels and separation, her painful battle with venereal disease as well as poverty, and her hesitation to have her ovaries removed at the end. As Dooling points out, this female leftist chose to “privilege the intimate details of a failed romance over her public career as an advocate of political and social reform” for two reasons: first, because Bai Wei needed a large amount of money for medical treatment for gonorrhoea; second, because she was “formulating her physical (as well as emotional and psychological) experience not as the private history of a unique individual but as the product of an endemic patriarchy plaguing modern Chinese society as a whole” (Dooling 1998). Indeed, although practical economic conditions forced Bai Wei to sell her own secret to the public, the poignant exposé of the “true” life of a New Woman who longed for modern romance and revolution but was unqualified for both posed a challenge to the social order that had constructed her as such. While for Dooling, *Tragic Life* shows Bai Wei’s attempt to demystify May Fourth romantic ideology by way of a problematic female identity, for David Der-wei Wang, it “serves as Bai Wei’s testimony to her betrayed revolution as romance and vice versa, and through such a ‘discourse of despair,’ it revealed the schizophrenic nature of woman relating to reality” (Wang 2001). However, what impresses me most about this novel is not only Bai Wei’s failures in both areas (revolution and love) but also the striking contrast between a burgeoning modernity and a woman’s diseased body, which suffers the consequences of the whole package of revolutionary romance, including emotional and sexual freedom.

*Tragic Life* could be titled “Diary of a Madwoman.” Unlike Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” (*Kuangren riji*), which depicts a paranoiac who insists that everyone around him is a cannibal and who is suffocated by the repressive reality of traditional China, in *Tragic Life* the female protagonist is incarcerated by her diseased body as well as the patriarchal social system. From the beginning of the novel, she is addressed by her friends as “strange stuff” (*guaiwu*); after her lover’s betrayal, the ordeal of venereal disease, and the experience of poverty, she can do nothing but madly laugh at reality. “Every day, she has to search for something to eat despite her sickness; every day, she is tortured by the disease and a sick life. . . . She laughs all the

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time, no matter where she is. Laugh! Laugh! She cannot help laughing. Laugh! Laugh!" (Bai Wei 1936: 884). All kinds of laughter—bitter, mad, sad, violent, cold and silent—string together the series of events in the final section of *Tragic Life* and they constitute Bai Wei's special language, which is a hysterical mode of writing. One specific program of sexualization directed toward women—"the hystericization of women's bodies"—is pointed out in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. However, as the feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz argues, "[I]n treating hysteria as an effect of power's saturation of women's body, Foucault ignores the possibility of women's strategic occupation of hysteria as a form of resistance to the demands and requirements of heterosexual monogamy and the social and sexual role culturally assigned to women" (Grosz 1994: 157-58). In contrast to the conventional, negative view of hysteria, Grosz actually promotes the hystericization of women's bodies and of their language. It is precisely on the basis of such a new vision that we can see Bai Wei using hysteria, a specific form of feminine neurosis, as a discursive strategy to erase the social inscription on her body. In rebelling against conventional femininity, she hystericizes; in lamenting her decayed body, configured by a progressive modernity, she hystericizes.

Her hysteria over her diseased body is a form of nostalgia, a monument to her revolutionary past and a sign of despair about the future. "The wheel of time was rolling as though one was in flight, but in Wei's memory the shadow of the wheel rolled even faster. She was as mad as the protagonist at the end of a tragedy, walking unsteadily and finally lying on the bed like a corpse" (Bai Wei 1936: 746). Like her male contemporaries, the author underscores her unmistakable aspiration to Western ideas of modernity and revolution, but it has been ruthlessly pulverized by her decayed body, which she cannot and will not abandon. Despite her longing for a true revolution, she realizes that "no matter how she feels for the revolutionary group, it will not care about a patient who is dying. The revolutionary group is like a flock of swallows flying far away, abandoning the diseased woman behind, not caring if she falls on the sand or in the marshy swamp" (Bai Wei 1936: 738). Abandoned by both her lover and the revolutionaries, she keenly feels the pain inflicted on her body; only through hysterical acts can she regain her

self-defined status as a New Woman. Other fictional New Women, such as Zhang Qiuli in Mao Dun's *Pursuit* and Wang Mangying in Jiang Guangci's *The Moon Forces Its Way through the Clouds*, also suffer from venereal diseases, but their bodies are allegorized in terms of the respective political ideologies of these two male authors. Repeatedly recording her physical pain, repeatedly mourning the difficult living conditions under which she has to suffer, Bai Wei never hides her paranoiac criticism of her lover, the revolutionary group, and the patriarchal society she lives in. Rather than seeing her disease "as a physical reminder of her failure as a woman and a revolutionary" (Wang 2001), I see it as a challenge to the discourse of revolution and romance, in which her contemporaries largely indulged. It poses serious questions to an advancing modernity: What becomes of a woman who is rejected by the rolling wheel of time? What do romance and revolution mean to a woman who is disqualified for both? At the end of the novel, Wei hystericizes again on seeing how her handicapped body has been relentlessly cast out by the racing current of time as well as the proletarian mass.

Bai Wei's suspicious attitude toward both love and revolution can be traced back to her early novel *A Bomb and a Bird on an Expedition*, published in *Torrents* in 1928. Only the first part of this novel is still extant; the second part was lost due to government censorship of the journal. Although not autobiographical like *Tragic Life*, this story still contains many of Bai Wei's personal experiences. It is about two sisters, Yu Yue and Yu Bin, whose father is a revolutionary who nevertheless defines women from feudal moral perspectives. Yue, the elder sister, enters into a terrible marriage arranged by her father and then dramatically escapes from what is virtually a living hell; the events call to mind Bai Wei's painful first marriage. Bin, the luckier one, goes to Wuhan and becomes a social butterfly, playing sex games with one man after another. After escaping from a marriage and joining the Wuhan government, Yue starts a love affair with a revolution rather than with men, and becomes trapped in a serious political struggle between the CCP and the GMD. Bai Wei's own experience—joining the Wuhan regime in March 1927 and working as a Japanese translator—enables her to depict the 1927 revolution from a woman writer's viewpoint.

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Instead of directly narrating the GMD's massacre of CCP members, Bai Wei links Yue to the fortunes of both parties, neither of which provides an answer to the woman question. In my reading I explore the interaction between the linguistic, ideological, and psychological dimensions of the novel's relation to society and history. It does not, of course, offer the best interpretation of the work, but it does allow for the investigation of a number of issues relevant to the problem of politics and gender. I focus on the interplay between these dimensions in order to show how Bai Wei brings out both the possibilities and the limitation of the feminist novel, particularly when it is set in the revolutionary era.

Influenced by the May Fourth tradition, Bai Wei's *A Bomb and a Bird on an Expedition* seeks to discover what women can do after they leave their patriarchal families, and how a revolution can resolve women's problems. The predicaments of the two sisters reflect two different situations faced by New Women after they have walked out of the extended family. Although both desire freedom and a revolution, Bin gradually degenerates into an attractive and dangerous "liaison" who enjoys fooling around with men, while depending on them at the same time. Because of her indulgence in desire, passion, leisure, fantasy, and frivolity, Bin becomes closely tied up with power and money, sensuality, bourgeois ideology, a colonized mentality, as well as the eroticized metropolis of Hankou. Bin has already gained sexual freedom, but her new sexuality is virtually defined by bourgeois ideology instead of the old patriarchal system. In contrast, Yue, who finally escapes the miserable marriage arranged by her family after surmounting numerous difficulties, chooses to devote herself to the revolution but ends up disillusioned. In this story about "revolution plus love," it is significant that Bai Wei's protagonist Yue prefers revolution to love. The subject position of women had been stabilized within the discourse of love at that time; only through a revolution did they have the opportunity of finding a new space for themselves (Meng 1989: 164-67). Yue's choice is a conscious rebellion against the role pre-assigned to her by a male-centered society.

Compared to Bin, who shows "feminine" and negative elements presupposed by bourgeois ideology, Yue presents

more “masculine” and positive elements like self-awareness, rationality, patriotism, and a sense of revolutionary purpose. On the ideological level of the novel, the two major and seemingly opposed protagonists stand for binaries that permeate the novel: a decadent, colonized and sensual bourgeois ideology versus a progressive, patriotic and asexual revolutionary ideology (which is not exactly Marxist, though the author portrays the Communist Party sympathetically). On the surface of the text, Bai Wei affirms the latter but repudiates the former. However, in fact she deeply suspects that women can find “the truth about the feminine” either way. At the end of the novel, Bin and Yue both collapse in despair: one is exhausted by a decadent and empty life, and the other is deeply harmed by political conflicts between the GMD and the CCP. Unlike Mao Dun’s and Jiang Guangci’s *New Women*, who can calmly utilize their bodies for revolutionary goals without feeling pain,<sup>4</sup> Yue constantly feels uncertain and confused about the political exploitation of women’s bodies, whereas Bin simply fails to trust both the revolution and men.

*A Bomb and a Bird on an Expedition* suggests that blind affirmation (or repudiation) allows the psychological and ideological dimensions of “revolution plus love” to work together to reveal the psychology of individuals, especially that of women like Yue and Bin, as well as to provide a general perspective on the relationship between gender and politics. It even suggests an interweaving of revolutionary ideology with feminist thinking. Before Bin turns into a dangerous woman who indulges in love games and a lascivious lifestyle, she, like many other progressive youths, wants to participate in the revolution. But she soon finds out she can only serve as a decoration. Her inner voice elaborates on the problem of the relationship between women and the revolution:

Bin is very upset. She feels that her spark of intelligence will be extinguished by the storm in the dark night. Surprised, she begins to wonder if the revolution is as regressive as she thinks.

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<sup>4</sup> Mao Dun’s case is different from that of Jiang Guangci. In his early fiction, such as *Eclipse* and *Rainbow*, Mao Dun’s heroines also feel uncertain about engaging in a revolution (see Wang 1992: 25-110).

Is women's work in the revolution as narrow in scope, and as inferior as it seems? Is women's social position in the revolution as restricted as it appears? Is she only a puppet of men? Hum! Revolution! . . . Revolution! . . . Am I so humble? Oh! I see! I am simply an extremely humble animal! The stupid worm which wants to take big strides but can only wriggle along. . . . Bin became more upset. She leaned on the balustrade, rolling up the propaganda note, imagining how she would mingle with men during the next day's march. The more she thought the more she sighed: Ah! Such a revolution! Such a revolution! Struggling in order that men can look great and sacrificing myself on the street! In this way, my strength of will, which is a bomb, will be extinguished! (Bai Wei 1929: 29)

Bin's suspicion originates in part from her feminist consciousness. Observing the inferior social position of women—their pure decorative function in the revolution—Bin starts to realize the huge gap between feminism and revolutionary ideas, between the self and ideology. In order to prevent her “spark of intelligence and her strength of will” from being repressed by men's rationality, she chooses to indulge in a sensual and emotional life that can allow for the expression of her self. Bin inevitably flirts with the discourses of both “revolution and love.” Not earnestly identifying with either, she keeps up an superficial and sensual performance by which she can temporarily exert her power.

Although frantically in love with the revolution, Yue consciously questions its meaning as well as its impact on herself and other women. Yue feels perplexed about the cruel discrepancy between the crusade she imagines and the real revolution, which is quite absurd. While looking at the march of protesters, she notices that there are a lot of kids, stupid women, and rascals, and she cannot help wondering:

“Is this the spirit of the masses? Are these the so-called revolution activities? . . . Look at the way they walk, without any strength in their feet, and the way they pant and lower their heads and their dumb eyelids. . . . How can they understand the meaning of the revolution? Revolution, revolution, is it merely a word shouted by a motley crowd?” After seeing this she felt very

sad and disgusted. But she did not know the principles of a revolutionary ideology, nor did she know how to start a revolution. . . . “Revolution . . . what is China’s national revolution? I don’t know!” (Bai Wei 1929: 143)

Yue departs from leftist ideas of class and collective strength, and this distances her from the masses. Unlike Bin, who abandons her original goal easily, Yue insists on pursuing her own identity as developed within the revolutionary discourse. Even if she feels disappointed by reality, so long as the GMD women’s movement chimes in with bureaucratic politics and expresses itself in an unchangingly closed and confined voice, she does not give up the pursuit of her ideals. Unfortunately, involved in the conflict between the GMD and the CCP, she agrees to utilize her own body as an instrument for political purposes. When her Communist friend Ma Teng persuades her to seduce Minister G from the GMD in order to obtain some information, she agrees. Yue’s superego is thus prohibitive, regulating sexuality in the service of politics. However, Bai Wei’s representation of New Women here differs conspicuously from those of Mao Dun and Jiang Guangci.<sup>5</sup> Instead of actively seducing the minister, Yue ends up being raped by him on a dark, rainy night; after this she refuses to commit herself to the “revolutionary” task. Here what concerns Bai Wei is the female revolutionary’s suffering body, not political ideology. Plunging into a political struggle, Yue is doomed to failure: she loses her body, herself—everything. At the end of the novel, jailed in a dark and damp prison, Yue seems abandoned and forgotten by both political sides. Her sincere pursuit and her failure raise questions about the significance of the revolution for modern and progressive women. Since Yue’s subject position has been pre-designated within the masculinist framework of national and revolutionary discourse, she can never find the place she really wants.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Mao Dun was also aware of the issue, he hesitated to articulate it. Of course, his vacillation after 1927 might have had a great impact on his narratives, but to a certain extent it may be due to his position as a male writer writing about women and the revolution.

Bai Wei's very reiteration of the name New Woman is an attempt at displacement and an act of appropriation. On the linguistic level, since her narrative consists of hysterical expressions, it takes on an uncanny and unfamiliar sense, in contrast to the portrayal of women by male writers, or by male writers speaking in the female voice. For instance, Bai Wei's narrative language is extremely emotional, not giving reasonable connections between events, freely jumping from one protagonist to the other, from interior monologues to exterior descriptions. A reader may have an extremely difficult time keeping up with the narrative. The most obvious feature of Bai Wei's hysterical writing is that the libido and the unconscious on one side, and the ego and the consciousness on the other, are shown to be closely linked. This connection and confusion lead to a re-creation of the neurotic characters of Bin and Yue. Echoing the madwomen in Western Gothic novels, these two protagonists' outrageous behavior expresses their despair about men and the revolution in a unique female voice that threatens the normality of male-centered society. Bai Wei's narrative language may be said to be coarse and immature, but to say so is to ignore the fact that her language reflects her consciously feminist purpose. Claiming that the feminine is precisely what is excluded by sexual binary oppositions, Irigaray argues that it appears only in catachresis, or an improper transfer of a proper name. Through the playfulness of repetition and the uncanniness of catachresis, not only does national and revolutionary discourse become problematic, but also feminist writing finds new possibilities of expression.

In *A Bomb and a Bird on an Expedition*, Bai Wei brandishes some leftist rhetoric, such as "the movement of peasants and workers," "proletarian liberation," "women's movement," "nationalism," and "revolution." Sometimes these terms, used in the characters' hysterical expressions, do not make philosophical and linguistic sense. The problem of using "masculine" terms brings out possibilities for a rethinking of the revolution and women's problem. The hysterical manner of expression seems to create contradictions and dilemmas, most notably within the precarious matrix of gender.

However, Bai Wei's narrative language is not "authentic" or "natural." Simply connecting female hysterical expression with

“authentic” female writings leads to an essentialist form of thinking in which naturally constructed women are regarded as inferior to culturally constructed men. Instead of linking hysterical expression to “natural” feminine writing, we should consider it as a kind of cultural production generated by miming. In addition, as Judith Butler notes, miming can be “a reverse mime,” which does not necessarily privilege the masculine as its origin, or stabilize the terms “masculine” and “feminine.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Bai Wei’s reiteration of “New Women” can be taken as a co-opting and displacement of phallogocentrism by means of gender parody.<sup>7</sup> Her hysterical displacement creates “a fluidity of identities” in which the naturalized and essentialized gender matrix must be recontextualized and reconfigured.

Bai Wei’s hysterical mode of writing contests Mao Dun’s and Jiang Guangci’s naming of “New Women.” As a consequence, women cannot find their own truth in male writers’ depictions of New Women, but neither can Bai Wei’s hysterical writing reveal the “authenticity” of the female. If feminist writing is possible, it is only in the recontextualization of the gender matrix, of power relations, through parody. Indeed, the significance of Bai Wei’s writing lies in her rejection of the concept of woman as defined by revolutionary discourse and in her subversion of male writers’ essentialist designation of New Women. Yue and Bin never readily identify with repressed Third-World women. Nor can their bodies carry the rationality of the revolution.

### **Lu Yin: Transcendent Female Love and the Passion for Death**

A celebrated female writer of the May Fourth generation, Lu Yin also dealt with the topic of “revolution plus love.” In her short novel *Manli* (*Manli*), Lu Yin’s New Woman protagonist

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<sup>6</sup> In Judith Butler’s words, “If a resemblance is possible, it is because the ‘originality’ of the masculine is contestable; in other words, the miming of the masculine, which is never reabsorbed into it, can expose the masculine claim to originality as suspect” (Butler 1993: 51-52).

<sup>7</sup> The term “gender parody” is borrowed from Butler (1990: 137-39).

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devotes herself to the revolution with great enthusiasm but ends up in the hospital with a wounded heart and body. In the form of a confessional letter, Manli confides to her female friend Sha that she feels extremely disappointed and frustrated about the absurdity of the revolution and the way women's bodies and identities are configured in it. Like Bai Wei's observations on women's role in the revolution, Lu Yin's *Manli* expresses the tension between the general view of New Women in the revolution and their own perception of that assigned position. At the end of the story, as the protagonist indicates, her disease is a mental one, neurasthenia, rather than a physical one. Lu Yin's emphasis on the mental disease as a symptom of social injury is an important one in the context of "woman" and "womanhood." In Lu Yin's fictional world, the mental state of the New Women is complicated and sensitive, far beyond male writers' descriptions. Lu Yin focuses on women's private lives in order to refute the revolution/modernity/nation's deployment of women in public life. In her formulation of womanhood, platonic female love is mobilized against the heterosexual framework upon which the masculine interpretation of woman is established.

周恩來

Lu Yin's *Ivory Rings* was based on the true story of famous revolutionary lovers Gao Junyu and Shi Pingmei, whose short and glittering lives embodied the themes of "revolution plus love." According to official history, Gao Junyu was an early Communist who died in 1925 at a very young age; his lover, Shi Pingmei, was a well-known female writer who died in 1928, having devoted her whole life to writing progressive literature. They were buried together in Taoranting Park in Beijing, where their tombstones became a very special and popular symbol of romance. In 1956, their graves were taken care of by the government, since Zhou Enlai recognized the educational value of propaganda for the youth of new China and pointed out that their life-stories signified the harmonious relationship between love and revolution. Apparently, veiled by a glorious story of "revolution plus love," the truth of the tragic romance between Gao Junyu and Shi Pingmei was smoothly erased in official hands.

Shi Pingmei's own literary writings, as well as her close friend Lu Yin's *Ivory Rings*, offer rather different versions of her

romance with Gao Junyu. Among the literary works Shi Pingmei left behind is one short story, "A Horse Neighing in the Wind" (*Pima sifeng lu*), which deals with the twin topics of "revolution and love." The heroine, He Xueqiao and the hero, Wu Yunsheng, have to separate because of their revolutionary duties. Using letters and lyrics, the whole narrative is cast in a mode of sentimentalism. At first, when He Xueqiao bids farewell to her lover, she looks less sentimental than Wu Yunsheng, since she is determined to subordinate her personal feelings to a higher revolutionary purpose. Only after knowing, later, that Yunsheng has been killed by the enemies does she allow her emotions to temporarily overwhelm her. At the end of the novel, her revolutionary aim shifts: she wants personal revenge for Yunsheng's death. Wu Yunsheng, by contrast, is emotionally divided between a desire for romance and revolutionary fervor. In a letter to He Xueqiao, he claims, "There are two worlds in my life. One world belongs to you, and I would like to place my soul under your control as an everlasting prisoner. In another world, I don't belong to either you or myself, for I am only a pawn with a historical mission" (Shi 1983:296). Wu Yunsheng sees very clearly his position in the revolution; therefore he greatly values love and allows himself to indulge in his own feelings. Interestingly, although Shi Pingmei was far more sensitive and emotional than the character He Xueqiao, the maudlin fictional image of the hero Wu Yunsheng bears a close resemblance to the Gao Junyu that Shi Pingmei had described in her diary, her letters to friends, and her prose. Even Wu Yunsheng's description of two worlds, one belonging to the lover and the other to the revolution, had appeared in Gao Junyu's letter to Shi Pingmei (Shi 1992: 140). Only Gao Junyu's obsessive love is omitted in the story.

After its publication, this sentimental and romantic story of *Ivory Rings* drew thousands of youths to mourn for Gao Junyu and Shi Pingmei in Taoranting Park. As one of Shi Pingmei's best friends, Lu Yin tried to adopt her own point of view. The long story includes much from Shi Pingmei's diary, letters to lovers, dialogues with female friends, and published articles. This large amount of original material blurs the distinction between fictional characters and "real" people/authors. Through the narrative voices of Shi Pingmei's best friends, Lu Jingqing

匹馬嘶風錄  
何雪樵 吳雲生

陸晶清

素文  
露沙

(whose name in the story is Suwen) and Lu Yin (whose name in the story is Lusha), as well as Shi Pingmei's own voice, the "truth" of this romantic story is revealed. The narrative emphasis on "private" female voices tends to take interpretations of this story in the direction of feminist criticism, in which Shi Pingmei becomes the most important embodiment of a redefined New Woman, who can be understood well enough in the fundamental paradigm of Lu Yin's utopian female world. Actually, Lu Yin creates a female identity that transcends the heterosexual framework and asserts its own discursive priority. As Lu Yin has said in her *Old Friend on the Beach* (*Haibin guren*), the harmonious and intimate friendship among these female protagonists reenacts the unusually close relationship among Lu Yin, Shi Pingmei, Lu Jingqing, and other female friends. The close friendship and the pure love among women, either fictional or real, allow Lu Yin to challenge masculine discourse using the "revolution plus love" formula.

海濱故人

For some critics, Lu Yin's *Ivory Rings* distorts the authenticity and significance of Gao Junyu and Shi Pingmei's love by presenting the original "healthy" story in a sentimental manner (Zhou 1994: 180-87). However, in a letter to Lu Yin, Shi Pingmei said:

靈海潮汐致梅姐  
寄燕北諸故人

I have read "To Sister Mei: The Tide of the Intelligent Sea" (Linghai chaoxi zhi Meijie) and "To My Old Friends in the North of Yan" (Ji Yanbei zhu guren). I feel *you are just myself*. You have expressed such indescribable feelings for me that I am left without words. When one feels that some other person is oneself, how unusual and comforting it is. But, Lu Yin, I have already had such a feeling. Even if our world is always empty and lonely, and we can see everything about ourselves only by looking at each other . . . I just want to keep this understanding in my heart. (Shi 1983: 41)

Shi Pingmei was happy because what she thought of as unrepresentable had been perfectly expressed by her female friend. Her love for Lu Yin was in a sense beyond words. The letters Shi Pingmei, Lu Yin and Lu Jingqing wrote contain expressions strikingly similar to those of heterosexual love; in addition, their language signifies a special bond different from

that of compulsory heterosexuality. This bond, expressed by “I feel you are just myself” or “I can see myself through you,” is something that is not found in heterosexual love, something that goes beyond sisterhood among women.

In the first half of *Ivory Rings*, Lu Yin listens to Lu Jingqing’s narration of Shi Pingmei’s “secret” romance, and in the second half they switch positions. Thus, in the form of friendly “gossip,” the original source of information about Shi Pingmei’s life is revealed to the public. We find out that Shi Pingmei authorizes her friends to look at her private possessions, such as diaries and letters, even if she is not present. When Lu Yin and Lu Jingqing take a glimpse of Shi Pingmei’s secret life, what strikes them is the aura that comes from Shi Pingmei’s artistic and sentimental expression of her pain. The pleasure of having experienced it this way is certainly mutual, since while Lu Yin or Lu Jingqing tells the story, the narrator of *Ivory Rings* sometimes adopts Shi Pingmei’s point of view. The friends see themselves, their pain and inferiority, through looking at each other. Uncontaminated by mundane considerations, they derive pleasure which originates in their transcendent feminine love, and this allows one to query the authenticity of the “revolution plus love” theme in Gao Junyu and Shi Pingmei’s love story.

*Ivory Rings* is an important work because its sentimental aesthetics involves a deadly obsession with the language of love, and its historical context makes it a precursor to other feminist writings. The narrative figuration of feminine intimacy and feminine feelings is related to the historical situation, so I will explore why and how a particular historical juncture brought about Lu Yin’s performative language of gender, a language closely related to a death drive and a destructive sentimentalism.

In Lu Yin’s novel, the reader is only vaguely aware that the Communist leader Gao Junyu is on some heroic mission. His revolutionary background fades from the scene before the sentimental romance takes place. Although he is deeply in love with Shi Pingmei, he does not gain her true love until he dies. Having been hurt by her first lover, a married man who manipulates her feelings, Shi Pingmei cannot recover from the trauma to accept Gao Junyu’s genuine love. She keeps refusing him; Gao Junyu finally dies because of this unattainable

love. Only then does Shi swear to sacrifice her youth and love for him; she visits his grave frequently for almost three years and eventually pines away too. According to Lu Yin's narrative, Gao Junyu lives and dies for love rather than for his great revolutionary cause. With deep remorse, Shi Pingmei says, "Why didn't you die and shed blood in the battlefield, instead of choosing to lie among a clump of roses? Now you are mourned not by the people of the whole country, but by a person who did not return your love" (Lu 1933: 190). The formula of "revolution plus love" is here deranged by the discourse of love, which was part of a sentimental tradition that was extremely popular in the May Fourth imagination but became problematic during the period of revolutionary literature.<sup>8</sup>

The title *Ivory Rings* has deep significance; ivory rings are a symbol of the bond between Gao Junyu and Shi Pingmei, suggesting death throughout the novel. In her own collection of prose works entitled *The Language of the Waves (Taoyu)*, Shi Pingmei illustrated the history of the rings in detail in one short selection, "Ivory Rings." In it she included the original letter that Gao Junyu sent to her along with the rings. He wrote, "Let us use 'the white' [ring] to commemorate life, which is as deadly quiet as emaciated bones" (Shi 1983: 95). When her friend Jingqing advised her to take off the white, cold ring, which might be an unlucky omen, Shi Pingmei firmly refused, preferring to let her "splendid and magnificent fate be lightly tied to this sadly white and withering cold ring" (Shi 1983: 94). Even though Shi Pingmei knew very well this ivory ring implied death, she allowed her young and beautiful life to be bound tightly with it. When Gao Junyu was struck by Shi Pingmei's denial of his love and spat out blood, Shi was reminded of this ivory ring. When she saw Gao's corpse in the hospital after he died, this ivory ring also caught her attention. Through her deep understanding of Shi Pingmei, Lu Yin came to select this death symbol as the thread onto which she strung every single bead of sentiment in her novel.

The discourse of desire in *Ivory Rings* does not take a decisive political turn, as in other writings using the "revolution

濤語

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<sup>8</sup> The Creation Society's dramatic transformation during the period of revolutionary literature proved that the May Fourth sentimental tradition was altered by a romantic revolutionary spirit.

plus love" formula in the 1930s. Lu Yin seems to harp on the same string of sentimentalism that was part of the Chinese erotic-romantic tradition, established by works such as Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng*), Wei Zi'an's *Traces of the Flower and the Moon* (*Huayuehen*), and Xu Zhenya's best-seller *Jade-Pear Spirit* (*Yulihun*). In real life, Shi Pingmei liked to secretly take on the role of Lin Daiyu: even her pseudonyms, Mengdai and Lin Na, were taken from Daiyu's name; moreover, Lu Yin sometimes called her "Pin," which was the nickname Baoyu gave to Daiyu. It is interesting to note that in *Ivory Rings*, Lu Yin deliberately focuses on representing Shi Pingmei's narcissism, self-pity, and self-destructiveness, which characterize Lin Daiyu too. Showing an obsession with illness and death, Lu Yin's version of Shi Pingmei and Gao Junyu's love story looks like another copy of stories in the emotionally excessive Chinese literary tradition.<sup>9</sup> However, historical conditions shaped this sentimental tradition too. Influenced by May Fourth ideas, Lu Yin also tries to recapture the spirit of Western romance. Gao Junyu quotes a famous line from Theodor Storm's *Immense*, repeating that if he dies he can only be buried alone. This exaggerated, Wertherian sensitivity renders the protagonists as agonized, helpless, and morbid. Their painful, afflicted existence seems to have been strongly encouraged at the time, and it made their love story extremely popular.

The hybrid of Eastern and Western sentimental traditions gives Lu Yin an opportunity to remold Shi Pingmei's image as a New Woman. According to the narrator, Shi is a very well-educated modern girl, a skating star and a dancing queen, smoking and drinking all the time. As Lu Yin narrates the story through Lu Jingqing, after Shi Pingmei is hurt by her first lover, she becomes very suspicious of heterosexual relationships. Although she spends time with Gao Junyu, she never loves him while he is alive. One of her excuses is that he is married just like her first lover. Therefore, she regards the afflictions and

曹雪芹  
紅樓夢  
魏子安 花月痕  
徐枕亞 玉梨魂  
林黛玉

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<sup>9</sup> See David Der-wei Wang's analysis of rationality versus emotional excess in his study of the repressed modernity of the late Qing, as well as his close reading of *Traces of the Flower and the Moon* (Wang 1997: 72-83).

sorrows of their relationship as fiction, and she is only an actress in a sadly beautiful play. With a melodramatic attitude toward life, she cannot help but be deeply affected by her own performance. She once tells Lu Jingqing that when she is acting she is clearly aware that it is only a play, but at the same time she makes a real show of being in earnest (Lu 1933: 141):

I believe Cao [Gao Junyu] really loves me and is pursuing me. Probably it is the possessive desire of human beings. I don't believe that he can die for the sake of love. Truly, I don't believe there is such a possibility. But who knows? My heart is filled with contradictions. Sometimes I also have fears. Not that he would die for me. Even when I see him cry I tremble all over. A man, especially an adult, should be rational, but when he cries his eyes are swollen and his face is pale. Isn't it serious? Whenever I am in such a situation, I almost forget myself. I am softened and hypnotized. In the hypnotic state, I change into another person. I become very gentle and I cannot but accede to his requests. Oh! How miserable! (Lu 1933: 147-48)

Some of her intimate confessions in the novel show her critical attitude toward men and the modern romance engendered by the May Fourth movement:

In particular, men who are married already cannot be relied on. These men are used to riding one horse but looking for another. If they find someone better, they start in hot pursuit. If they do not succeed, they have the nerve to go back to their wives. The most detestable thing is that they see women as objects. They liken women to lamps and lights and even brazenly claim that they don't need kerosene lamps if they can have electric lights. After all, women should also have their rights; after all, they are not horses. . . (Lu 1933: 149, 52)

Since in the May Fourth tradition men were encouraged to break up their arranged marriages and pursue sexual and emotional liberation, many intellectuals such as Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo and Mao Dun became involved in love triangles with their wives and the New Women. Perplexed by such a common situation, the conventional woman has no

choice but to sacrifice herself. Shi is deeply concerned about women's predicament. She also consciously challenges the role of New Women as defined by the new patriarchy.

Who would like to sacrifice everything merely because of marriage? . . . As a person, [Gao Junyu] is not bad. Although I do not want him to be my lifelong companion, I want him as "decoration" in my life.

But when you think of other people too much you will forget about yourself. Think of this: a girl is admired and chased after just because she is a girl. If she marries, she is nothing but a dying star, without light and heat. Who wants to pay any attention to her? Therefore I really don't want to get married.

In dealing with men, when we are happy, there is no harm in smiling and playing with them. When we are unhappy, we should break up with them. Who would like to imprison oneself in the jail of love? (Lu 1933: 104-05, 160)

Shi Pingmei's secret inner thoughts reveal what is so different and disconcerting about her own (and Lu Yin's) understanding of New Women. Deeply suspicious of men's love and heterosexual marriage, Shi acts like a modern girl with power and flirts with men. She wants to maintain a dominant position, without sacrificing herself to men, love, marriage, or male-centered ideologies. Putting up with her own trauma, Shi Pingmei refuses to accept the pre-assigned position of the New Woman and decides to build love, marriage and utopian female relationships on the basis of an illusory "ice/snow-like friendship" (*bingxue youyi*). Her self-denial, self-destructiveness and self-exile are perfectly suited to such a kind of friendship, both aesthetically and psychologically. Regarding real life as a play or fiction, she displays self-destructive behavior and excessive sentiments in a dramatic performance through which she redefines New Women according to her specific feminist point of view. Denying her very "self," she successively twists masculinist logic concerning power relations. By withholding herself, Shi Pingmei can cross the lines drawn by social institutions such as marriage. Yet her definition of "ice/snow-like friendship" is not simply a same-sex relationship; it encompasses an array of meanings associated with deviation from various norms, among which heterosexuality is figured.

冰雪友誼

Readers may wonder if the real Shi Pingmei, who was known as a devoted revolutionary writer, was as sentimental and self-destructive as the heroine of *Ivory Rings*. However, Shi Pingmei's diary, prose writings and letters prove that Lu Yin truly reveals the most "private" part of the woman whose public image was that of an active revolutionary. Shi had to live within a realm of masculine discourse and the repression of women's self-representation. Like most of her female friends in real life, Shi was full of contradictions. She vacillated between reason and emotion, the traditional and the new, death and love, as well as between the assigned role of women and her own imaginary transcendence of this role. Her contradictory existence made her obsessed with death, which became a means of reforming the "self" in the most paradoxical way: she did not love the living Gao Junyu but fell deeply in love with him when he was dead. In one of her prose works entitled "Heartbroken and Tears Turn into Ice" (*Changduan xinsui leicheng bing*), Shi Pingmei gives a chilling description of her experience when she bade farewell to Gao Junyu's dead body:

腸斷心碎淚成冰

His appearance hadn't changed a lot. It was only as sadly white as wax. His right eye was closed, but his left eye was still a little bit open. He was staring at me. I was praying silently as I touched his body, begging him to close his eyes in death. I knew he did not have other hopes in this world. I looked at his body carefully, at his sad, white lips and his lifeless, still opened left eye. Finally I looked at the ivory ring on his left forefinger. At that moment, I felt like Salome when she got John's head. I stood there solemnly all the while, and other people also stood behind me in silence. At that moment, the universe was extremely quiet, extremely beautiful, extremely sad, and extremely gloomy! (Shi 1983: 102)

In her own grotesque description, Shi Pingmei became a decadent woman addicted to the beauty of death and sickness, one who had the menacing power to seduce and kill them. Consciously identifying herself with the famous Western *femme fatale* Salome, she lived with a distorted sexual identity and a deep spirit of *ressentiment* (Nietzsche's term),<sup>10</sup> as well as a

<sup>10</sup> As Nietzsche says, "Decadence is a loss of the will to live, which prompts an attitude of revengefulness against life and which manifests itself through *ressentiment*" (qtd. in Calinescu 1987: 181).

hostility to life. This distanced her from the revolution, progress, and nationalism, so that she became alienated. When Gao Junyu was alive, she took part in the love game but refused to take any sexed position in it. Deep in her heart, as she confessed to her female friend in a private letter, she had the dangerous intent of toying with other people.<sup>11</sup> This playful attitude eventually led to Gao Junyu's death and made her permanently committed to death too. As she put it:

The reason that I continue to write *The Language of Waves* is to substantially build our grave and let people know that I am as hopeless as a walking corpse. . . . I love virgins, especially the corpses of virgins. I hope my love can be fulfilled. Before, I dared not say big words; I was afraid that I couldn't control my feelings. Ever since Tianxin [Gao Junyu] died, I have found out that I can reach my goal.<sup>12</sup>

Shi Pingmei's desire for decay and death separates her from the revolutionary/ decadent New Women, whose seductive bodies are used to convey progressive ideology. Shi Pingmei's obsession with all the symptoms of decadence and exhaustion reflects her strong belief in individuality. It also reflects the female dilemma of wanting to reject male regulation of female desire but finding no satisfying alternative within a male-dominated society. Through death and decadence, Shi Pingmei represents her selfhood and shows how she overcomes gender discrimination. Based on a sentimental style of writing, Shi Pingmei and Lu Yin's subversion of male desires and identities is translated into cultural practices in which their voices are sharp and real, sad but loud, and extremely difficult for men to accept.

Writing for themselves and each other, Lu Yin and Shi Pingmei create a specifically feminine locus of subversion of paternal law. They ceaselessly question the validity of the "real,"

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<sup>11</sup> In Shi Pingmei's letter to her female friend Yuan Junshan. See Yang (1985: 108-15).

<sup>12</sup> In one of her letters to Yuan Junshan, Shi Pingmei adds: "If I were to die and you wanted to write some articles to analyze my life, this letter would provide perfect evidence."

“authentic” New Women as defined in politics and by the revolution. Their writings endeavor to understand feminine discourse on the model of a performative theory of names, providing for a rearticulation of the masculine definition of “New Women.” In a conflation of the symbolic with the real, which is supplied by first-hand accounts, Shi Pingmei and Gao Junyu’s story gives another twist to the “revolution plus love” formula. In a radical departure from ideas of progress, Lu Yin argues on behalf of Shi Pingmei; her argument is justified and consolidated through the construction of a narrative with its own language, which effectively masks its immersion in power relations.

The writings of Bai Wei and Lu Yin are engaged with a historical transformation of the relationship between gender and politics, growing out of what is implicit in revolutionary ideology itself—the imaginative force of women’s gendered subjectivity. Through these two writers’ use of the “revolution plus love” formula, we can see women writers consciously and constantly negotiating with their social position, one that is fixed and consolidated by repressive social laws in the name of progress and revolution. Their different performative enactments of the “revolution plus love” formula show that feminist identities are not simple replications of masculinist identity, nor something shared by other subordinated groups. Rather, feminist identities are fluid; they are a site for the displacement of sexual power relations.

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