The Path Toward the Other: Relational Subjectivity in Modern Chinese Literature, 1919-1945

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the uncharted territory of relational subjectivity in modern Chinese literature. As a model of identity that positions the self in a web of social interaction and emotional connectivity, relational subjectivity suggests that the self is continually partial, open, and constantly “under construction.” Lacking an autonomous “closed system,” subjects remain open to exchange and to becoming agents of co-created meaning. Through readings of the fiction, essays, and poetry of Lu Xun, Ye Shaojun, Shen Congwen, Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, and Eileen Chang, I investigate the ways these writers manipulated narrative structure, texture and voice to present a discourse of openness, receptivity, and tolerance for difference. My investigation uncovers a wider range of subjectivities and relational yearning than was previously recognized for this era. Chinese writers also linked the discourse of relational subjectivity with a more generalized epistemological openness characterized by neutral visual attentiveness and acts of listening. This study reflects a growing interest in locating forms of sociality in the modern Chinese context. As such, my work furthers the theoretical discourse for examining self-other relationships, especially those shaped by multiple-perspectivism, non-hierarchy and horizontal ways of seeing. Finally, this research offers possibilities for locating an alternative beginning for modern Chinese conceptualizations of self in community.
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Dedication

To my parents, Robert and Shirley Cannella,

and to Isabelle
Epigraphs

We can never come to subjectivity apart from our relations with others. The self always has an “intersubjective core.” For another, we come to subjectivity by participating in language, or more broadly, in communication.

-Noëlle McAfee

The most insightful critiques of modernity have been concerned with how to restore the link between individual and community [...] Before we arrive at a crossroads where individualism and collectivism seem the only available and mutually exclusive paths, an alternative middle ground needs to be elaborated in order to appreciate Chinese modernity’s endeavor to envision romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism not as foes, but as fellow travelers.

-Ban Wang

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The Path Toward the Other: Theoretical Introduction

Whenever Father beat me, I went to Granddad’s room and stared out the window from dusk to late in the night. Granddad often placed his two wrinkled hands on my shoulders, then on my head, and my ears rang with the sounds of: “Hurry and grow up! It will be fine once you have grown up.” The year I reached the age of twenty I fled from the home of my father, and I have lived the life of a drifter ever since. I’ve “grown up,” all right, but things are not “fine.” Yet I learned from my grandfather that besides coldness and hatred, life also includes warmth and love. And so, for me there is a perpetual longing and pursuit to find this warmth and love.¹

Xiao Hong, “My Everlasting Longing and Pursuit” (1937)

It was spring of 1935 when Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1895-1936) took Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911-1942) under his professional wings. The older writer was suffering from tuberculosis but was still active as an essayist, literary critic and editor. Lu Xun welcomed literary submissions by young writers, the best of which he helped find their way into the hands of publishers. This was the case with Xiao Hong’s novel, The Field of Life and Death (生死场 1934), which was published in December of 1935. The novel tells a story of Chinese suffering under landlord oppression and early resistance to Japanese occupation in Manchuria. The Field of Life and Death also marks the arrival of a fresh voice on the literary scene: lyrical, earthy, and realist. In his preface to The Field of Life and Death, Lu Xun

remarked that he was impressed by the novel’s “keen observations,” “extraordinary writing style,” and “robust” spirit.² His only critique, though carefully worded, suggests that the work as a whole “is naturally more of a brief sketch” whose description of events and scene surpass its treatment of human figures.³

Beauty, death, literary stylization and realistic details all contribute to the success of Field of Life and Death in ways not unlike Lu Xun’s own lyrical fiction, such as “My Old Home” (故乡 1921), “Village Opera” (社戏 1922), and “In the Tavern” (在酒楼上 1924). These works disguise a similar kind of yearning for “warmth” (温暖) and love (爱). In particular, “New Year’s Sacrifice” (祝福 1924), in its near absence of human feeling, energizes a desire in the minds of readers: if only the narrator, the educated man from the city, and Xianglin’s wife could find common ground and if only there was some compassion among the families of that village, then perhaps the story could have a less tragic ending. Expressions of warmth and love float elusively around the periphery of Lu Xun’s stories and essays, but Xiao Hong brought that desire to the center of her work in ways that no doubt moved the heart of the older writer.

Xiao Hong’s personal story illustrates a truth that was also at the heart of Lu Xun’s own life experience: the kind of warmth and love he sought could not be found within the traditional family unit – it had to be recreated elsewhere and through different types of new,

² Lu Xun, “Preface to The Field of Life and Death,” trans. Howard Goldblatt The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2002), 3.

³ Ibid., although I chose to alter the translation to include a direct translation of 自然, “naturally.” Chinese version in Xiao Hong, The Field of Life and Death, ed. Lin Xianzhi 林贤治 (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2009), 107-108.
modern relationships. Xiao Hong could not find refuge in a family dominated by an abusive father figure. Living as an abandoned, unmarried, and pregnant woman in Harbin, Xiao Hong turned to the local press to find a benefactor who could care for her. Moved with sympathy, the aspiring revolutionary writer, Xiao Jun 萧军 (1907-1988), became Xiao Hong’s caregiver and eventual lover and intellectual companion. Thus began a vagabond life as a member of the diaspora of Chinese intellectual youth who had forsaken family ties. Admirers of Xiao Hong have felt it especially tragic that she died in Hong Kong at the age of 30, alone but for a couple of friends. Lu Xun also left home at an early age for university in Japan. Upon returning to China, his relationships with family members remained strained, in part due to his failure to fulfill marital duties to his wife from an arranged marriage. Later in life, Lu Xun created a thoroughly modern family through this common-law marriage to Xu Guangping, a former student, with whom he had a son.

Xiao Hong’s “everlasting longing and pursuit” not only represented the writer’s personal longing for unconditional love, this sensibility also permeated her fiction, inscribed as a desire for a place of kindness and belonging. Hers is a fictional world where girls with blackened hands from work in a family dye business are not ostracized and denied an education, as depicted in the short story, “Hands” (手, 1936). It is a world where people can do more than just survive; they can begin to build a new life together. Yan Haiping credits Xiao Hong for presenting literary representations of “mobile kinships,” Xiao Hong’s vision for a (re)humanized world:

Old or young and women or men caught up in the midst of disintegration and liquidation of their former kin-defined world, they had to turn and were turning into
moving and motivating sites where broken bodies and social relations were remade into an empowering human kinship that were to unleash a latent lava of human transformation.\(^4\)

Thus, the stories told by modern Chinese writers such as Lu Xun and Xiao Hong, both fictional and autobiographical, not only contributed to the literary discourse of the time but also represented constructions of new forms of relationality, community, and subjectivity. Their imaginative re-creation of the wholeness of human experience, though sometimes by exploring its absence, was nonetheless an “empowering human kinship” that created a discourse of hope. This was hope on a different level from the national hope of salvation, the individual’s hope for personal liberation, or the revolutionary’s vision of hope for a world free of feudalism and class oppression. Theirs was a hope for meaningful relational identities that could support all of these goals.

The writers I will present in this thesis, Lu Xun (1881-1936), Ye Shaojun (1894-1988), Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902-1988), Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999), Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911-1942) and Eileen Chang 张爱玲 (1920-1995), each present a hope for Chinese humanity as a community of individuals who could relate to one another using a different ethics of care than that offered by either Chinese Confucianism or Western humanism. This vision was rarely presented polemically by the writers themselves, with the possible exception of Bing Xin and Shen Congwen. Not surprisingly, this vision also came into frequent conflict with revolutionary discourse and directives, which shaped and later controlled the discourse of hope for several decades.

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Locating and being able to describe this alternative vision of hope has emerged as one of the findings of this study. It did not begin as the thesis or the thematic approach. Rather, the study began as a quest to examine the alternative configurations of selfhood, social relationality and epistemological frameworks opened up by the discourse of relational subjectivity in the modern Chinese context. Relational subjectivity is a particular positioning of identity as open and in-process – open to emotional experience, to the identities of others, and to new understandings about self and world. The hope to create a community of caring individuals begins with a desire to know others: to share, to listen, to observe, and to leave a part of oneself open to change.

Relational subjectivity can be located in literary texts in a number of different ways. First, relational subjectivity offers a new rubric for assessing dialogue and interaction between characters in a text. As Luce Irigaray has argued, communication is the only means holding the potential to ensure mutual recognition and respect.⁵ Therefore, I will examine instances of dialogue as well as non-verbal forms of conversation between represented individuals that offer glimpses into relational identities. Beyond dialogue, interior monologues and imagined or remembered encounters can also reveal yearnings for belongingness. Failed encounters, so representative of many key works of modern Chinese literature, will receive a fresh interpretation using a theory of relational narrative desire. This theory proposes that an author’s effort to present relational failure can also be understood as an articulation of desire for its opposite: relational success. While a fictional

work may present relational failure as the outcome of plot, a subject’s desire remains articulated thereby lending the story a lingering affective mood and a feeling of anticipation.

Second, the theoretical stance of the in-process subject shifts the focus of reading from plot to voice, from outcome to process, from the objective position of “what” happens to the subjective awareness of “how” things happen in the fictional story world. This model allows readers to remain open to gains produced by interaction that extend beyond linguistically-determined or goal-driven narrative closure. In this sense, I will consider the affective energy of a text as a whole, the full range of connections made between characters, setting, atmosphere, and mood, as contributing to an open form of receptivity, a key component of the relational self.

Interestingly, many of the writers who have produced works of relational subjectivity also fall into the category of “lyrical” writers who stand outside the mainstream groups of politically-aligned realist writers of that era. This includes Shen Congwen, Bing Xin and Eileen Chang, already recognized as lyrical writers. And from within the canon of mainstream writers, Lu Xun, Ye Shaojun and Xiao Hong produced both realist and lyrical works. The stylistic features of so-called “lyrical” writing include poetic and “plotless” narratives that “flow” and generate feelings of “harmony.” While this type of narrative connects back to the classical poetic tradition and its lyrical aesthetics, I will explore the possibility that the lyrical elements of modern relational narratives represent a desire for a modern experience of emotional attachment and ecological wholeness. In other words, the aesthetics of relational narratives do not represent an escape from the modern world to find
retreat in the traditional past, but rather, represent a distinct way of imagining the modern Chinese relational self, a self who is connected and belongs.

Finally, relational subjectivity will be located in narrative description that reveals a subject’s orientation to the world and to others. This is the more philosophical footing of relational subjectivity, where a relational epistemological positioning can be seen operating. In this third category, poetry, lyrical essay, and travelogue will be analyzed as philosophically-inspired forms of literature. My research has revealed that representations of subjects as fundamentally open to others in relationship, also share a deeper position of openness to otherness in general. Texts of relational subjectivity tend to present multiple perspectives and points of view; situations are described from different angles, and layers of reality interweave and overlap. Details that describe the specificity of a scene, person, or mood, proliferate without interpretation or closure, remaining hermeneutically open. This is not an early form of postmodern indeterminacy; the writers here are still working under the rubric of a mimetic text that expresses an author-driven subjectivity. However, their works offer a shift in perspective where hierarchical categories and black and white scenarios are set aside in favor of looking horizontally across society to examine the multi-faceted and complex web of relations found there.

**Organization of the Chapters**

Chapter one considers dialogue and encounter between characters, and its relational opposite: silent presence and listening. Utilizing the concept of portraiture, I will explore
ways in which modern Chinese writers represented meaning in relationships and interpersonal dynamics. Affective bonds, dialogue, ethical encounters and the politics of detail are all ways in which relationality as a social good is presented. In the works of Lu Xun, a writer most associated with depictions of individuals alienated from culture and society or trapped between conflicting worldviews, one can find rare moments of intimate relationality that stand in contrast to the overriding despairing message of his works. Ye Shaojun, by contrast, consistently presents individuals in encounters and social situations of all kinds. While at times critical and other times farcical, he nonetheless explores the different ways people in the chaotic Republican and May Fourth eras could relate to one another both as individuals and as national subjects. This wider reading of works by Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun reveals the existence of identities that are represented as open to meaning and transformation by way of productive, though often limited, self-other relations.

Theoretically, chapter one will examine the new range of possibilities available to interpretation once the confines of a hierarchical subject-object relational framework are removed. Could moments of communicative impasse be reinterpreted to signify more than just interpersonal failure? Conversation can be understood as a complex rhetorical act that involves mutual exchange, turn-taking, and listening.6 Up to now, relational failure has been proclaimed due to an interpretive model based on either domination of the other or full

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integration of the other to the subject’s worldview.\textsuperscript{7} Might readers and critics have been looking for relational success using an epistemological model not suited for locating it? In this study, I will acknowledge moments of failure, but also investigate what other potential meanings are being held in the subtexts of such textual moments. By utilizing a relational approach, I have found that communicative acts embedded in the narratives of May Fourth writers highlight a concern with what might be called a “middle ground of relationality.”

Chapter Two shows how Shen Congwen’s inscribed acts of listening, even more than visual perception, link self and other. This is the open self characteristic of relational subjectivity. Shen Congwen presents himself and many of his narrators as observers, open to the happenings in the world around them. Theoretically, I will utilize Luce Irigaray’s theory of listening as a relational act. To Irigaray, listening offers the other the neutral space to exist as other and challenges the subject to tolerate difference. This positioning establishes the possibility for non-hierarchical subject-subject relations. Philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara also presents listening is an epistemological position wherein the subject, by his very attentiveness, places himself open to perception and change. In Shen Congwen, acts of listening not only link people and ideas in the context of human relations, but also offer a form of receptivity that suggests a wider, more universal, ecological connectivity.

\textsuperscript{7} For example, writing about Zhu Ziqing as representative of his generation, Jin Li states that, “The authorial ‘I’ might have found himself in a netherland of meaning before he desperately grabbed the humanistic universals of sympathy, love, and respect for a foothold. The ‘troubled’ state of the mind involves cognitive difficulty, emotional anomic, and actional impotence. Sympathy, love, and respect as the primal principles are ‘disembodied,’ and ironically, ‘unfelt.’” See Jin Li, “Paper Sorrow: Narrating Emotion in Chinese Literature, from the 1840s to the 1920s.” (PhD., diss. Harvard University, 2008), 143.
what another critic calls “the knowledge of listening.” The intimate, personal resonances between self and world found in Shen Congwen’s narratives reveal listening as a turning from materiality to connecting with the world aesthetically. Late in his writing career, Shen Congwen writes of aesthetic perception as a form of listening. I will argue that this attitude of listening, an open and non-judgmental way of receiving from the world, is what Shen Congwen suggests his countrymen should adopt as they face the challenges brought by the cultural transformations of both modernity and civil war.

Theoretically, chapter two will investigate the textual strategies that configure relationality as an alternative mode of narrative subjectivity. Forms of narrative voice that shift between first and third person, that utilize subjectless sentences, or that exploit the effects of non-linear, plotless narratives, all point to narrative identities that are “permeable,” open, and at times, plural. In particular, third-person narration, set in a non-hierarchical narrative structure, reflects a “compromised” authorial voice and a tolerance for ambiguity. These strategies reflect a desire for a relational identity. Shen Congwen’s experimental narrative modes provide a rich body of work through which to explore the textual and structural aspects of relational subjectivity. Further, Shen Congwen’s lyrical native place literature reveals a relational epistemological model for the self: a self that gains and perpetuates knowledge through an intimate poetics of familiarity – a highly interconnected

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space of being and belonging in community. Yi-fu Tuan has termed this kind of place attachment an aesthetics of “belongingness.”

Chapter three considers the discourse of “love” as both a site and a source of relational subjectivity and identity in the writing of Bing Xin, Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang. The focus here is not romantic love, but love as conceived in philosophical and epistemological terms. I will adopt Luce Irigaray’s view of love as recognition, hence, as a way of seeing or relating to the world. To Irigaray, love is a form of openness and tolerance toward the other; this tolerance, in turn, allows the subject to move away from self-contained individualism and step toward the other, “seeing” the other in new ways. The result is a different subject-object positioning, which can be explored theoretically through the concepts of recognition and witnessing. Kelly Oliver argues for witnessing as a mode of acceptance: “By seeing with and seeing through “porous” [open and fluid] eyes, witnessing subjects oppose the objectifying, contestatory Lacanian gaze which separates subject from object.” In this way, relational desire, particularly that found in the narratives of Chinese woman writers, express a different social praxis of power, one not founded in domination, but in co-existence. Two women writers stand at the forefront of a discourse of love: Bing Xin and Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing).

Bing Xin early on set the form and style for relational portraiture, writing tenderly about her relationships with family members, especially her parents. Her fiction and essays

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were famous for their “motherly,” “nurturing” narrative style. Bing Xin is also known for her “philosophy of love.” Heavily influenced by both Christianity and Hinduism (by way of Tagore), Bing Xin utilized literature as a means to present love as a form of hope and redemption, a balm that held the power to heal humanity’s crisis. Bing Xin’s view of love and her literary inscription of relational identity articulated a distinctly modern feminine sensibility – a way of being both independent and deeply attached to family and community. While her relationality was later re-channeled by feminist/collectivist ideologies, it remained a powerful discourse that was re-discovered in the 1980’s. It is Eileen Chang who, in the decade of war and chaos – the 1940’s - argues for a literature of love, not revolution, defending her works of ordinary people and their petty concerns and preferring them to “heroic” literature. Chang also presents an epistemological position in her fiction and essays, a philosophy of life that values human relationships and relationality as the essential fabric that holds a society together. Without this basic relational foundation of daily life, Chang argues, human existence is meaningless.

Theoretical Underpinnings I: A Review of Relational Theories of Subjectivity

Utilizing the cluster of tactics surrounding the term “relational subjectivity,” I will locate literary voices that stand in that middle ground between romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism, thereby revealing a continuum of relational responses to modernity in the modern Chinese context. Relational subjectivity will provide both a

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11 According to Wendy Larson, this “middle ground” can also be extended to include other polarities that have characterized the May Fourth and post-May Fourth era: subjective/objective, psychological/realist,
thematic emphasis and a theoretical framework to this thesis. Thematically, my readings will focus on Chinese literary texts from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s that narrate meaning in relationships, encounters between subjects and communicative interaction, whether in literary portraiture, modern fiction or lyrical essay. Theoretically, I intend to examine the workings of relational subjectivity in narratives of modern Chinese literature. The aim is not to offer a re-conceptualization of modern Chinese subjectivity, but to open up current discussions to consider a wider set of possibilities for constructions of self-identity, relational capabilities in the self-other dynamic, and to offer fresh approaches to configurations of community and national identity. I have adopted this cross-disciplinary approach as the theoretical underpinning for this thesis. Working with philosophers and theorists from fields of psychology, feminism, and social theory, I will present a theory of relational subjectivity that allows for a widened, more flexible view of the self and individual identity as a more fluid, partial and in-process entity that is intersubjective at its core.

The term, relational subjectivity, has been used in discussions of narratives, artwork or film that explore self-other conceptualizations, interpersonal encounters among subjects, as well as interactions between subjects and society. Relational subjectivity links configurations of self-identity to broader social workings of the self in community and in relation to the historical moment in which he or she lives. While relational subjectivity emerged from the field of feminist psychology, I follow the models presented by Luce Irigaray, the French post-structuralist philosopher, and American philosophers Nöelle romantic/revolutionary and idealist/materialist. Wendy Larson, “Review of The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling,” The China Journal (2001): 218.
McAfee and Kelly Oliver, both interpreters of Irigaray. In her work, *Habermas, Kristeva and Citizenship*, McAfee’s joins the theoretical effort to locate an alternative to both the Enlightenment privileging of the discrete individual and the Freud-Lacanian understanding of self as defined by separation and a persistent state of lack. The fluid and partial self presented by these theorists, functions as an “open system,” or a “subject-in-process.”

Further, and a key point from the perspective of literary studies, McAfee’s relational self generates self-knowledge through narrative, not only by way of the internal stories subjects compose for themselves, but also through the ways narrative is co-created through a subject’s relationality with others.

McAfee’s primary concern is the relationship between the construction of subjectivity and the formation of healthy civil identities in deliberative democracies. A more open and flexible conceptualization of subjectivity, if widely embraced, could have a positive impact on how citizens relate, communicate, and solve problems. Her work, though grounded in subjectivity, is a vision for community at a time of cultural and ethnic tensions and global realignment: “The discourse involved in deliberation is a discourse of leaning

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12 See Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London and New York: Continuum Int’l Publishing Group, 2008), Noëlle McAfee, *Habermas, Kristeva and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), and Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). McAfee finds Kristeva’s concept of the subject-in-process as well as her political writings better suited to political philosophy. Oliver’s work, being more theoretical and less political, pursues the shifts in communication, encounter, and approaches toward the other that a subjectivity based in non-hierarchy makes possible.

13 McAfee synthesizes existing work by Julia Kristeva, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others. Building on Kristeva and Habermas, in particular, McAfee presents a model of the self that is always already relational in nature.

14 These terms are borrowed by McAfee from the work of Julia Kristeva.

15 McAfee, 140.
toward others . . . in deliberating, participants are aware of their own finitude, that their understandings are partial, and so seek the views of others.” It is my view that McAfee’s groundbreaking work in philosophy need not be confined to the political culture of the early 21st century, but may also be considered as a new paradigm with which to interpret discourse and political agency in historical perspective.

Theories of relational subjectivity regard the self as fundamentally “intersubjective.” That is to say, that they hold as primary the belief that self-identity is not constructed by our difference and separation from others, but rather, that “our very subjectivity is constituted relationally.” This “co-created self,” exists as a configuration of self-identification that is not discreet or wholly independent, but is known to itself by way of its interactions with others.

This theoretical framework of intersubjectivity stems from the work of feminist psychologist Jessica Benjamin who conceptualized an alternative mode of subject formation that challenged the phallocentrism of the Freudian/Lacanian model of the autonomous self. In this mode, individual self-consciousness is not obtained through a rejection of the infant-mother bond, but evolves intersubjectively, offering a view of individuality that acknowledges rather than suppresses interdependency. Paradox and ambiguity remain at the heart of Benjamin’s vision: “The vision of recognition between equal subjects gives rise

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16 McAfee, 190.

17 McAfee, 129.

to a new logic – the logic of paradox, of sustaining the tension between contradictory forces . . . our simultaneous need for recognition and independence: that the other subject is outside our control and yet we need him.”

The importance of this point is that Benjamin does not present a utopian vision. Complexity, failure, paradox are all understood to be working right alongside this tentative re-framing of subject-object relations, as Benjamin herself states:

To aspire to this renewal is to accept the inevitable inconsistency and imperfection of our efforts, without relinquishing the project. Feminism, though many think the contrary, has opened up a new possibility of mutual recognition between men and women. It has allowed men and women to begin confronting the difficulties of recognizing an other, and to expose the painful longing for what lies on the other side of these difficulties (emphasis mine).

In other words, intersubjectivity does not suddenly appear because scholars’ efforts to shift our conceptualizations of identity formation. Benjamin argues that we must first begin to confront the difficulties of recognizing an other, which includes also recognizing within ourselves the existence of a painful longing for a meaningful connection with an other who seems beyond our reach. Moving toward intersubjectivity, in her vision, is a process or growth. With this statement, I am confident in the application of this theory to a literary analysis in the Chinese context, where I will show writers struggled with similar difficulties in recognizing and seeking a meaningful existence with an other.

Benjamin’s challenge to the Freudian model of selfhood attracted the attention of a variety of scholars, from philosophy to literary criticism. One of the most important

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19 Ibid, 221.
20 Ibid, 224.
applications of her work to a literary context is Maureen Niwa-Heinen’s study of
intersubjectivity in the works of H.D. and Virginia Woolf. Niwa-Heinen’s work served as a
guide to my own for the way in which it not only explored intersubjectivity as a marker of
feminist identity, but as influencing literary discourse and narrative modes. Further, Niwa-
Heinen pursued the artistic deployment of intersubjectivity as representative of a writer’s
concern with otherness in general: “Inter/transsubjectivity is not only the sharing of two
subjectivities, but rather, the entire recognition of the social dimensions of identity.” 21 Her
theory of “relational narrative desire” locates representations of subjects open to the
difference presented by the other. Building from Benjamin’s theory of intersubjectivity, this
tolerance of the other’s difference stems from an ability to understand the self as co-created:

   My discussion here assumes a co-created self or relational identity, predicated as it is
on self-Other relations . . . co-creation begins with a recognition of the individual’s
necessary dependence on and active engagements with others, and thus with
conflicting modes of thought. In this way, the SELF is not primarily a result of self-
construction, but rather of SELF-Other construction . . . 22

For Niwa-Heinen and others, this configuration of the co-created self-identity changed the
way writers utilized narrative voice, point of view, character development, plot and its need
for closure, and mood-generating description. More so than direct representations of this
type of subjectivity, literary works indirectly betray the desire for such self-other bonds
among modern subjects in search of configurations of belonging.

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21 Niwa-Heinen, xiv, italics in the original.

22 Niwa-Heinen, 48, italics in the original.
In the field of modern Chinese literature, Wang Lingzhen also adapted the theory of intersubjectivity to argue that Chinese women’s autobiographical narratives present a distinct feminine subjectivity that stands in contrast to, and even challenges, dominant male discourse. To Wang, Benjamin’s theory offers critics an alternative model of power in relationships: “to perceive the other as neither an appropriatable object nor a passive mirror image of the self but an independent and dependable subject is regarded as the most important step toward an intersubjective relationship.” To put it another way, what is new from Benjamin onward is the context and power dynamics by which human social identity is understood, as summarized by Maureen Niwa-Heinen: “The Lacanian subject laments its lack of wholeness and seeks completion through appropriation; Benjamin’s subject recognizes its partialness and seeks identification with a like, also partial, subject through inter/transsubjective connection.”

Opening up the possibility of subject-subject relations that are not constructed or maintained by power relationships is a compelling idea in the context of modern Chinese literature. Was it not the modern Chinese intellectual who sought to stretch beyond his or her position of economic and cultural privilege and reach out to connect meaningfully with

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23 Wang Lingzhen, *Personal Matters: Women’s Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 22. Wang also writes that, “I focus on the intersubjective aspect of the personal and argue that intimate relationships, love bonds, identificatory mimesis, and desire interact with but can never be fully appropriated by dominant discourses; thus, they always counterbalance hegemonic modes of subjective production and provide alternative way(s) of constructing identities and experiences,” 61.

24 Ibid, 17.

Chinese literary texts and the body of criticism surrounding them have examined the problematic, if not impossible, ability for writers to do just that, even in the imaginary realm of fiction writing.\textsuperscript{26} Even more, what of the emerging female voice in modern Chinese fiction and essay? In her study of Bin Xin 冰心 (1900-1999), Wang Lingzhen finds the concept of intersubjectivity useful in analyzing narratives that portray “intersubjective dependency and emotional attachment.”\textsuperscript{27} Wang chooses intersubjectivity as a key critical concept in her study because it allows her to see how women writers pushed back against male-dominated discourse that devalued or excluded relationality, including the intimate bonds between friends, or between parent and child – which is often the realm of women’s writing. The intersubjective dynamic in her work creates a new “space for structuring woman’s selfhood in history – her different desire, her relational identity, and her own specific psychic reality.”\textsuperscript{28}

Feminist scholars like Wang Lingzhen have turned to intersubjectivity as a useful tool to theorize co-created subjective identities and typically feminine ways of relating as social beings, such as the mother-daughter bond. However, Benjamin’s theory was not intended to be gender-determined, but is gender-neutral.\textsuperscript{29} In her study of Virginia Woolf, for example, Niwa-Heinen also found that Woolf employed modes of narrative desire as a


\textsuperscript{27} Wang, \textit{Personal Matters}, 19.

\textsuperscript{28} ibid, 97.

\textsuperscript{29} Benjamin, 224.
means to explore the challenges posed by modernity in general, which is exactly the
correlation I hope to make with modern Chinese writers:

\[\ldots\] Woolf conceives of relational identity as a means to greater social coherence. Although mourning the personal and historical loss that comes with relational identity, Woolf promotes a positive vision of social bonding attuned to the gaps that keep us separate. \ldots inter/transsubjectivity includes both the positive and negative aspects of interpersonal connection. Although she represents the difficulties of communicating with and through difference, she does not perceive such difficulties as insurmountable.\textsuperscript{30}

Confronting the “difficulties of communicating with and through difference” was also a major dilemma faced by modern Chinese writers. For example, writers such as Ye Shaojun 叶绍钧 (1894-1988) wrote of the “barriers” separating one from another in society.\textsuperscript{31} And yet he explored these barriers by way of encounters and communicative interaction of characters. In chapter one, I will argue that, like Virginia Woolf, Ye Shaojun also considers connection across difference a contested site of negotiation, which by its very sense of incremental process suggests possibilities for change.

Relational subjectivity and its theoretical cousin, intersubjectivity, thus provide an important conceptual framework within which to examine selfhood, self-other relationality, and relational desire. There is an emphasis on difference, listening, and learning tolerance. While potentially painful and involving loss of ego-bounded self, as noted by the example of Woolf above, the gain is greater self-fulfillment. The existence of the other in the subject’s mind, as knowledge and as narratives of co-creativity, builds self-identity, as noted by Niwa-

\textsuperscript{30} Niwa-Heinen, 303.

\textsuperscript{31} The title of Ye Shaojun’s first short story collection is called Barriers (Gemo 隔膜, 1922).
Heinen: “In a world without Otherness, no capacity for interpersonal connection is present; the self loses opportunities to enrich itself through difference.”

Luce Irigaray moves this point even further:

[By] accepting that I am not the whole also signifies the possibility of glimpsing a wider world, a greater completeness – that is, the possibility of overcoming a solitary destiny in order to be involved in a being-with-the-other that does not amount to a sharing of the same in the Same.

In other words, intersubjectivity is not defined as the sharing of a similar ideal, feeling or aspiration between two separate subjects. On the contrary, in Irigaray and Niwa-Heinen’s conceptualization, intersubjectivity is found in a meeting of the difference that the other presents to us, and how we change in response to interaction with that difference. Building on these ideas, this thesis will show how Chinese writers of relational narratives also explored existential questions of self and world and the larger meaning of life. Perhaps even more importantly, I will investigate to what extent the discourse of relational subjectivity also factored in constructing the emerging discourse of modern sociality, community and national identity in the May Fourth and post-May Fourth periods.

Theoretical Underpinnings II: Communication and Social Theory

Studies of relational subjectivity and related work in social theory have made us aware of the blind spot in our intellectual quest to understand modern Chinese identities in the early decades of the 20th century, opening up new understandings of the relationships

32 Ibid., xv.

33 Luce Irigaray, Sharing the World (London and New York: Continuum Intn’l Publishing Group, 2008), 17.
between individuals within society. This is especially true in the case of modern Chinese literary studies, where the rise of individual autonomy was coupled with a new rhetorical position and new forms of narrative – both designed to present this new individual and grant him or her the voice to declare his/her identity and point of view, including individual psychological states and interiority.\textsuperscript{34} The other goal of early reform movements was iconoclastic: a deep critique and dismantling of the institutions associated with Confucianism (family, educational, governmental), which were not only considered bankrupt in their own sense, but were also perceived to be holding Chinese culture and the Chinese nation back from modernity. The Chinese enlightenment was thus shaped by this dual effort to both construct and deconstruct.

As part of the on-going effort to investigate the diversity of intellectual positions and discursive practices of the May Fourth and post-May-Fourth period, this thesis will utilize alternative conceptions of modernity that contextualize individuals within complex relational positions, worlds where discourse is intersubjectively produced and maintained. Several years ago, Ban Wang warned readers that the model of the autonomous Chinese self cut off from family, society and other meaningful relationships is no longer a viable model used to define modern selfhood.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, Ban Wang encourages a shift beyond individual


\textsuperscript{35} Ban Wang, “Review of The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling” Comparative Literature 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1999), 354-356. A quote of this passage appears as the epigraph to this thesis.
vs. society constructions of modern identity. This revised view of modernity reflects the impact of German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, whose twenty years of scholarship on social identity, communication, and structures of society, places relationality at the center of his theory.  

Locating individuals within their respective “lifeworlds,” rather than seeing them as isolated, is one of the most important critical constructs I will follow as I locate and discuss the problematics of relationality in modern Chinese literature.

Jürgen Habermas’s writings on the “lifeworld” explore how modern subjects relate to one another as social and moral beings thereby creating, maintaining or challenging social order and social norms. In Habermas’s work, “lifeworld” operates dialectically with the concept of “system.” While lifeworld concerns the “domains of social life: family and household, culture, political life outside of organized parties, mass media, voluntary organizations, etc.” The “system” is a term that refers to “sedimented structures and established patterns of instrumental action.” Because speech acts and narratives play an important role in the maintenance, replenishing or destruction of the lifeworld, literary texts lend themselves to analysis using Habermas’s theories. Habermas, known for his pragmatic approach to speech acts, places a high value on “successful” communication – the transfer of meaning between two or more people in society. Successful communication takes place due to a “consensus” that is found between the parties. Consensus is powerful and has the

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38 Ibid.
ability to replenish the lifeworld, so to speak, and keep a society functioning: “The lifeworld is thus able to function as a kind of bulwark against social disintegration, resisting the fragmentation of meanings.”

In the context of May Fourth culture and society, both the “lifeworld” and the “system” were undergoing radical transformation. The May Fourth era experienced a fracturing of the lifeworld into multiple lifeworlds that competed with one another based on differences of region, dialect, educational background, traditional vs. “Western” learning, and all of the underlying material and cultural circumstances that accompany such historical change. The “domains” of the lifeworld (family, household, media, arts), while understood to have a fluid nature in Habermas, became particularly unstable in the Chinese context. The domains, which should act as repositories of shared meanings and understandings, were being radically re-defined.

Could the emptiness found at the center of texts such as Lu Xun’s reminiscences, *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* (朝花夕拾, 1927) be explained as a reflection of the unstable domains of the Chinese lifeworld? Lu Xun appears to have little interest in replenishing the lifeworld of his childhood, the socially stratified and kinship-bound world of the Confucian social system. Thus, his “reminiscences” only seem to illuminate hollow social spaces and hermeneutic dead ends. As he stated in his “Preface” to *Dawn Blossoms*, his memory of childhood initially “tricked” him into longing for his hometown, but this was an illusion. Speaking of the vegetables and fruits he ate as a child and had once held in almost magical

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39 Ibid., 53.
esteem: “. . . after a long absence, I tasted them again and found them nothing special. It was only in memory that they kept their old flavor. Perhaps they will continue to cheat me for the rest of my life, making my thoughts turn continually to the past.”

Lu Xun articulates the intense discomfort produced by a shifting lifeworld, whose domains have crumbled from underneath his feet.

However, expressions of relationality could also be the place to look for the ways in which a modern Chinese “lifeworld” was being negotiated and even reconstituted. For example, one might argue that Bing Xin’s lyrical essays present “successful communicative action” because a feeling of shared knowledge and “consensus” operates. By contrast, Lu Xun’s narratives narrate the loss and the lack of replenishing that occurs when communicative acts, and the consensus on which they are based, fail. Yet, readers turned to Bing Xin’s Letters to Young Readers (寄小读者, 1926) as a guide for how to live a modern emotional life, and particularly found solace in Bing Xin’s representations of loving Chinese family relations. Might Bing Xin’s narrative visions of positive social interaction, based on meaningful moral values, have functioned to “replenish” the modern Chinese lifeworld? As chapter three will show, the sharp criticism Bing Xin received from Leftist critics shows precisely the competition over the discourse, the narrative forms, and the underlying moral sources that qualified for lifeworld rebuilding in the May Fourth era.

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Beyond Habermas, the body of scholarship on “encounter,” based on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), must be mentioned here. While I have chosen not to utilize Levinas directly, his work has profoundly influenced the critics cited as well as my own research. Levinas developed the concept of ethical encounter as the basis of subjectivity. For Levinas, the key to understanding subjectivity lies in the concept of responsibility. Responsibility is our awakening to ourselves: we come to know ourselves only through the other, especially through face-to-face encounter. In the text, *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas writes that:

> In [*Otherwise than Being*] I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental mode of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base [as Heidegger would have it]; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.

Levinas was one of the first philosophers to re-conceptualize the relationship of self to other as a dynamic, interactive exchange at the heart of subject formation. Importantly, our encounters engage an ethical response, or to be more precise, an ethical *response-ability*. Through interaction, we learn how to respond and this process, in turn, creates our own subjectivity: “Levinas invites us to listen . . . to the voice of the other, who sanctions all of our moral obligation.”

From the perspective of affect theory, Brian Massumi has also

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44 Ibid., 2.
written of ethical encounters that, “Ethics is a tending of coming-together, a caring for belonging as such.” Through the word choice of “tending” and “caring,” Massumi emphasizes the attitude and actions that provide the capacity for individuals to connect.

In this study I have chosen to work with feminist philosophers who subscribe to an intersubjective concept of self-identity. As the basis for identity shifts from subject-other to subject-subject, so too do the implications for encounter. Luce Irigaray, for example, is often compared with Levinas, but vigorously argues to be understood as occupying a different intellectual position. Irigaray also investigates the moment of encounter between self and other – what happens or should happen when genuine connections are made. Irigaray’s *Sharing the World* (2008), a monograph devoted to this problem of encounter, presents a vision for how intersubjective subjects open a space for the other, emotionally and epistemologically. In this rubric, a subject’s perception of self-other relations reveals the underlying epistemological framework that actively shapes orientations toward the other. By shifting perceptions and modes of knowledge, a new set of conditions

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46 Among the feminist philosophers, there is a clear resistance to align with Levinas (except for Kelly Oliver – see *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*). Levinas’ concept of substitution is the key factor. With substitution, one knows the other only through a projection of self onto other. This precludes the possibility of any real subject-subject relationality.

47 See her article, “What Other Are We Talking About” *Yale French Studies*, No. 104 (2004), 67-81. Here she boldly states that in her career she has approached the question of the other along an “entirely different path” than Levinas.

for subject-subject relationality, based on non-domination and “letting be” becomes possible. But this act is not simple; it involves recognizing the self’s own limits, its own incompleteness and partiality, and to Irigaray, its capacity for plurality. This awareness of the self’s limitations becomes a pre-condition for meeting with the other as other and not as self-projection: “Meeting the other acts as a tear in my temporal weaving, a tear which also corresponds to a necessary realization of latent dimensions of my existence and my Being.”49 My readings of modern Chinese literature have located textual moments that seem to open up the kind of epistemologically open space that Irigaray points to as forming the essential basis for subject-subject relations of mutuality.

**Addressing the Lacunae in the Definition of the Modern Chinese Self**

How did the modern Chinese intellectual conceptualize his or her identity in relation to others during the May Fourth and post-May Fourth eras of radical change? Intellectuals of that time encountered a serious dilemma with respect to their social identities. Facing the bankruptcy of the Confucian social and political system, they embraced the autonomy and self-determination that enlightenment ideologies offered the modern individual; but on the other hand, they found themselves in a discursive vacuum with respect to sociality. The conceptual and linguistic framework that supported networks of relational identity between self and other (and extending outward to include family, village, region and nation) as well as the epistemological foundation upon which it was built (Confucianism) was undergoing

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49 Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 79
immense transformation. Within this epistemological and discursive void, modern intellectuals not only struggled to conceptualize their sense of individual self-identity, but also struggled in tandem to construct themselves as modern social beings.

Studies of relational identities or relational forms of narrative subjectivity have been scarce in the field of modern Chinese literature until recently. This is largely due to the impact of canonical literary histories, which tended to promote the view that individualism and collectivism were perceived as the only two intellectual possibilities. Ban Wang argues for scholars to begin to explore the “alternative middle ground” between unnecessarily reductive positions:

The most insightful critiques of modernity have been concerned with how to restore the link between individual and community [...] Before we arrive at a crossroads where individualism and collectivism seem the only available and mutually exclusive paths, an alternative middle ground needs to be elaborated in order to appreciate Chinese modernity’s endeavor to envision romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism not as foes, but as fellow travelers.

Historically, the rapid development of Marxist and communist ideologies in May-Fourth and post-May Fourth China temporarily filled the void left by the loss of Confucian relational discourse – for many intellectuals. However, the embrace of collectivist ideologies quickly led to difficulties, as has been well researched by Kirk Denton in *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature*, the text to which Ban Wang responds. For Denton, revolutionary

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collectivism, from its beginning, threatened to subsume individual agency with its paradigm of the masses’ struggle against “abstract forces of history.” Also responding to Denton’s work and its analysis of the individualism-collectivism divide, Michael Hockx has suggested that perhaps critics should consider “collectivity on a smaller scale” – connections smaller than the nation or concepts of minzu (民族 ethnic identity) as the abstract entity informing social formation.  

In as much as my study is a response to Ban Wang’s position on self and subjectivity, it is also therefore a response to the groundbreaking analysis of self and subjectivity produced by Kirk Denton. In analyzing constructions of self and subjectivity in modern Chinese literature, from the May Fourth period through the early years of the People’s Republic of China, Denton’s work presents a picture of the modern Chinese intellectual as trapped between overlapping and often competing ontological and epistemological views of the self. On the one hand, “romantic individualism” promoted by New Culture advocates drew the individual toward a Western-Enlightenment view of the autonomous self. This is evident in the rise of fiction and essay that explored self-expression through I-narrators and protagonists who occupied a new symbolic context. As noted by Lydia Liu: “the protagonist

\[52\] Denton, Kirk. The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 263. Denton states further, “In its cold determinism, depicting history as the inexorable march from stage to stage through a dialectic of class struggle, Marxism seemed to nullify self’s role in the process of social transformation” (263).

\[53\] Michel Hockx, “Review of The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling” The China Quarterly 160 (Dec. 1999), 1086-1088. Full quote: “One attempt would be to increase our efforts to study writers and genres that fall outside the extended canon of literature. There we might find purer forms of individualism, or, at the very least, we might find collectivity on a smaller scale, centered around the wish to belong to certain societies, clubs or salons without needing to get involved in larger collective movements” (1088). Hockx and Denton later collaborated to edit the volume, Literary Societies of Republican China (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).
no longer serves as a mere element within the nexus of patriarchal kinships and/or in a
transcendental, divine scheme as in most pre-modern Chinese fiction, but dominates the
text . . . as the locus of meaning and reality in possession of psychological and moral
‘truth.’”

This “discovery” of individual interiority and explorations of the complexity of
human motivation has thus played an important role in the construction of modern Chinese
identity and the project of Chinese modernity as a whole. But more than the development
of new forms of identity and expression, the new self in modern China was an agent of
change: the modern, autonomous self gained a position, a distance from traditional cultural
structures, so that it could attack those very structures. In the face of political collapse,
warlord abuses and imminent Japanese invasion, this rise in a discourse of individualism
came to be seen by many as “unaffordable luxuries of an idle elite.”

The other discourse that challenged the construction of a modern subjectivity in
modern Chinese literature was the pull towards national salvation represented in discourse
by “revolutionary collectivism.” This view was based upon a Marxist-Leninist materialist
view of history that located individuals as members of classes or even entire historical
“epochs.” History in this sense had a “power of its own to move society forward,
independent of human will.” These competing discourses created a “radically isolated ego”

54 Lydia H. Liu, “Translingual Practice: The Discourse of Individualism between China and the West” positions asia critique 1, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 182.


56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 47.
on the one hand and a disenfranchised and castrated ego on the other. Here Denton summarizes this point:

Romantic individualism and national and/or revolutionary collectivism were formulated with social transformation in mind, but both discourses seemed to remove the self from its traditional role in leading social renewal. Functioning originally as part of the iconoclastic program, romantic individualism pulled self away from the external world, isolating it and reducing its capacity to transform. Revolutionary collectivism lent a cosmic power and inevitability to historical movement that was very appealing in a time of crisis but that also seemed to squeeze the self out of History. Neither discourse could satisfy fundamentally traditional desires to empower the self through an organic linkage with the outer world (emphasis mine).

I credit Denton not only for his critique of New Culture and early Marxist-Leninist conceptions of Chinese self-identity, but for also contextualizing these shifts within the Confucian worldview that was under siege. According to Denton, the family-bound, other-oriented Confucian paradigm of self was an ontological and epistemological model of self-identity that included a “determined self,” who derived identity from his situation in a nexus of interconnected social relations, and a “transcendental self” that aimed to connect personal achievement, moral self-cultivation and lifelong service to a conception of “universal humanity.” Thus, as modern Chinese intellectuals rejected traditional Chinese social values and borrowed a Western-liberal paradigm of the self, the “linkage” of self and world became severed leaving insurmountable lacunae.

58 Ibid., 262.
59 Ibid., 48.
60 Ibid., 39-40.
In Denton’s analysis, the discourse of emerging modern self was premature, still developing, and focused primarily on individual identity. Even by the mid-1930s, May Fourth New Culture discourse had not or could not yet replace Confucian-based social discourse with a suitable alternative as regards social identity. What did evolve to fill the discursive gap separating individual and society, revolutionary discourse, was problematic in that it did not grant individuals agency; the individual could act only as part of a “movement.” Thus, Denton concludes that self-identity remained fractured throughout much of the twentieth-century. In literary texts, representations of this split subjectivity are abundant: protagonists are show as conflicted, disenfranchised, and unable to find self-fulfillment through meaningful subject-object relations.

Whereas Denton despairs the failure of an autonomous self to realize his or her agency in the modern era, this thesis proposes to look for possibilities for a relational identity that is connected meaningfully to others and to community. In one of Denton’s concluding statements, he declares: “The traditional dual orientation of self can in the modern period no longer be seen as dialectically interrelated or mutually beneficial; it has become paradoxical and in irresolvable conflict.” By contrast, I will argue that this “irresolvable conflict” may be explained by a difference of perspective. To be clear, if we privilege a model of “possessive individualism” (the Enlightenment self) as the only paradigm by which to construct modern subjectivity, then we will certainly find this fractured, dislocated self divided by conflicting worldviews.

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61 Ibid., 267.
By adopting a relational view of subjectivity, and by recognizing and valuing the fundamental intersubjective nature of the self, especially the Chinese self shaped by millennia of Confucian other-centeredness, the problematic of self appears under a different guise. The conflict between competing worldviews still exists, yet the concept of the modern individual as “emasculated and disempowered” is averted. Full autonomy of the individual is no longer understood as the only legitimate configuration of the self. Further, while the break with Confucianism might have initially “[cut] the self off from the transformational promise of the ideal of linkage,” I argue in this thesis that a relational conception of self allows for the possibility of new discourse to be formed. 63

Finally, not all early modern Chinese intellectuals pursued a full adoption of Western enlightenment models of the self and society; and further, many of these modern Chinese writers also did not fully accept or participate in the trend toward “revolutionary collectivism” and the proscriptive realist literature it promoted. 64 Ban Wang admits the arguments of both sides: while the move toward individual autonomy was a break from the shackles of the past, collectivity also deprived the individual of “his or her sovereignty and creative possibilities.” These lacunae make room for a study of those writers and works that fall in-between the polarized positions.

62 Ibid., 263.
63 Ibid., 262. Denton means self to other and self to world both.
64 See especially Shih Shu-mei’s discussion of “Beijing School” writers in The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). See also Denton’s later chapter on Hu Feng’s subjectivism.
Therefore, this thesis may be understood as a formal response to Ban Wang’s imperative to work beyond the black and white positions of individualism and collectivism and to resist setting one in a privileged status vis-à-vis the other. Can we not see the ways that self and community mutually inform one another? More importantly, might modern Chinese intellectuals have worked to “restore the link between individual and community” in ways that were not merely a holding on or return to Confucian structures of meaning, but are distinctly modern and which incorporate parts or even whole aspects of the modern conceptions of the Enlightened Self? In this thesis I will show that modern Chinese writers, Lu Xun, Ye Shaojun, Shen Congwen, Bing Xin, Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang, explore modern configurations of self and other in their literary works, configurations that affirm relational bonds and shared meanings. They at once celebrate modern selfhood while seeking meaning in relational modes of self and subjectivity.
The Dialogics of Literary Portraiture: Relationality in the Early Short Stories of Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun

Uncle stumbled along in the dark. The other guy, a cigarette between his lips, said slowly, “They seemed kindly folk. They came to this place full of indignation yet they still looked kindly . . . Before you is the enemy, whether you hit him or not, you don’t know what he looks like. But if someone is bound and placed before you so that you can see even his hair and eyebrows clearly, then it is hard to pull the trigger! After all, he’s a human being. It’s especially hard with those kindly ones, who look delicate enough to fall at a breath. That day the one given the job backed away several times and then – orders are orders – tightly knitting his brows he fired. For some reason he missed. The man was hit in the arm and he writhed in pain. The woman, seeing that, screamed like mad. To tell you frankly, I felt so bad that I turned away. Three more shots and the thing was finished. The two of them were covered with blood.” As Uncle listened, holding his breath, his legs grew numb and he hardly dared move for fear he might tread on a skeleton. So he followed closely, his chest almost brushing against the other man’s back.¹

Literary Portraiture helps us to see and hear the many voices of history, often in intimate ways. This excerpt from “Night” (夜, 1927), a short story by Ye Shaojun 叶绍钧 (1894-1988), presents a collage of portraits of individuals linked by one event: the round-up and killing of communist activists in Shanghai by Guomindang (KMT) operatives. One portrait is of a middle-aged grandmother, and her brother (”Uncle” in the above excerpt) who together face the aftermath of the shooting that killed her daughter and her husband. Their death leaves behind a young son, an inconsolable toddler who cries himself to sleep at

¹ Ye Shaojun, “Night” in How Mr. Pan Weathered the Storm (Beijing: Panda Books, 1987), 78.
night. Uncle’s efforts to locate the bodies in a make-shift mass graveyard, is the only plot this lyrical story provides over the course of its twelve pages.

Instead, Ye Shaojun writes a psychologically dense series of linked portraits, including that of the soldier whose identity is presented mainly in the form of the excerpt quoted above. Rather than tell us who the soldier is or why he chose to break rank and lead Uncle to the mass grave, Ye Shaojun shows readers a glimpse of the man’s thoughts, his sympathies and his detachment. The statement reveals the senselessness of war, the folly of soldiers mindlessly following orders, and a rare glimpse of human feeling amidst the raw violence. When writers like Ye Shaojun choose to tell history by way of portraiture, narrative opens up to multiple perspectives and energies that do not always support a linear plot line or politically-correct closure. In this case, why do we see the KMT soldier displaying heartfelt sympathy toward the murdered couple? What are we to make of the details of the missed shot and knitted brows? What is Ye Shaojun trying to communicate to readers by way of these sensitive portraits?

This chapter explores this question and others like it that illuminate the conflicts surrounding encounters, dialogue, and relational identities in the early May Fourth era. The works of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1895-1936) and Ye Shaojun 叶绍钧 (1894-1988) were chosen from many possible examples because they best illustrate the complexity of portraiture in this period. Portraiture is a particular type of narrative that focuses its attention on human relationships and subject positions. In the portraits written by Lu Xun, alienated and despondent subjects travel through barren social landscapes where meaningful
communication seems nearly impossible to achieve. Lu Xun’s works are thus characterized by failures of communication, of silences that emerge in the spaces that separate individuals across class, economic, and educational differences. My reading will show the complexity of Lu Xun’s representations of sociality, revealing the underlying desire for belonging, as well as a desire for speaking and being heard.

By contrast, Ye Shaojun’s characters speak and interact freely, even optimistically, in a world of emerging sociality where the negotiation of communicative encounters are part of the daily routine. Ye Shaojun approached his stories from the perspective of individual personalities caught in the middle of life’s predicaments. A study of social encounters in Ye Shaojun’s short stories reveals how the author utilized shifting narrative perspective to open up a relational world that suggested the possibility for relational subjectivity. Further, co-presences and conversations present a more positive vision of a modern Chinese lifeworld under construction.

The overall aim of this chapter is to establish relational subjectivity as a critical approach in the context of modern Chinese literary history before moving on to more abstract discussions in chapters two and three. Re-readings of canonical texts from the lens of relational narrative desire reveals the self-other conflict, perhaps the major literary topic of that era, operating in much more subtle ways than had been recognized by more ideologically-informed readings. Far from merely reproducing instances of relational isolation, antagonism, or communicative failure, I will show that the discourse of relationality in the works of both Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun establishes a horizon of expectation
and the hope that relational meaning *should be found* and that it existed in the minds of these visionaries as a *social good* worth seeking. As simple as this sounds, subject-subject relationality as a social good nonetheless represents a major force of both Chinese Enlightenment and revolutionary thinking that has yet to be examined.

**Portraiture in the May Fourth Era**

One might characterize much of early modern Chinese fiction as a kind of portraiture. The modern short story began with Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” (*狂人日记*, 1919) followed by portraits of the characters Kong Yiji (*孔乙己*, 1919) and Ah Q (*阿Q正传*, 1921). In each of these examples, the fictional portrait serves the function of representing a societal “type” or even a social problem read allegorically and historically. Looking back on the May Fourth and post-May Fourth eras we find a whole parade of literary portraits: Ding Ling’s Miss Sophia, Lao She’s Camel Xiangzi, Mao Dun’s Rainbow, and Shen Congwen’s Cuicui and Xiaoxiao, to name a few. These characters are not only figures in a short story or novel, they are also literary portraits that function to cluster a set of questions about relational subjecthood and modes of relationality. For both Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun, literary portraits were written with the “spirit” of social reform in mind. Both men were considered vanguards of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun as main contributor to *New Youth* (*新青年*) literary magazine, and Ye Shaojun, as founding member of the Literary Research Society (*文学研究会*), a group of writers dedicated to producing realistic works of reform literature following the motto of “art-for-life’s-sake.”
However, the majority of portraits in the May Fourth era are more simply the literary “picture” of a life. The aim of these types of portraits is to capture some essential features or personality. In this more open form, portraiture operates more freely as the site of relationality. Meanings are located in the way a literary portrait is examined, remembered or celebrated in relation to the narrator’s own life. Examples of this type of personal portrait include Lu Xun’s “Kong Yiji” (孔乙己, 1919) and Ba Jin’s “Nanny Yang” (杨嫂 1931). Similarly, Lu Xun’s portrait of Lü Weifu in the short story, “In the Tavern” (在酒楼上, 1924), focuses on the relational energies and interactions that occur between the lead character and surrounding personalities brought to life through personal remembrance and storytelling.

One can situate the fascination with literary portraiture within two main trends of the May Fourth era: the popular press and autobiography. Newspapers, magazines and literary journals regularly published biographies, autobiographical essays, and photo supplements of famous people. Readers, including Chinese educated youth, were fascinated by these depictions of modern subjects, people who had made an impact on the world through their ideas, inventions, political power, wealth, scandal or good looks. In this sense, we can see that urban elites in China were paying attention to what constitutes a modern individual. Even journals like Short Story Monthly (小说月报) exemplified this trend as each issue included a photo spread mainly comprised of portraits of writers, notable intellectuals and foreign notables. In addition, Chinese writers of the time responded to the fascination

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with the modern subject with their own autobiographical writing, presenting themselves as examples of modern subjects and objects for public contemplation. Yet this was not new.

The practice of writing one’s life-story has a long tradition in Chinese literature. What was different in the modern era was the number of life-stories in public circulation and the variety of them – one needn’t to have achieved any fame, or even to have arrived at old age to put one’s life experience into print.³

In this way, portraiture performed a key role as an element of social economy in the May Fourth era, and as a way to profile and therefore “test out” new modern “types” and new forms of relational identities. Portraiture therefore operated as a construct of knowledge. Modern Chinese identities were formed discursively by way of the circulation of life-stories, linguistically-constructed portraits (both real and literary), which represented the conflicts, contradictions, or triumphs of individuals coping with a society under transition. One notable example is the poet and essayist Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931), whose profile appeared in the popular press throughout the 1920s until his untimely death in 1931.

Reacting to the public’s interest, Xu Zhimo himself submitted autobiographical essays and poems that further fleshed-out this portrait of himself as a certain type of new, western-educated Chinese man, who chose free love over obligations to an arranged marriage.⁴


Copresence and Dialogue: Interactions with the Other

This theory of dialogical portraiture will investigate the possibilities for meaning in both failed and successful dialogues presented in the works of Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun. At the same time, however, relational energies are often found outside of direct dialogue in the layered weavings of description of setting or interiority. Beyond the ways in which characters interact linguistically, description reveals nonverbal forms of copresence that interpenetrate the literary text and shape the relational energies that circulate therein. In sociological theory, copresence is most simply defined as “a form of human colocation in space-time that allows for instantaneous and reciprocal human contact.”

For the purpose of literary criticism, however, another meaning of copresence may be more useful. Copresense can also refer to a more abstract “sense of being with others,” a subjective feeling of relationality shaped by perceptions and feelings. Shanyang Zhao explains this as an inner realm of experience: “An individual’s sense of being with others is basically a psychological phenomenon, which may or may not correspond to the actual state of copresence.” This interior, imaginative or virtual sense of relationality plays a key role in mediating actual encounters. In Lu Xun’s “My Old Home,” for example, I will show how the narrator’s inner sense of being with others substitutes for and effectively cuts off actual encounter in real time, resulting in a failed encounter. But I also ask: what more can we learn from this failed encounter? Is there a message in the “missed opportunity” that Lu Xun presents?

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5 Shanyang Zhao, “Toward a Taxonomy of Copresence,” Presence 12, no. 5 (October 2003): 446.
6 Ibid, 450.
Dialogue written on the page is, of course, the most obvious, surface-level way of observing relationality in narrative. Dialogue allows the reader to “see” relationships unfold and provides the means of experiencing a range of human interaction as presented by the narrator. Portraits that utilize dialogue also reveal a window onto the sociality of a historical period and the nascent constructions of new forms of community and national identity that are such a key component of literature written in the 1920’s.

Dialogue and conversation are conceived as part of a range of acts engaged in by two parties, more or less willingly, that typically involve a desire to know – either to understand another person, or to understand some situation. While much has been said in modern and postmodern criticism about the impossibility of language to generate meaningful communication, this study is interested in locating moments of linguistic possibility. Over the past two decades, several critics, including Jürgen Habermas, Hans Georg Gadamer and Charles Taylor, have sought to understand how communication and conversations persist, despite their imperfection. This pragmatic approach does not promote the idea of transparent language and direct communication, but rather allows for the circulation of language and the construction of temporary understandings, as articulated by Gadamer in his monograph, *Truth and Method* (1989):

... language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to
one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain who we were (emphasis mine).

This passage, a theoretical model reflecting Gadamer’s own optimism for the possibility of universal meaning, nonetheless presents a dialogical model for human communication and understanding. In fact, it is the basis for his theory of human identity – we know ourselves by way of our interactions with others. The more challenging these interactions are to us, the more we are forced to come to terms with our “prejudices” (foreknowledge). While highly controversial in feminist circles, Gadamer nonetheless presents a model whereby (ideally) “hermeneutic conversation” (dialogue) moves subjects toward positions of greater epistemological openness. This fundamental openness is the point of departure for further theoretical inquiries into dialogism and relational subjectivity in this chapter.\(^8\)


\(^8\) Gadamer is quite controversial among feminist philosophers who challenge Gadamer’s primacy of the question as key to generating the hermeneutic conversation among many other objections. Gadamer’s faith in universal meaning – in finding common ground, is read as patriarchal and as obliterating essential difference. Consider the following quote from *Truth and Method*, which begins with the call to respect the other’s difference, but ends in subsuming the other into a singular meaning: “A Conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus, it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on the subject.” *Truth and Method*, 347. Quoted by Silja Freudenger in “The Hermeneutic Conversation as Epistemological Model,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lorraine Code (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 2003), 264. For an overview of prevailing feminist critiques of Gadamer read Code’s introduction to this volume: “Introduction: Why Feminists Do Not Read Gadamer” (1-36). Freudenger’s essay argues that Gadamer’s work represents a historical shift in thinking about the other that, while flawed in key ways, is nonetheless still useful as a critical theory.
In works of fiction, dialogue usually links to plot as the conversations typically act to further the story-line in significant ways. In reading literature by way of plot, readers will focus on the outcomes of dialogic interaction between characters – what understandings are met, what shifts of perspective occur, or what growth or change a character undergoes as a result of an interaction and all it represents. Yet not all discourse in narrative is goal driven and much of it relates to other agendas, such as demonstrating character traits, establishing mood, or in presenting moments of psychological integration or crisis. Jürgen Habermas terms this latter type of non-goal-driven discourse, “communicative action.” To Habermas, communicative action and its opposite, strategic action, describe the two main modes of linguistic interaction. Communicative action is meaning-oriented: subjects are motivated to share feelings or experience for the purpose of gaining understanding of themselves or others. Strategic action is results-driven: subjects communicate because they need information in order to accomplish something. Unregulated types of discourse, from the “informal and unmarketized domains of social life” play a crucial role in “replenishing” the lifeworld. The shared meanings and understandings together form the fabric of a lived social horizon. Similarly, modern Chinese literary portraits also present readers with a constructed social horizon made up of multiple modes of discourse. Some act to “replenish” the lifeworld; while others show its bankruptcy.

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9 This is simplified to the two main types. See McAfee, “Habermas’s Theory of Postconventional Identity,” in Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 23-55.

While Habermas deals with macro level of communication as it relates to social formation, there remains the tricky area of meaning on the discursive level, which can never be taken for granted. Failure of communication is a common human condition and is also a major theme of modern literature.\(^\text{11}\) Representations of communicative failures were especially politicized in China due to emerging class consciousness and concerns about national identity. It is impossible to forget the desperate cry of Yu Dafu’s protagonist in “Sinking” (沉沦, 1921): “O China, my China, why don’t you grow strong!” a character who literally drowns in his melancholy in response to a series of failed social encounters with Japanese women while a foreign student in Japan. The character blames his social isolation and sexual frustration on China’s weak status in the world.

In stories by Yu Dafu and Lu Xun, relational failure plays out on a grand scale: a Chinese man in the context of China’s global status or, in the case of Lu Xun, an individual vis-à-vis the oppressive forces of the Chinese tradition. Lu Xun’s “Preface to A Call to Arms” (呐喊-自序, 1922) established the discourse of modern disorientation in the face of traditional superstitions, such as the outlandish and expensive pharmacological recipes from a Chinese doctor that could not cure his father’s tuberculosis. Lu Xun’s call was really more of a shout made in crisis (喊 han – shout, cry, yell) “to those fighters who are galloping on in loneliness, so that they do not lose heart.”\(^\text{12}\) Perhaps even more revealing is Lu Xun’s image

\(^{11}\) For example, James Joyce seemed obsessed with the figure of the alienated man. The character of Leopold Bloom in Ulysses, and those in his earlier short story collection, Dubliners, all contain numerous instances of literary portraiture.

of the enflamed “iron house,” the writer’s grim metaphor of the Chinese state and its citizenry trapped and powerless amidst forces beyond their control. Here Lu Xun uses yet another verb: 嚷 rang, meaning to yell loudly or to make an uproar. “Now if raise a shout (嚷) to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making these unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you really think you are doing them a good turn?” These images of the shouting intellectual, either rallying the “troops” or screaming to the dying, epitomized the nightmarish gap that was believed to have existed among Chinese of that time. Lu Xun’s emphasis on the crying out also reinforced a conceptual gap between shouting and silence, one that privileged speaking over listening, and knowledge over the perceived ignorance of the other. From this perspective, it appears that Lu Xun does not present a vision of relational identity.

For decades, critics of Lu Xun have made excuses for the pessimism, explaining away persistent relational failures as proof of the writer’s moral superiority. Yet beyond the political reading, one may ask what else is operating on the level of subjectivity and identity that prevents Chinese subjects in the fictional worlds of Lu Xun and from connecting and communicating? The issue goes much deeper and points to psychological dimensions of fear that subjects who claim “failure” of experience. Maureen Niwa-Heinen has articulated what is at stake:

Failed inter/transsubjective connections can represent a subject’s fear of relationality, and fear of relational identity. Failed inter/transsubjective connections represent missed opportunities for intimate social connection between subjects, resulting in alienating self-Other objectification or in an inter-objectification that does not

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progress to a restorative feeling of unity. Such a failure may evoke self-loathing or self-disparagement, or an attitude of extreme (and even painful) self-consciousness . . . 14

Niwa-Heinen identified a subject’s fear of relationality as a key contributor to relational failure, fear that, not surprisingly, turns back on itself in the form of “self-loathing.” Luce Irigaray explains why this fear of relationality can be so paralyzing. According to Irigaray, meeting the other (as other) at the space in-between, involves a willingness to tear the spatial-temporal nexus (a linguistic and hermeneutic web of meaning) that surrounds each subject as an individual.15 The fear of relationality is characterized as a rejection of the potential re-orientation of the self that subject-subject interaction engenders:

No doubt, opening one’s own journey in order to welcome the other as other at the crossing of our paths is not without risk: of losing one’s way, of seeing any subtlety in energy vanish or disappear, or reducing transcendence to the facticity of the encounter, of getting lost in the other or wanting to possess the other.

To take on the responsibility towards this meeting [of self and other] is so difficult, which is not to say painful, that we will attempt various ways of evading it.16

When a subject takes the path to the other, his or her individual horizon opens and can no longer remain singular and self-reflexive. With each step, the subject agrees to risk some loss to his or her own “shelter,” the linguistic and cultural “home” in which our self is housed.

On the positive side, however, Irigaray posits that much is to be gained if subjects can

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15 Irigaray works solely within the realm of intersubjectivity with the goal of finding a mode of relational interaction that preserves the subjectivity of each party – the old model of subject-object relations that involve appropriation and projection are not found here.

16 Luce Irigaray, Sharing the World (London and New York: Continuum Intn’l Publishing Group, 2008), pages 36 and 49.
overcome their fear and accept the challenge of subject-subject relations. Ultimately, it is growth and transformation that this space/time matrix of the threshold offers: “Trusting in the contribution that the otherness of the other will provide us with, agreeing to receive until we become changed, without for all that renouncing ourselves -- that is what a threshold must give us access to.”¹⁷ This metaphor of the threshold as a third space created by open subjects can also be found in narratives as a reflection of relational desire.

The majority of Lu Xun’s short stories depict instances of relational failure set in the context of morally corrupt or culturally decaying lifeworlds. Subjects, such as the narrator in “My Old Home,” hesitate at the threshold, then pull back to reject possibilities of subject-subject relationality. Yet the subtext to these narratives reads that “failed” relational connections may also be interpreted as “missed opportunities.” While literary depictions of communicative failure or fears of relationality communicate a bleak vision of the lifeworld, their very inscription must also be understood as a form of narrative desire. As Maureen Niwa-Heinen states:

... failed attempts at inter/transsubjective connection are just as important as those that succeed, since they still symbolize the potential for human connection, inclusion and unity. Thus, failed intersubjective connections are narratively valued because they symbolize potentialities or possibilities for a character’s psychological growth.¹⁸

The next section will explore what it means when failure can count as a site of possibility for relationality.

¹⁷ Ibid, 9.

Lu Xun’s Middle Space of Relationality

Lu Xun was a writer of portraits. Most of the best-known literary characters of the May Fourth era were created by him: Kong Yiji, Ah Q, Xianglin’s Wife, and Runtu. Images of Lu Xun’s family members also left strong impressions on readers, especially those of his father. This is the paradox of Lu Xun: a writer who clearly cared so deeply about people also wrote works that seem vacant of relational energies or meaningful encounter. Lu Xun’s fictional portraits are intellectualized critiques, re-shapings of human lives into types that serve a representational function in his project of writing national allegory. Even Lu Xun’s family portraits are emotionally dry and lack the warmth one might expect from such reminiscences. Certainly part of the melancholy one feels when reading Lu Xun comes from the awareness of loneliness that circulates through these texts. It is the loneliness of the characters and their troubled lives, the narrators and their alienation, and the presumed loneliness of the author who created this world.

The emotional mood, this nexus of affective energies that permeates Lu Xun’s works are not just a product of the plot or characterizations, it is also an expression of relational narrative desire that lurks under the surface of Lu Xun’s short stories and essays. At times this desire asserts a middle ground amidst the seeming black and white polarity of a story’s main theme; at other times, it engenders a feeling of longing for that which is absent – a relational subject who engages in meaningful exchange. A reading of “Kong Yiji” will demonstrate the subtle force of this middle ground of relationality. Next I will offer a reinterpretation of “failed” encounters in “New Year’s Sacrifice” and “My Old Home” as
examples of relational narrative desire. In both cases, Lu Xun presents gaps in his narratives that open a window toward another view of the story and its characters.

Lu Xun’s short story, “Kong Yiji” (孔乙己, 1919), presents a good example of a narrative gap where relational energies may be found. As a portrait, Kong Yiji, is presented in the form of a memory, as part of a somewhat nostalgic remembrance of a time when the narrator worked in the local wine house, Prosperity Tavern, at the age of twelve. To this unreliable narrator, Kong Yiji represents a character who livened up the otherwise “boring and monotonous” job of being a server. He remembers Kong Yiji as a loner and outcast who not only embarrasses himself with his ruse as a scholarly gentleman, but was also ridiculed by the community of people surrounding him – the “crowd” in Lu Xun’s allegorical structure.

Considering the story as a whole, critics have focused on the way the work sets up an antagonistic relationship between the loner, Kong Yiji, and the crowd, of which the narrator considers himself to be a part. In the face of Kong Yiji’s decline from being a poor tutor to an unemployed thief beaten into the form of a cripple, the crowd can only jeer, make jokes, and treat Kong Yiji as an outsider. Relational disconnection and lack of compassion characterize the story, as noted by William Lyell: “Though in a crowd, emotionally, old K’ung is in total isolation; not one of the people who surround him shows so much as a glimmer of human sympathy.”¹⁹ Portraying this isolation was Lu Xun’s aim, according to Leo Ou-fan Lee. Kong Yiji represents, as Leo Lee puts it, “an intellectual type whose behavioral characteristics epitomize the spiritual problems of a whole generation caught up in a certain phase of

historical change.” Kong Yiji’s “behavioral characteristics” include the wearing of a long gown to symbolize his status as a scholar-gentleman, even though he never passed even the lowest civil service examination, and his penchant for quoting aloud classical aphorisms in an attempt to impress others with his learning. In short, Kong Yiji blindly holds onto a traditional culture that (in Lu Xun’s mind) is already dead. Compounding this pathetic scenario of Kong Yiji’s life is the dehumanized crowd. Relational meaning seems not to exist in this world.

“Kong Yiji” is therefore representative of Lu Xun’s project of portraying the “collective spiritual illness” of Chinese, including those “faults of the Chinese national character.” The story fulfills the motivation for writing set forth in the essay, “How I Came to Write Stories,” in which Lu Xun states, “My aim is to expose the disease so as to draw attention to its cure.” But what exactly is the disease in the case of Kong Yiji? If it can be located in the crowd’s lack of humanity, why haven’t readers paid more attention to the dialogic situation depicted at the heart of the story?

A slightly different picture emerges if we attend to the brief moment when we hear Kong Yiji himself speak. At the center of the story is a remembered conversation between the narrator and Kong Yiji on the topic of Chinese characters and writing. The narrator recalls that Kong Yiji once asked him if he had any schooling and when the answer is “yes,”

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21 Lee, Voices, 59.

22 Quoted by Lee in Voices, 61.
Kong Yiji follows up with a “quiz” on the character for “aniseed,” which is brushed aside as insulting by the narrator. But Kong Yiji refuses to give up the conversation, and while we might use this example to further critique Kong Yiji (as many readers and critics have done) we can also find in this moment a sliver of redemption in Lu Xun’s portrait. Kong Yiji is remembered saying, “You can’t write it, eh? I’ll show you. Mind you remember. You ought to remember such characters, because you’ll need them to write up your accounts when you have a shop of your own.” Though the narrator remembers trying to ignore Kong, he couldn’t resist revealing that he did, in fact, know that character. Then the narrator recalls that as he wrote out that character, “Kong Yiji’s face lit up. Tapping his two long fingernails on the bar, he nodded, “Quite correct.”

The critique of this scene seems obvious - why should Kong Yiji take on a superior role of tutor, being a failed scholar himself, a thief accused of stealing books? Is this another example of his self-delusion? And why “aniseed” — such an unlikely word to be required to know. And yet, there is also something real about the moment and the gesture. Kong Yiji was just then eating peas flavored with aniseed, a popular tavern snack, and so took a word from the real material world of the tavern and linked it with a hopeful statement about the boy’s future career. Kong Yiji offered something including a vision of the narrator’s future

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23 The narrator feels it is inappropriate because he considers himself of a higher class status than Kong Yiji.

24 Critics have commented on the character for “aniseed” as both random and obscure, not a good choice if he thinks the boy is illiterate.


26 Ibid.
success. In this moment of social exchange, readers catch a glimpse Kong Yiji’s humanity, and perhaps for just this moment he exists as more than a “type,” but as a unique subject engaging with an other.

In this way, Lu Xun carefully presents his subtext (relational desire) in the form of rather innocuous dialogue. Regardless of the success or failure of their communication, conversation and copresence still mediates the relationship between man and boy. Dialogue presents plurality of voice and a multiplicity of meaning; at the same time, it can also provide a view into collective consciousness. Studies of narrative have argued that plurality of voice in narrative correlates to heterogeneity of meaning. The narrative “interruption” of dialogue offers a space for relationality, as Kay Young has noted:

When a narrative displays the discourse of a partnership, it interrupts the course of the single consciousness of the voice telling the story. It insists on a scene of mutuality where a collective consciousness creates together its ongoing life about the activity of relating and, therefore, of being intimate.  

Contrary to this hopeful statement by Young, Lu Xun’s narrator denies the conversational “scene of mutuality” with Kong Yiji: “My patience exhausted, I scowled and moved away. Kong Yiji had dipped his finger in wine to trace the characters on the bar. When he saw my utter indifference his face fell and he sighed.” This is the lonely moment Lu Xun wants readers to feel, where the “activity of relating” is denied. In this moment, relational desire is aroused as the reader questions the narrator’s true feelings. Is it possible that in

27 Kay Young, “Privacy, Intimacy, Happiness and Narrative” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1992), 167. This thesis was later published as Ordinary Pleasures: Couples, Conversation, and Comedy (Ohio State UP, 2001).
experiencing Kong Yiji’s dejection, he still felt superior and without compassion? Even after all these years, could he truly describe the memory with such a lack of feeling?

Recall the communicative model presented by Gadamer, which states that, “Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language,” and that, “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain who we were.”28 This “communal” moment described by Gadamer as a marker of successful communication, seems missing in “Kong Yiji.” It is also missing in many of Lu Xun’s other stories, such as “My Old Home” (故乡, 1921) and “New Year’s Sacrifice” (祝福, 1924). We can speculate that Lu Xun’s characters inhabited different linguistic worlds and could not find a common language with which to communicate. Therefore, they also could not become “bound to one another in a new community.”29

The theme of linguistic impasse in Lu Xun’s fiction has far-reaching implications, as presented in a recent study by Hui Jiang.30 Following Benedict Anderson’s theoretical rubric of imagined communities, so critical to emergent constructions of national identity, Jiang argues that the gaps of communication in Lu Xun’s fiction illustrate the failure of individuals to enter the same temporal space. In Anderson’s theory, moderns sought new modes of


29 Ibid.

representing the nation as a community, but in order to do this, they needed a representational system that placed nationals in the same temporal space, which he termed “the homogenization of time.” Jiang explains that the unbridgeable gap between Runtu and the I-narrator in “My Old Home,” for example, is not due to their class or educational differences, but stems from fractured temporal references. Runtu still lives in the “past” of Lu Xun’s childhood, while the I-narrator exists in the modern present, characterized by temporal confines of clock time and the vast spatial horizon opened up by travel, technology, urbanization and western learning. Thus, Lu Xun presents a world of pre-citizens who, consciously or not, lack the means to create community. Might it be possible to adjust Hui Jiang’s reading of “My Old Home” to look for transformational elements that offer the possibility of partial relational meaning or limited communicative success, even if this success is presented in the form of desire?

“My Old Home” (故乡, 1921) is another Lu Xun classic whose storyline and characters are well known to readers of modern Chinese literature. An I-narrator, based on the persona of Lu Xun himself, returns to his hometown of Shaoxing for the Chinese New Year. The return to the hometown (故乡 guxiang) is emotionally charged – it had been over twenty years since the narrator had been back. Readers might expect an air of excitement; however, all of the expectations associated with returning to one’s native place become defamiliarized in this story. A feeling of warmth and anticipation (the expected emotional context) is replaced with cold and dread; enjoying social time getting reacquainted with old

friends and old haunts is replaced by the task of moving and the idea of abandoning social
relationships. Early on, Lu Xun’s narrator makes it clear that the traditional nostalgia
associated with returning to one’s guxiang would not be in play here. Negation of reader
expectations first appears as a bleak description of the scenery as the narrator reaches the
village:

It was late winter. As we drew near my former home the day became overcast and a
cold wind blew into the cabin of our boat, while all one could see through the chinks
of in our bamboo awning were a few desolate villages, void of any sign of life, scattered far and near under the somber yellow sky. I could not help feeling depressed.  

Before readers even finish the first page, the narrator further closes the door to lifeworld-
building activities in the hometown: “This time I had come with the sole object of saying
goodbye.” The lifeworld represented by the hometown was not a place the narrator was
willing to invest any cognitive, emotional or psychic energy. It is presented to readers as a
nearly dead environment.

The surface-level plot of “My Old Home” concerns the various tasks of moving:
packing, selling old furniture, meeting old neighbors, and giving odds and ends away to
friends. But the real story is the reunion between the narrator and his boyhood friend,
Runtu, who arrives to bid farewell. Both the beauty and the artistic brilliance of this story
can be seen in the way Lu Xun carries his readers through an emotional reminiscence of his
relationship with Runtu only to disappoint them with silence and withdrawal once
confronted with Runtu in person. The reminiscence presents a tender portrait of Runtu and

33 Ibid.
the narrator as young boys finding adventure in the Shaoxing of their youths. Runtu’s cleverness, strength and ebullient spirit is shown to readers through description and remembered dialogue. All this is told amidst a lively and colorful backdrop – a stark contrast to the cold and dreary scene that opened the piece.

Lu Xun also upsets conventional guxiang feelings in the stark replacement of the “full of life” picture of Runtu with the “real-time” presence of Runtu as an older man, his face wrinkled and sallow. Less obvious, but equally important, is the implied contrast between the narrator himself as a young boy, carefree and excited, with his own older self: stiff, judgmental, and afraid. In one of the story’s famous lines, the narrator proclaims: “I only felt that all round me was an invisible high wall, cutting me off from my fellows, and this depressed me thoroughly.”34 This “high wall” might represent the deep thoughts of a revolutionary as he acknowledged the class differences, cultural gaps and economic disparity between educated Chinese and rural folk, especially during the first decades of the twentieth-century, a period of tremendous change politically, economically, and culturally. However, from the perspective of relational subjectivity, this “high wall” may also represent a more psychological position: the narrator’s self-awareness of the limitations of his ability to connect with an other, even his old friend, which in turn reflects a deep unease within his own subjectivity.

Where familiarity is expected or perhaps hoped for in the meeting between the narrator and friend; instead, Runtu appears as a stranger. The spatial-temporal worlds that

34 Lu Xun, “My Old Home,” 100.
each man inhabits seem to collide at this moment. The two men stand at what Irigaray calls the “threshold,” but neither understands how to step beyond the barriers they feel. To Irigaray, this is exactly what subjects feel when encountering an other: “. . . the weaving of a familiar world is henceforth undone. And I am left in some way naked in strange surroundings.”

Irigaray’s project is to propose ways of moving beyond the impasse first through understanding and second, by means of assuming a particular type of agency, one defined by vulnerability and non-appropriation: “To recognize the existence of another subjectivity implies recognizing that it belongs to, and constitutes, a world of its own, which cannot be substituted for mine; that the subjectivity of the other is irreducible to my subjectivity.”

Readers of Lu Xun’s “My Old Home,” recognize the double movement: that one may feel it “impossible” to go back to the past, but equally difficult to open one’s thinking to accept the subjectivity of an other in real time.

Lu Xun attempted to express a subject’s feeling of disorientation and powerlessness before the other as other during an era of dramatic historical transformation. At the end of the story, the awareness of the self’s limitations is made clear. As the narrator expresses his hopes for the next generation (“they should have a new life, a life we have never experienced”) he comes face to face with a new kind of fear: “The access of hope made me suddenly afraid.” The narrator explains this feeling as a recognition of his own moral hypocrisy. Was he truly any better than Runtu, who had asked for an incense burner and

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35 Irigaray, Sharing the World, 48.

36 Ibid, 1.

candlesticks, symbols of religious worship? That worship constituted part of Runtu’s discourse of hope; while the narrator’s “hope” was something altogether abstract and distant. Whose was the more real? But as the story ends, the narrator returns to the memory of being with his friend, Runtu, the feeling of togetherness represented by the peaceful scene of the seashore: “As I dozed, a stretch of jade-green seashore spread itself before my eyes, and above a round golden moon hung from a deep blue sky.”38 Preceding one of the most famous passages in Lu Xun’s oeuvre (“hope cannot be said to exist . . . a road is made”), this bucolic image is often overlooked, yet it represents a reaffirmation of relational energies communicated by the story’s lyrical subtext.

Stylistic moments, especially those often described as “lyrical,” can be markers of relational energy in a literary text. Leo Ou-fan Lee discussed lyricism in the fiction of Lu Xun as reflecting a mix of both Chinese traditional aesthetics and the modern turn toward lyricizing the self in fiction.39 In both European lyrical novels and in the Chinese literary tradition, feeling and idea are concentrated on a work’s overall mood and stylistic texture. Lee cites Jaroslav Průšek’s reading of Lu Xun as a lyricist inheriting modes from the Chinese classical tradition, “. . . which led him to concentrate on mood, imagery, lyrical tableau, and


39 In Voices from the Iron House, Leo Ou-fan Lee cites Ralph Freedman’s The Lyrical Novel, a study of fiction of the early twentieth century that intentionally blends novelistic and poetic modes. Lee quotes Freedman: “the usual scenery of fiction becomes a texture of imagery, and the characters appear as personae for the self” (65).
metaphorical landscape at the expense of plot, detailed background, and the sequential narrative characteristic of realist fiction.\textsuperscript{40}

The first lyrical passage in “My Old Home” is extensive, covering nearly three pages of an 11-page story (in English translation). With the mention of his friend’s name, the narrator’s mind launches into an impressionistic journey through fragmentary memories of Runtu, all lyrically presented as part of a rich “metaphorical landscape”:

At this point a strange picture suddenly flashed into my mind: a golden moon suspended in a deep blue sky, and beneath it the seashore, planted as far as the eye can see with jade-green watermelons, while in their midst a boy of eleven or twelve, wearing a silver necklet and grasping a steel pitchfork in his hand, was thrusting with all his might at a\textit{ zha}, which dodged the blow and escaped through his legs.\textsuperscript{41}

What is extraordinary about this passage is that the narrator never witnessed this scene. He earlier stated that he never traveled to the seashore to visit his friend. The image was imaginatively created in his own mind based on the stories told to him by Runtu. The “strangeness” of this vision could be that on the one hand, the relationship with Runtu had long been a kind of fantasy, an idealization perpetuated by the narrator. On the other hand, however, the passage could also be interpreted as a reflection of the integration, or better yet, the “transformation” (to use Gadamer’s terms) that took place at that moment in the past when shared meaning was found between the two boys.

This also links back to Irigaray’s idea of temporal weaving, where each subject exists within a nexus of spatial and temporal coordinates. The narrator’s flashback in “My Old

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{41} Lu Xun, “My Old Home,” 91-92.
"Home," reveals the weaving of his reality and his personhood. In order to meet Runtu in a new relationship in the present, he would have to make a tear in this weaving and open it to new information, new impressions, and new interpretations. In the end, Lu Xun’s narrator refuses to do this – preferring not to disturb this precious memory. As the text itself suggests, his fear at meeting a man whose cumulative life suffering has left him “stupefied” is too painful. Thus it appears that Lu Xun presents the territory of “virtual relationality” in this lyrical description of his relationship with Runtu. It is, on the one hand, an embellished reminiscence of childhood, but it also exists in the present as a site of fantasized unity of self and other.

A much darker and pessimistic version of the failed encounter is presented in Lu Xun’s nightmarish “New Year’s Sacrifice” (祝福, 1924). By the end of the story, a poor beggar woman, named “Xianglin’s wife,” is fully ostracized from her community and with no income, shelter or food, and by the end of the story, dies of exposure on a cold winter night. The narrator, an educated man living in the city who returned to the town for the New Year holiday, cannot wait to leave the memory of his encounter with her behind. Like the serving boy in “Kong Yiji,” this narrator also feels uneasy after his encounters with a lower class “other,” but lacks the courage or the moral backbone to either help her or to express any regret in not being able to do so. Once again, Lu Xun critiques society from multiple levels, even his own social class.

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42 Lu Xun, “My Old Home,” 100.
In “New Year’s Sacrifice,” the language uttered by Xianglin’s wife sits at the “center” and is acknowledged by both sides, yet the interpretive meaning derived from that language differs substantially, resulting in communicative failure. A reader might ask, how should the narrator have responded to Xianglin’s Wife when she asked, “Is there life after death?” What could he have done? In the text, the narrator replies, “I am not sure,” an answer hoping to dodge the question entirely; after all, as a secularized intellectual, he states, “I had never bothered myself in the least about whether spirits existed or not...”\(^43\) The failed gesture is couched in sympathetic reasoning as Lu Xun gives us an interior glimpse of the man’s thinking: “I hesitated for a moment, reflecting that the people here still believed in spirits . . . why increase the sufferings of someone with a wretched life . . . ?”\(^44\) Despite the narrator’s seemingly good intentions, the encounter fails, leaving him shaken. The concerns of a simple country woman proved to be too difficult to handle: “All my hesitation and maneuvering had been no match for her three questions. Promptly taking fright, I decided to recant.”\(^45\)

In a recent dissertation that echoes my discussion of Gadamer’s “common language” theory, Jin Li argues that the narrator and Xianglin’s Wife each occupy different discursive planes and that the semantic split between them prevents meaningful communication from taking place. To the extent that modern Chinese consciousness was a product of a new

\(^{43}\) Lu Xun, “The New Year Sacrifice,” 171.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
language of thought (白话) and new ways of assigning meaning to language, semantic gaps reveal fissures in the consciousness and ethical identity of modern intellectuals: “The impenetrability or rather elusiveness of her mind challenges the capability of knowing and feeling of the ‘enlightened.’”\textsuperscript{46} This results in a destabilization of the subject’s sense of personal identity. Further, the lack of confidence in enlightenment discourse also leaves the writer himself unable to escape from a deep sense of unease, guilt, and ethical failure. This anxiety and guilt affected an entire generation of writers, as noted by Haiyan Lee: “. . . [Yu Dafu] and his fellow writers bequeathed to us a vision of Chinese society as hopelessly plagued by hypocrisy, fractured by familial narcissism, and parochialism, and devoid of affective identification across social divisions.”\textsuperscript{47} Affect is the psychic and emotional energy created and circulated by way of relational contact. The problem of lost “affective identification” points to two underlying issues: the crisis of subjectivity and the crisis of moral agency.

Jin Li termed the crisis of moral agency the “unhappy consciousness” of modern Chinese intellectuals. This consciousness is found in much of May Fourth literature as a product of the “clash of faith and experience.”\textsuperscript{48} The “faith” was the belief in humanism, which was promoted in the early years of May Fourth (1917-1924) as universal values of love,

\addcontentsline{toc}{section}{Notes}

\textsuperscript{46} Jin Li, "Paper Sorrow: Narrating Emotion in Chinese Literature, from the 1840s to the 1920s." (PhD., diss. Harvard University, 2008), 143.


\textsuperscript{48} Jin Li, 162.
sincerity, and sympathy for all people, a moral vision that privileged love and mutual respect. Included in this thinking was a faith in literature’s positive and transparent role in communicating this vision. And yet, “The mindscape of ‘unhappy consciousness’ is featured,” Li states, “by actional stasis, epistemological opacity, and emotional difficulty, in sharp contrast to the sanguine vision of the modern self.”

Modern writers, in their efforts to inscribe moments of “encounter” with an Other, recognize the failure of self to live up to the standards and values that this humanism proclaimed. The problem was rooted in modern self-referentiality; the encounter with an Other brought the subject back to himself and activated his conscience in troubling ways.

The task of realist literary representation exacerbated the perceived crisis of moral agency. How should we “write about others?” thoughtful writers asked of themselves. Marston Anderson took this as the starting point in his study of Chinese realism. Anderson’s research revealed how May Fourth writers, in adopting realism as both a literary and epistemological model, ran into a range of social and moral impediments that ultimately undermined writers’ faith in realism to positively affect change in society. For example, how could realism objectively depict cruelty and crisis in society without partaking in that

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49 Li quotes Zhou Zuoren’s “Humane Literature,” stating that a humane society . . . “in terms of morality, everyone shall take love, wisdom, sincerity, and courage as the basic moral values, stops following old laws and rituals, thereby attains freedom and true happiness.” See Jin Li, 151.

50 Ibid.

51 Jin Li’s example here is Zhu Ziqing’s (1898-1948) prose essay, “The Qinhua River in the Splashing of Oars and the Shade of Lanterns” According to Li, Zhu Ziqing’s “pang of conscience causes fragmentation and evaporates the lyrical vision as the unity of the ‘mood’ that pervaded the journey before the encounter. The vying commands of morality, feelings and the instinct for pleasure were entangled in the subject’s effort to ‘order’ the meaning of the encounter” (140).
oppression and risk “merely reproducing it?” This is one of the moral impediments keenly felt by Lu Xun. Another impediment is the failure of writers to represent a character’s relationship to history, which could also be understood as the writer’s adherence to his or her own subjectivity in presenting a story and failing to objectively present a character fully as a historical subject.

Despite the crisis of moral agency, and the impediments to creating a “pure” form of literary representation, writers and intellectuals of the time nonetheless accepted the task of creating a new discourse to shape their lived social imaginary. However, this constructivist vision can often be found in its inverse: as a reflection of the destructive and critical discourse that tears at the fabric of society. As David Der-wei Wang has noted, from within the progressive, enlightenment, nation-building enterprises of which modern Chinese writers participated, in this hope for a better future, “a monster haunt[ed] the human struggle for self-betterment.”

Lu Xun’s “decapitation complex” – the writer’s project of dis-membering present society and separating it from the ills of the past – is such an example. The tearing apart can also be seen as a reflection of its opposite – a desire to re-construct something whole. Wang perceptively recognizes the yearning for wholeness which

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53 See Anderson, The Limits of Realism 119-179. Anderson summarizes Mao Dun’s critique of Ye Shaqjun: “Ye shows a failure of historical imagination by confining himself to the subjective concerns of the bourgeois youth he takes as his protagonist and intellectual laziness in allowing his fiction to become a medium for the expression of personal whims and frustrations. As a result Ye never achieves a truly detached historical perspective” (125).

lies at the heart of Lu Xun’s project: “... in spite of his iconoclastic intent, [Lu Xun] betrays time and again a longing to regain a coherent meaning, at the same time as [he expresses] a skepticism regarding this longing.”

One might argue that the skepticism, this intellectual impediment, prevents Lu Xun from allowing that coherence to appear in his fiction. As a result, despair presides over hope.

The ethical encounters in these stories open up complex moral spaces that might be considered a metaphorical “middle ground.” The middle ground is the place of relationships, of connections and conversations -- the social aspect of personal identity. It is also generative of a kind of subtle and accretiative meaning. Lu Xun’s dialectical thinking dominated his writing as well as our reception of his works, which are described as a vacillation between past and present, self and other, and spirituality and rationality. And yet, the middle path allows us to also see another dynamic at work that disrupts the neat dichotomy and provides a bridge between the extremes of the polarized world.

The middle ground might also be where hope could be said to exist, in the partial and flawed first steps. If hope is to be found in the children, as Lu Xun’s madman suggests, then that form of hope begins not only with their freshness of youth (yet uncontaminated) but in the relationships that will shape their identity. Lu Xun concluded “My Old Home” with a musing on the nature of hope, describing it as the road made by people choosing to walk a together in one direction. Lu Xun’s metaphor conjures up the idea that this road may have

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Ibid., 21.
started as a small footpath, for in the beginning, “there is in fact no road on the ground.”

Lu Xun seems to be saying that for hope to exist, there is a starting point along with some vision of where to go. We’ve accepted the reading that this starting point is a faith in change or even revolution. But could this starting point also be found in the desire for meaningful relational exchange and in the lack of fear of being together with an other? Might Lu Xun’s statement also contain a vision of a pair of individuals or even a small group walking together to create such a new path into the future?

**Ye Shaojun – A Gardener of Life**

Nearly all of Ye Shaojun’s fictional stories present a central protagonist who reacts to and experiences the forces of life surrounding him (usually a him – only a few protagonists are women). Curiously, Ye’s portraits are less recognizable by name than those of Lu Xun; they are known to us more by type: the isolated old man – “Solitude” (孤独,1923), the desperate and self-interested educator, Mr. Pan, from “How Mr. Pan Weathered the Storm” (潘先生在难中,1925), and, of course, the earnest, yet misguided educator/revolutionary, Ni Huanzhi, whose name carries the title of China’s first full-length novel in the modern vernacular, *Ni Huanzhi* (倪焕之,1929). Overall, fewer impenetrable walls can be found in these works. Ye Shaojun does not seem to long for meaning across an unfathomable abyss, as is the sense when reading Lu Xun. Instead, Ye presents a multiplicity of perspectives that each compete for legitimacy. The lifeworld is not dead or dying here, but under constant

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negotiation and re-negotiation. This reveals Ye Shaojun’s fundamental optimism. Rather than express despair, his works present a relentless curiosity about how different types of people (their personalities, genders, and class differences) might interact, know each other better, and begin to form a new community.

Ye Shaojun was born in Suzhou in 1894, the son of a tax collector working in the waning years of the Qing Dynasty. Ye Shaojun taught Chinese in an elementary school for ten years after he graduated from high school, from which he began a life-long career in education, teaching and national curriculum. Ye also wore other hats, as journalist, writer, book editor, and this may account for the great variety of themes in Ye’s work, both in style and content. A glimpse into Ye Shaojun’s personality can be seen in his choice of friends, among the closest two being the historian and folklorist Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚 (1893-1980) and the cartoonist and essayist, Feng Zikai 丰子恺 (1898-1975). In fact, it was Gu Jiegang who suggested that his old classmate submit a story for a literary magazine he was associated with in 1919, at the height of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Ye Shaojun approached his writing with the seriousness of a historian but also with the shrewd wit of a comic who plays with the bitter ironies of life. These two were then mixed together with the ethics of care Ye Shaojun so associated with his main profession: teaching.

As stated in the Introduction, this thesis claims that intellectuals of the 1920s through the 1940s explored a much wider variety of relational subjectivities than previously.

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acknowledged. Such explorations represented attempts at configuring new social aspects to individual identity. Ye Shaojun’s fictional output represents one of the most coherent visions of this social self grappling with new ways to identify with others in community in a new, modern way.

My approach to this discussion will be both thematic and critical. On the one hand, Ye Shaojun’s many stories set in schools, with teachers or school administrators as protagonists, provide an opportunity to locate the school and its mission as a particular experiment in the creation of modern community. Having located this site, my concern will center on what types of subjectivities are represented as inhabiting this community and how they relate to one another using what types of discourse. This section will show that Ye Shaojun’s narratives demonstrate a persistent concern with dialogic encounter, negotiated meaning, and shifts in perception and point of view. To borrow terminology once again from Gadamer, Ye Shaojun carefully stages narrative dialogue as a form of “hermeneutic conversation,” interaction that opens up the knowledge and self-understandings held by each party. Gadamer’s requirement for successful communication, his “something placed in the center,” is fulfilled at times and thwarted at others, but always with interesting commentary on the social perils of the modern self attempting to live with others.

Ye Shaojun began his exploration of relational identities by first examining the conflicts that separated individuals. His first short stories, later collected and published under the title, Barriers (隔膜, 1922), were mainly comprised of portraits. Most of Lu Xun’s portraits were created as part of a personal remembrance or are encountered in a subject’s
return to the hometown, where the protagonist himself is separated from his social world and returns as a visitor to float disconnected through a space that was once familiar but is no longer. In many ways, therefore, Lu Xun’s portraits take shape in a suspended, dream-world, which explains the psychological intensity of his stories. By contrast, Ye Shaojun places his protagonists in the materiality of their everyday world, showing readers a glimpse of their daily habits, encounters, and challenges. Ye’s encounter stories pursue the question of shared meaning – either the total absence of it or the possibilities for it. Works that demonstrate successful communicative acts, engender a kind of social intimacy that functions as an antidote to blockages. Social intimacy is the product of small-scale encounters on a human level. In this way, Ye Shaojun’s vision for community is created not by direct statements, but with small gestures that together create a feeling of relational meaning and possibility.

**Negotiated Encounters: “Barriers” and “Bitter Greens”**

“Barriers” presents a world of dislocation not unlike Lu Xun’s “My Old Home.” It is a somewhat rare representation of a world of communicative blockages in the oeuvre of Ye Shaojun. “Barriers,” published in March of 1921, describes the feeling of distance and dislocation of a modern-school teacher returning to his hometown to visit with family. Utilizing an autobiographical persona, the narrator describes his movement through his hometown, highlighting a meeting with a family elder, a New Year’s gathering, and a trip to the local teahouse. The translation of the title (隔膜 gemo) as “barrier” is somewhat
misleading. *Gemo* is not an obstructing physical structure; the meaning relates specifically to a lack of relational understanding – a blockage of meaning. This is exactly what Ye Shaojun explores through his three scenes. His narrator sits in various forms of copresence with others, but is otherwise separated from his fellows intellectually, emotionally, and psychically.

The narrator of “Barriers” describes four contrasting settings with the repeated phrase, “I am at the . . .” (我在 . . .). This sets up the physical space and its corresponding social context. He is first on the boat en route (alone with self), with his family elder (one on one), at a banquet where he listens in silence (one among many in a family space), and later by himself in a local teahouse (one among many in a public space). Each scene is characterized by a feeling of loneliness and isolation. In a meeting with a family elder, the narrator sits in silence, avoids eye contact, and makes painful small talk. A day later, at the local teahouse, the narrator comments on the shallowness of the conversation found there among men he knew from childhood: “I wished to search for the reason why these guys gathered here day after day, but I could not find it.” Spitting on the ground at will, smoking deeply from their pipes, drinking to their fill of tea, and leaning back lazily in their chairs, it was a scene that the protagonist could not join or bear to watch any further. The story ends with the protagonist sighing in resignation, “I just don’t understand . . .”

By contrast, “Bitter Greens” (苦菜, 1921) demonstrates a starting point for fiction of negotiated encounter as it contrasts life experiences, values, and points of view. Here, Ye

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Shaojun tells the story of teacher who decides to turn his small backyard, a barren and weedy lot, into a productive vegetable garden. Ye Shaojun deftly portrays the naïve attitude of the teacher whose invests his garden project with spiritual associations typical of one who is not familiar with working on the land: “Labour would be the true meaning of life, spiritual fulfillment and happiness would be mine, and the vacant plot would be the wellspring of a new life, which I anticipated with keen ardor.”


The teacher’s local expert, a middle-aged peasant named Futang, sets to work on the long-neglected plot, its soil poor and full of stones and bits of brick. One of Yu Shaojun’s gifts as a writer is his keen eye for the humorous detail, which often lays bare a protagonist’s weaker underbelly in a cartoon-like manner. In “Bitter Greens,” Ye comically exposes the teacher’s unexpectedly weak physical stamina:

A strand of parching heat spread from my spine to my entire body like a process of cellular combustion. I began to breathe rapidly, almost unable to take in the outer air boring into my nasal passages. Normal sensation left my hands, which felt as if still grasping the rake - though this was already lying on the ground - so that I could not clench my fists.

The breakthrough for Ye Shaojun as a writer is the way he places the body at the center of the narrative. “Barriers” includes several similar moment of bodily response. For example, as the protagonist meets with his family elder, the strained silence creates extreme physical discomfort:

It was like I was floating on a deserted island, sinking into a silent never-ending, it was that kind of isolated feeling of dislocation that went beyond typical discomfort


Ibid., 20.
and penetrated every cell of my body, and made my thoughts become confused, everything seemed to drift away from me, and become hazy. My body gradually began to cramp up, as if I had been bound with rope.”

Description of the body becomes a mirror for the psychological state. But at the same time, one can also find that relational energies circulate from and around bodies as their own form of expression, replacing the need for words. In “Bitter Greens,” Ye Shaojun shows how the teacher-narrator’s physical gestures of exhaustion are fully understood by Futang, who seamlessly suggests he work on an easier task instead.

The basis for meaningful relational exchange, therefore, emerges from manual labor that itself creates a physical level of copresence in “Bitter Greens.” The relationship between teacher and peasant, co-authors of the narrative of productivity, evolves slowly, with the teacher taking the role of willing laborer under the guidance of the knowledgeable peasant. These roles shift, however, when the seedlings falter -- their leaves yellowed and eaten through by insects. The good working relationship between the two men now turns sour. The teacher, who had gloried in the seeming expertise of Futang, now scrutinizes him suspiciously: shouldn’t he have been more vigilant about the insects? Why did he not search every leaf in the field instead of sitting and smoking his pipe?

Ye Shaojun faces this challenge of relational breakdown head-on. After presenting a critical assessment of Futang, Ye Shaojun’s teacher-narrator then asks about Futang’s life. In the lengthy passage that follows, we hear Futang tell his personal story, one of struggle with the land, a struggle that he has engaged in since a teenager. His troubles were not limited to

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farming, but extended to ways the family schemed to make rent and survive. The method they found was to have more children, all girls, who were “farmed-out” when old enough to work. Pregnancy brought another benefit: Futang’s wife could get paid as a wet nurse to other families. Yet this also likely contributed to the loss of Futang’s only son, who became malnourished and died.

In the end, “Bitter Greens” falls short of displaying true relational exchange, as the narrator’s simple question only leads to a lengthy monologue. The narrator responds to the intense detail of Futang’s story not by talking with him as a friend but by turning to inward reflection: “Futang had no more tragic words to relate his misfortune . . . As I stared at the fallen leaves in the yard, a peculiar sadness hovered disconsolately with nowhere to settle.”62 However, the climax of this story powerfully represents a moment scarcely found in the writings of Lu Xun: the narrator tells readers directly: “Now I understood.” The protagonist listened to Futang’s story and understood his predicament. This in turn led the teacher to regard himself in a new light. The rosy vision of becoming a weekend farmer, the occasional keeper his little plot, is now understood for its irrational idealization of farming life: “My grasp of life had in fact been simple and shallow, and I had now been given greater confidence.”63 This new confidence is his understanding of the difficulties of Futang’s monotonous life, the same monotony found in other professions as well. The narrator wonders if their lives are truly so different.


63 All quotes from Ye Shaojun, “Bitter Greens,” 25
The Problem of Sympathy, *Tongqing* 同情

In his study of Ye Shaojun, Marston Anderson points out a shortcoming of “Bitter Greens” – while the narrator has “been given greater confidence,” Futang seemingly returns to his hard life without any apparent change, material or spiritual. Anderson therefore questions the workings of Ye Shaojun’s moral vision, which seem to privilege the educated class despite their good intentions. Nonetheless, Anderson placed “Bitter Greens” among Ye Shaojun’s “sentimental” stories of his early period, considering it a rather plotless sketch that “highlight moments of sympathetic communion, [or] dramatize a moment of “achieved tongqing.”  

*Tongqing* (同情), or sympathy, was not only a thematic concern of Ye Shaojun’s early stories, it was a key aspect of his aesthetic orientation. Anderson consistently translates *tongqing* as “pity.” That is certainly one possibility, but “sympathy” and “compassion” are also suitable alternatives that carry the “together” sense of *tong* a bit better. The choice of words, according to modern usage, lends a very different meaning. “Pity” typically connotes a power relationship of have and have not, healthy vs. suffering; whereas sympathy represents a feeling of shared (same-level) understanding.  

If, as Anderson has suggested, Ye Shaojun aimed to write a literature of *tongqing* 同情, as an

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64 Marston Anderson, “The Specular Self: Subjective and Mimetic Elements in the Fiction of Ye Shaojun” *Modern China* 15: no. 1 (Jan. 1989): 83. The other type found in the early period are “melodramatic” – includes “A Life” – “explores social barriers that separate individuals and inhibit expression of tongqing” (83).

65 The challenge is perhaps that the English language has a cluster of related words to draw from due to the development of the concept of pity/sympathy/compassion in Greek Philosophy and later Christianity. In modern usage, those who are the object of pity are “pitiful,” powerless. The etymology of these three words shows a significant difference: compassion (from the Latin cum + passion), means co-suffering; sympathy (from the Greek together + feeling); and pity (from Latin and later French meanings) means having a duty toward another. Source: *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (www.oed.com).
aesthetic and moral imperative, I prefer to underscore the idea of shared meaning inherent in the meaning of tongqing as compassion.

The practice of generating feelings of connection between writer and reader dominated the Chinese poetic tradition for centuries. Ye’s first fictional efforts, while reform in spirit and realistic in narrative formula, were also shaped by a traditional aesthetics that placed a writer’s own personality and subjectivity at the center of a work. It is ultimately the writer’s own sincerity and sympathy, heartfelt in the mind of the writer, which is communicated to readers. In the essay “On the Literary Arts” (文艺谈), written in June of 1921, just months after the publication of “Bitter Greens,” Ye writes that “profound feeling” is a key characteristic of any great literary work.66 This feeling, expressed with sincerity (诚 cheng), has the capacity to engender feelings of empathy or compassion (同情 tongqing) in the reader. The need for a writer’s depth of feeling and commitment to a work of art was a necessity because he was all too aware of the “hypocrisy, ridicule, selfishness, coldness, [and] barriers in society.”67 Sincerity was the cornerstone of Ye Shaojun’s reform philosophy – the antidote to the lack of human feeling in most social interactions, as described in “On the Literary Arts” (文艺谈):

But how many times, in our conscious lives, have we been sincerely moved or experienced a deep tenderness? Two people greet each other with a nod of the head, but their eyes do not meet; each goes his separate way, and they never see each other again; nor do they even retain a memory of the other. A letter arrives with two sheets of eight-line paper, but on them are written only the formulaic expressions of


67 Ibid, 165.
the epistle. An old woman, weak of limb, slips and falls, provoking only a clap of applause and derisive laughter. A neighbor is robbed and one person injured, and I can but selfishly take relish in the good fortune that I was not also a victim... One could go on and on.\footnote{Ibid.}

These negative examples represented the small tragedies of everyday life to Ye Shaojun. Because relationality is so rare, yet so important, Ye Shaojun uses his writing as a means to generate a genuine feeling of sympathy in readers, one can assume, so that they might recognize it and employ it in their daily lives.

**Dialogic Interaction and Point of View: “A Stroll at Dawn”**

Ye Shaojun also utilizes the technique of shifting point of view in his narratives to allow readers to gain an understanding of another person’s life. The result is a more interactive and poly-vocal text that begins to lean toward representation of relational subjectivity. One early example is “A Stroll at Dawn” (晓行, 1921), a story that gently follows another teacher-narrator as he familiarizes himself with the countryside around the small town where he has come to teach. Ye’s narrative opens with an optimistic tone. The morning is bright, the air is fresh, and the narrator is so transported by the bucolic scene that it reminds him of a recent trip to West Lake in Hangzhou. The teacher, new to town, follows an agricultural path, uncertain of where it will lead or what he will find.

The story thus presents a feeling of confidence, peace and anticipation. Written the same year Lu Xun’s “My Old Home,” (故乡, 1921), Ye Shaojun’s “Stroll at Dawn” could not be more different. The countryside shimmers with growing things, wonderful colors and scents.
The protagonist expresses an open eagerness to talk with local peasants. Most importantly, each of the encounters is characterized by dialogue and the sharing of information.

Whereas Lu Xun’s narrator in “My Old Home” judges his surroundings, the protagonist in “Stroll at Dawn” listens receptively. It is important to point out that Ye Shaojun’s story presents random encounters that happen spontaneously, while Lu Xun’s stories, such as “My Old Home,” present the heavy weight of tradition, family obligation, and personal memory.

Two encounters shape the story of “A Stroll at Dawn,” and both project a tone of humility and openness. The teacher-narrator first meets a young peasant girl, who is initially apprehensive of him. The narrator notices that her family is very poor, living in a small farming shack. The girl also has sparse hair, a thin face, and stereotypical “blank look.” However, once he asks the way to the river, she opens up and provides the way, along with a caution:

> “Just cut right through . . . but the bean leaves are covered with dew – it’ll wet your clothes and shoes.”
> “It doesn’t matter,” I answered as I parted the bean stalks and set off along a narrow furrow. Although I ignored her warning, I was grateful for her concern for me – a stranger.69

This simple exchange sets the tone for the whole piece, in the give and take of information, and in the stranger’s ignorance of local knowledge. Following the scene quoted above, Ye Shaojun later adds a short sentence to indicate that the narrator realizes that the girl’s advice was sound: “After crossing the bean field to the river bank, my shoes and the lower


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part of my clothes were sopping wet... This tone of humility, here marked again by bodily awareness, sets up the next encounter which will go much deeper.

Always looking for humor, Ye Shaojun next places the teacher-narrator before a muddy ditch recently cut to move water from the river to the rice paddy. At the teacher’s moment of hesitation, one of the peasants working the waterwheel calls out to him: “Watch your step or you may slip.” Fortunately, the teacher is able to jump over and a conversation ensues between the teacher and the peasant. It is trivial, but seen in contrast to the relational blockage of “My Old Home” and similar stories, the moment stands out as a critical representation of social exchange in the early May Fourth literature:

Seeing me safely across, they went on with their work. The elder man looked at me and asked, "Are you from that school there, sir?"
"Yes."
"More than three hundred children, haven't you?"
"That's right, more than four hundred."
"Seem to have fun all right. Each time I pass your wall I hear them laughing and fooling about. Don't suppose they play truant, do they?"
"No, they don't." Presently I asked, "Was your wheat harvest good this year? There were no storms while it was ripening."
"Not bad at all, the best in the last five or six years."
"Will you be planting rice in this plot of yours, now?"71

What makes this conversation more than just empty small talk is the fact that each party noticed and commented upon something relevant to the other’s life: the peasant recalled hearing the children playing in the school yard; and the teacher noticed that the weather

70 Ibid.

had been good this year during harvest. One may critique Ye Shaojun for his idealism, but I think this is an ingenious way to inscribe acts of noticing into his narrative. Recall Ye Shaojun’s passage on noticing in the essay, “On the Literary Arts,” also written in 1921: “But how many times, in our conscious lives, have we been sincerely moved or experienced a deep tenderness?”72 The feeling of tongqing, of sharing the same feeling or awareness, involves first noticing the other in relation to self. Ye Shaojun’s fiction provides a model for how his fellow citizens might begin to overcome the crippling inhumanity of their society, by noticing the realities of others’ lives.

Participating in acts of noticing is precisely the message at the center of Ye Shaojun’s children’s story, “The Scarecrow” (1922). An editor of a recent collection of Ye Shaojun’s works, who borrowed this title for the collection, stated that the story carried the essence of the writer’s style and literary personality. One the one hand, the story achieves stylistic brilliance with beautiful language and fresh images; on the other hand, its story provides readers a means of discerning good and evil, beauty and ugliness.73 This is the legacy of Ye Shaojun and his moral vision: the image of the scarecrow who bears witness to what happens in the lives of the people who surround him.

Almost all of Ye Shaojun’s children’s stories play with this idea of perception and of differing ways of seeing or understanding. In the fable, “The Scarecrow,” (1922), the scarecrow notices all of the small events of the field under his watch: the moth that lays her


eggs in a rice stalk, and eggs that are not noticed by the mistress of the field which will lead
to disaster. One late night, he stands helplessly as a woman commits suicide in the nearby
river. The scarecrow desperately wishes he had the agency to help, especially the means to
communicate to others what he sees, but he cannot. Ye Shaojun’s message to young people
is first, be someone who notices; and second, do what the scarecrow cannot do: help others.

In the short story, “A Stroll at Dawn,” the new information gained through
conversation does not lead to dramatic change of mindset or enhanced agency, but provides
an example of a meaningful depth of understanding. In an interesting turn, the discussion
shifts to the subject of rents and landlord-peasant relations. This peasant’s particular
landlord is named and his house is pointed out. In a cinematic fashion, the teacher-narrator
pictures this Shao Hezhi in his mind; this man visited the teahouse daily and had a brooding
look about him. Finally, we hear the peasant recant the story of the near drowning of a
farmer in a neighboring village who could not pay the rent in full on the due date. Ye
Shaojun employs a traditional storyteller approach here, presenting the dramatic details
before any real “facts” of the circumstance as explained: that the peasant hid in the latrine,
would later try to drown himself, and that his neighbors were planning to overturn the
landlord’s boat if the man died. In the end, the peasant was rescued from the river and his
family went without food to pay the rent that year.

By shifting the focus of the narrative to the peasant and his story, Ye Shaojun is able
to present multiple perspectives and conflicting interests concerning the same land. The
bucolic, almost poetic, world of bright sunshine and neatly planted fields first experienced by
the teacher-narrator is now complicated by other layers of reality: insect infestation, rising rents, abusive landlords, and failed attempts by peasants themselves to help neighbors in trouble. When the narrator says, “I was sickened by this account, and not just by the part that Shao had played either,” we get the feeling that he is referring to all of the characters: Landlord Shao, his associates, the villagers who gave up the struggle, his storyteller, and himself, the bystander. All are implicated. At this stage of his career, this is as far as Ye Shaojun goes, however, and the story ends optimistically with the resumption of work: “The water-wheel started turning again. The river water flowed slowly into the field. I should be starting my own work soon, not just watch other people working.”

Ye Shaojun’s achievement in stories like “Bitter Greens” and “A Stroll at Dawn” is not political or even purely moral (as discussed by Marston Anderson), but is social. Ye Shaojun’s revolution is a revolution of the heart, but not with the goal of eliciting pity, but of finding common ground. Earlier in this chapter, I presented Maureen Niwa-Heinen’s characteristics of failed narrative connections. Now successful narrative connections begins to come into focus in the fiction of Ye Shaojun:

Successful narrative inter/transsubjective connections promote feelings of intimacy, empathy and connectedness between the self and Other. These feelings of unity between self and Other can be both illusory and transitory. They can be severely compromised, contained, or even disapproved by dominator powers. Successful intersubjective connections characterize a subject’s acceptance of her or his social interdependency on others.75

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74 Ye Shaojun, “A Stroll,” 35.

In her readings of modern English literature, Niwa-Heinen found that writers such as Virginia Woolf also utilized techniques of multiple perspectivism and shifting narrative voice to create what she termed “momentary alliances” between characters. The possibility for “momentary alliances” occurs when writers suspend the self-other dichotomy between characters and instead show acceptance of the dialogical other as other, without reduction or domination. This is not unlike the root meaning of “sociality.” Sociality should not be understood as a generalized idea of “being social,” but more specifically, as a particular type of social connectivity that aims at, “a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that that relationship provides . . . it is a friendship only in so far as the connection with the other person is valued for its own sake.” Ye Shaojun’s fiction presents social energy that flows easily between subjects in a shared spatial-temporal space, where numerous instances of sociality and copresence make social exchange and shared meaning feel possible. While the encounters are not invested with political messages, they nonetheless generate a texture of relationality through successive momentary alliances.

However, Ye Shaojun was not an idealist. His portraits succeed not because they present a rosy and optimistic view of society, but because they are complicated stories told with realistic detail that produces overlapping views and contradiction. Further, Ye Shaojun’s protagonists are always flawed in key ways, and for that reason only take small

76 Ibid, 204.

steps toward relationality. In the case of “Bitter Greens” and “A Stroll at Dawn,” the protagonists, while good-hearted, are a bit naïve and new to the real workings of the world. Ye’s skill as a writer is that he created critical tension around each character presented, making them more believable as real human types.

Realms of Intimacy in “Night”

Ye Shaojun once wrote that his development as a fiction writer was not unlike the experience of learning to use a camera. When one starts taking pictures, everything is a potential subject and shots are taken freely without much concern for distance, lighting, or composition. Over time, however, as one becomes more aware of the camera’s limitations and strengths, one begins to adjust one’s attitude to taking pictures. The result is a more analytical and limited approach, where knowledge and technique are employed to achieve certain outcomes on film. Ye explains that this was his experience of writing fiction – a process of experimentation that began passionately but gradually became directed toward achieving specific results on paper.78 The stories read thus far in this chapter all come from the early part of the writers career, represented by the story collections Barriers (隔膜, 1922) and Conflagration (火灾, 1923). By the late 1920s, Ye Shaojun’s interests shifted and the style and tone of his work changed as well. Ye Shaojun’s camera analogy explains how the writer took control of the open-ended, free-flowing, “sketches,” of his early period and shaped them into plot-centered, messaged works.

78 Ye Shaojun, “Casual Remarks About the Past” 过去随谈, in The Scarecrow, 258-259.
“Night” (夜, 1927), the story whose excerpt opened this chapter, represents one of Ye Shaojun’s literary responses to the violent historical events that surrounded him during the years 1925-1927. The phrase “literary response” is appropriate because while Ye’s effort certainly had political motivations, it was not written nor can be read as a didactic piece. Ye held true to his personal values as a writer: to write from a genuine place of personal knowledge and real feeling, to tell a good story, and to use language that will capture the reader’s attention.79 “Night” impressionistically records one family’s experience of the Guomindang (KMT) - ordered 1927 crackdown on communist party members and labor union organizers in Shanghai in the period known as the “White Terror.” Literary historians have understood Ye’s seemingly “de-historicized” story as reflective the writer’s caution in the face of censorship or feared retaliation because no mention is made in the story of the “White Terror,” which army or militia was responsible for the executions, or what activities the young couple were engaged in when arrested.80 Nonetheless, Mainland Chinese critics writing in the early 1990s, hail “Night” as Ye Shaojun’s “breakthrough” into revolutionary writing, particularly his depiction of new main protagonists: the urban lower class or petty bourgeoisie.81

79 Ye Shaojun, “On Writing” Ye Shaojun Collected Works 叶圣陶全集 (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), 204-247. The essay was originally published in 1929.


81 Ibid., 142.
These same critics make an interesting point regarding Ye’s artistic achievement in “Night.” While “Night” marks the writer’s turn from subjectivism to embrace a more objective approach to fiction, the story’s success is attributed to Ye Shaojun’s ability to create the atmosphere of terror, achieved through a blending of scene and feeling. The terminology used here is the traditional poetics of qing-jing (情景交融).\textsuperscript{82} Theoretically, qing-jing describes the process of artistic creation in the Chinese poetic tradition. Sensory impressions emanating from the natural world blend with subjective feelings that arise in the mind of the poet. When the experience takes shape in words, the scene and subjective response combine as one expression.\textsuperscript{83} In the process, the poet utilizes the symbolic potential of external forms to communicate complex thoughts and emotions for which direct speech is insufficient to describe. This aesthetic process, and the theories surrounding it, carried a special weight in the Chinese tradition as the concepts mirrored Taoist cosmological worldviews and the ideal of harmony.

I believe the lyrical mode in Ye Shaojun’s fiction is not rooted in a preference for the poetic style, but stems from a deep-rooted faith in humanism. His devotion to representing individual human dignity is the driving force creating this style. Consider Ye Shaojun’s discussion of portraiture in the essay, “On Writing,” published in 1929. The author advises

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\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
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would-be writers to pay attention to four aspects when creating a literary portrait: accurately show personality and general attitude, describe actions as a way to show the inner life of a character, present the temporal and spatial context of that character in order to realistically show what character knows, and finally, present speech accurately, including a character’s accent and tone of voice. Ye Shaojun cared about what makes each character interesting as an individual: “People have individual personalities, and every person is unique, we must also represent the unique impression that each individual presents to us.”

As one writes, Ye continues, he must blend the description of scene (境界 jingjie) and character (人物 renwu). Here it seems that Ye Shaojun intends to modernize traditional Chinese aesthetics, substituting “character” (renwu) for what had been the subjective feelings of the poet, bringing this aesthetics into the Leftist project to faithfully record life experience: “Scene (jingjie) is the setting for your characters (renwu); your characters (renwu) are the photographers for your scene (jingjie), everything made visible in your story is taken in through their lens.” Therefore, one of the tasks of a writer is to practice the art of description by observing people, their speech and actions, and imagining what the world looks like through their eyes.

“Night” offers many good examples of Ye Shaojun’s aesthetics of “scene and character.” Returning to the scene that opened this chapter, where the soldier describes to

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85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 242.
Uncle what he witnessed at the execution grounds earlier that day. The Chinese text captures much more vividly Ye Shaojun’s camera lens technique of showing the reader the world through a character’s point of view:

They seemed kindly folk. They came to this place full of indignation yet they still looked kindly. Each eyed the other, then both lowered their heads, as if they wanted to say something yet could not.  

他们两个都和善。他们你看我，我看你，看了几眼就低头，想说话又说不上。  

In the original Chinese text, the repetition of “you look at me, I look at you” emphasizes emphasis acts of looking, not only between husband and wife, but on the part of the soldier who observes. The use of pronouns “you” and “me” instead of “he” and “she” minimizes the distance between observer and observed and creates a feeling of intimacy in the scene. Yet traditional qing-jing aesthetics operate in this scene as well, generating a more abstract mood of terror surrounding the encounter between Uncle and the Soldier as they walk out to find the mass grave. The scene is described by the third-person narrator, but it is written to reflect Uncle’s flashback memory. Memory being subjective, the scene is projected with the man’s fear: the muddy path and fear of slipping mirrors a fear of falling onto graves and stirring up ghosts of the dead. This fear keeps Uncle physically close to the soldier, though the two are essentially strangers:

87 Ye Shaojun, in Gu and Chen eds., “Night,” 135-136. To confuse matters, a different wording appears in a more recent printing of the story: “他们两个都不行，没有一点气概，带出来就索索地抖，像两只鸡。面色灰了，你看我，我看你，眼泪水直淌，想说话又说不上” in Scarecrow, 168. This version more naturally represents what a soldier might say: “他们两个都不行” versus “他们两个都和善。” The word, “kindly” seems a bit didactic here. Further research is needed here to understand the history of these textual changes.
The two of them had walked towards the open country . . . There was no street light, no moon and no stars in the sky, the oppressive darkness weighed heavily upon them. The black shadows of distant trees and nearby buildings in the deathly silence seemed like monsters forming ranks. Occasionally two or three fireflies floated up and down as if ghosts were blinking their eyes with joy as they danced! The dogs’ barking and the automobiles’ honking in the distance sounded as if they came from beyond the horizon. But the faint droning in the air emanated from, scores of small ephemeral insects. It had rained in the morning and the ground was muddy and slippery. Uncle stumbled along in the dark. The other, a cigarette between his lips, said slowly, “They seemed kindly folk . . .”

Each image in this description carries emotional power, from the seemingly innocuous “open country,” which represents vulnerability, to the more symbolic linking of fireflies with ghosts. The urban and rural worlds are mixed as are the worlds of light/dark and living/dead as the two men move along an overlapping borderspace. The term, “borderspace” comes from the work of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger who describes the active attunement of self to Other as a “borderline.” As open subjects come together, they, knowingly or not, create a space of shared interpersonal boundaries, called a “borderspace.” In this “porous, temporary and transgressable” site, subjects are “inscribed with the traces of others, whether known or anonymous, just as others are inscribed with his/her traces.”

As Ye Shaojun writes this scene, he seems to be aware that the borderspace extends to the social world that defines the relationship between the two men. The soldier, in the darkness of the night, is depicted as dressed in civilian clothes, in the social position of fellow man rather than executing soldier. Thus, the two enter into a shared interpersonal and social space temporarily held by

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88 Ye Shaojun, “Night,” 78.

the borderspace of the path. The contrast with Lu Xun’s narrator and his childhood friend, Runtu, could not be more clear. In “My Old Home,” the two subjects do not move into a position where they may mutually create a shared space, but remain separate.

The power of this story, “Night,” while accentuated by the lyrical passages such as those above, finds its true force in the layered scenes of human interaction and social intimacy, each centered around portraits of human individuals presented in dialogic pairs:

- Grandmother and toddler
- Grandmother and her brother, “Uncle”
- “Uncle” and the soldier
- Soldier and the murdered couple
- Grandmother and daughter through a letter

Each pair represents a separate, but overlapping, temporal and spatial realm. Each pairing also includes dialogue and details that suggest intimacy. In the long opening sequence, an elderly grandmother struggles to soothe the tired child weak from crying for his mother. His cries are the outward expression of the woman’s own inexpressible grief, which is projected throughout the room as monstrous shadows on the lamplit walls. Intimacy is felt when Uncle meets the Soldier in the teahouse, in the detail of the soldier’s bodily gesture, a sigh of resignation that revealed the turn of his thinking. The humanizing force in Ye Shaojun’s fiction is not any kind of moral order, but is generated by physical proximity and mutual recognition.

Ye Shaojun lived in Shanghai during the years of the White Terror. Unlike other writers who resettled in Shanghai after the 1926 crackdown on Leftist activism in Beijing, Ye
Shaojun had been based in Shanghai since 1923 where he worked as an editor and teacher. Shanghai was not free of strife, especially after Guomindang (KMT) forces, under the control of Chiang Kai-shek, took control of the city in early 1927. Leftists and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) groups had been organizing labor unions and general strikes throughout the city for several years. Demonstrations often turned deadly, resulting in shooting casualties and even beheadings. The largest strike took place on March 21, 1927, involving nearly 600,000 Shanghai workers. By April, the fragile alliance between Communist and Nationalist forces finally broke, unleashing a wave of purgings and arrests by KMT of Communist workers, particularly labor organizers. Clashes between protestors, anti-union militia and KMT forces resulted in the killing of hundreds of protestors. Thousands of people went missing.

Ye Shaojun had been following the violence since the bloody May 30, 1925 crackdown on demonstrating workers and students that took the life of 12 students in Shanghai. He and fellow writers Zhu Ziqing, Mao Dun, and Zheng Zhenduo collaborated on a commemorative issue of Short Story Monthly dedicated to the memory of the victims. Ye also founded a revolutionary support group in Shanghai comprised of educators. Called the

90 Ye worked for the Shanghai Commercial Press (上海商务印书馆) and Kaiming Press (开明书店) in addition to working on several literary magazines, including Short Story Monthly (小说月报). Ye Shaojun’s publications of the mid-20s consisted of short stories, essays, children’s literature, and annotated readers.

91 According to Jonathan Spence, there were an estimated 499 unions in Shanghai representing nearly 821,000 workers. See The Search for Modern China, 352-353.


93 Twelve marchers were killed in the May 30, 1925, most of them students. The death toll rose in the 1926 demonstrations, where forty-seven demonstrators were killed. See Schwarcz, The Chinese Enlightenment, 147-149.
Shanghai Educators’ National Salvation Association, it pledged to support striking workers and the students who demonstrated with them.\textsuperscript{94}

Ye Shaojun’s increasing political engagement and commitment to revolutionary causes in the late 1920s impacted the types of sociality represented in his works. Ye’s shift to the left was well-researched by Vera Schwarcz in *The Chinese Enlightenment*. Ye Shaojun was one of many intellectuals of his generation who faced a crisis of confidence after the violence of 1925-1926. The values that had guided them through the early years of May Fourth, Schwarcz writes, were seemingly ineffectual now: “Those who undertook the long, difficult process of weaning themselves away from their May Fourth certainties had to put their ideas to the concrete test of history . . . events such as the massacres of 1925-26 could not be subsumed into their previous framework of interpretation and thus that frame had to be expanded.”\textsuperscript{95} One of the key narrative frames included writing about the lower classes who were suffering more than ever. Workers and peasants, mobilized by revolutionary efforts, were losing their lives by the thousands. The May Fourth spirit of idealism was not over and intellectuals like Ye Shaojun realized that they could no longer stand on the sidelines of history.

**Ye Shaojun and the Metaphor of the Garden**

Garden plots figure prominently in Ye Shaojun’s fiction, from “Bitter Greens” (1921), “The Headmaster” (校长, 1923) to the novel *Ni Huanzhi* (1929). In each case, the gardens

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 172.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 170.
are doomed to fail. In *Ni Huanzhi*, it is Schoolmaster Ni himself, presented as an overzealous scholar-type energized by May Fourth idealism, who overlooks local social and cultural realities when he decides to move an old graveyard in order to plant a garden for his school. The move generated local opposition to the school by the peasantry, despite Ni Huanzhi’s initial aim to create a garden to help students learn the value of labor so that they might relate to the locals better. Ye Shaojun utilizes the garden metaphor to demonstrate the glorious vision the idealism initiated and also, as Schwarcz noted above, the painful withdrawal intellectuals had to face when their garden projects failed.

In his fiction, Ye Shaojun continually returned to the figure of the teacher of modern, “new schools,” whose job it was to prepare young people for taking up productive roles in a new society. Teachers were the intellectual gardeners of this new society. They planted ideas, rather than real seeds, and nurtured their growth and development. The task was immense. One notable example of such a character type is the teacher-protagonist in the suspenseful emotional sketch, “The Package” (包裹, 1926). Like many intellectuals of his time, this modern teacher felt trapped between social and political forces. Above all, he saw his role in society as a servant for young people: “Ah! To end like this before I’m even thirty! . . . Though it may not count as aiming very high, I did want to make a success of that school of mine; I wanted to see my students amount to something.”96 And a bit later, after recalling the sight of the atrocities carried out by the Warlords and anti-revolutionary elements, he experiences a moment of revolutionary ardor himself: “Old Li’s cause should

be the cause of us all. I should follow his example.” Yet this thought is undermined by another: “But I have my own work to do . . . I’m teaching young people not to lapse into bad ways, and that’s very important too, besides being more basic. As for the other [work—meaning political movement], I’m not up to it.” Ye Shaojun was aware of this apparent contradiction that the commitment to youth brought about in teachers who were educated in the new culture movement and were surrounded on the one hand by even more radical calls for revolution, and on the other, by conservative local gentry who preferred the status quo. These literary figures, both the gardener and the teacher, represented a general forward-looking thrust of Ye Shaojun in his approach to writing.

Chinese critics have long read Ye Shaojun’s shrewd character portrayal as a parody on the weakness and shallow conviction of the educated class, even those who are reform-minded. And yet, Ye presents readers with an interesting facet of reality: running a school takes an equal commitment of energy and resources, and intellectuals of that time sometimes felt that they could not do both. David Der-wei Wang articulated what was at stake in his review of Marston Anderson’s The Limits of Realism: “The realist writer’s newly-won awareness of different ways to see and depict “reality” was undercut by their desire to imagine and believe in a new Reality.” The “new Reality” is, of course, the future society the reformers were intent on building and that teachers in new-style schools were already creating day by day.

97 Ibid, 67.
Conclusion

The discussions in this chapter focused on dialogue and instances of inscribed relationality in the texts of Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun. It asked how these writers, in their effort to present human portraits, also explored the relational dimensions of their character’s identities. Lu Xun’s pessimism about the ability for people to connect across cultural and linguistic gaps is the dominant mode of his works, yet hopeful moments of connectivity appear that reveal the author’s deliberate staging of the possibility of meaningful human exchange in the form of narrative desire. Ye Shaojun, on the other hand, based his work on a faith in relationship, and intentionally probed the nature of human interaction, even across class boundaries. In the short fiction of Ye Shaojun, failed attempts at making genuine connection are tempered by persistence; his characters stay engaged in life from within networks of family and professional relationships. They do not choose isolation as is the case with so many Lu Xun protagonists.

Literary portraits function, as all portraits do, as receptacles of meaning, both individual and collective. In the realm of modern Chinese literary history, portrait literature has largely been understood in one way: writers of the 1920’s operated within an individualist-enlightenment modality and mainly wrote about the self and abstract ideas. After 1928 and by the beginning of the 1930’s, the major effort of many writers shifted to writing about others, but more specifically, about the underrepresented peasants or “masses”:

From the enlightenment literature to the revolutionary literature, Chinese writers quickly shifted their interests in the representation of the intellectuals to that of the
masses and of the people. Along this passage, voice had been gradually politicized as the embodiment of the collective subjectivity.

The idea of Chinese popular culture may be defined in various ways, but its most significant feature in the 1930’s was the glorification of the masses as a chief historical figure for representation. As a result, the intellectuals stopped the drama of self-portrait and directed a new drama for the masses.99

According to this thinking, writers initially felt empowered to write literature of self-discovery and self-creation, but then, following Leftist ideals, began to write about social classes, marginalized groups and entire cultures of workers and peasantry. In this view, self and other could not be farther apart. What I have shown in this discussion is the existence of a middle ground of relationality that existed prior to and right alongside the “discovery” of the masses as both object of representation and potential consumer of literary texts. The discourse of otherness begins much earlier and can be seen in much more subtle and, in many cases, more meaningful ways.

Shen Congwen’s Listening Voice: A Study of Rhetorical “Belongingness” and Relational Narrative Desire

Openness exists . . . not only for the person to whom one listens, but rather anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.¹

-Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method

Shen Congwen 沈从文 (1902-1988) was a self-proclaimed observer; he wrote that it was his primary way of learning about the world. According to the author’s autobiographical essay, “The Relationship of My Writing to Water” (我的写作与水的关系, 1934), his ability to invent stories and to write developed through years of observation and reflection. The essay tells of his early truancy, how sneaking away from school offered opportunities to wander through fields of grain as tall as his body, losing himself in the sounds of insects and grasshoppers coming from all directions. On other days, he went into the village to observe the goings-on at the butcher’s table or the blacksmith’s shop. Rainy days were no less enjoyable, even while being punished for playing hooky, for rain offered solitude and a chance to reflect: “. . . because the rain checked the movement of my body, my mind then

took in all it saw and experienced, reviewed it and recorded it to memory.” The sound of the rain and the act of listening also played a role in triggering imaginative thought:

In that empty cavern of a dining room, listening to the sounds of water dripping from the eaves outside, *di li, di li*, my imaginative powers would get another opportunity to be trained. I had to use remembrance (*huixiang*) and fantasy (*huanxiang*) to complement my poor meal, and to console me for the suffering I brought on myself.³

One might overlook the sound of dripping water in the passage as a minor detail in the description of scene, but with this statement, sound becomes an essential component connecting water, memory, imagination, emotions, and writing.

It appears that Shen Congwen, in listening to the rain, does not focus solely on the rain as rain – as an observed phenomenon, but allows the resonance of sound to trigger a mix of mental associations. The philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy described the act of listening in a similar way, focusing on the role that resonance (as re-sonance or the echo sound makes) plays in our reception of sound. By resonance, Nancy means that we take in sound through acts of listening and it circulates freely in our minds before arriving at cognition. In the echo of resonance, the subject feels an emotional response even before being aware of a cognitive response.⁴ In this sense, says Nancy, listening will always be “straining toward or in an approach to the self.” It is as if the mind fills in the gaps left by sound’s elusive qualities, as Nancy attests: “. . . to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and

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³ Ibid.

consequently one that is not immediately accessible.⁵ Readers of Shen Congwen cannot fail to notice the importance of listening and sound imagery in the author’s works. One feels that listening marks the author’s approach to knowledge – his orientation toward the world. Ever-present in the works of Shen Congwen is a narrative voice that leans in and strains toward possible meanings.

While Nancy is primarily concerned with sound as affect, and considers its circulation of energy a precursor to conscious subjectivity, Luce Irigaray tackles the experience of listening within communicative acts, as something that happens between subjects. In a chapter of her monograph on the subject of love entitled, i love to you, Irigaray problematizes the act of listening by asking: “How am I to listen to you?” Irigaray’s work helps us position the many inscribed acts of listening in the works of Shen Congwen which seem to reinforce an attitude of openness toward the world. In Irigaray’s i love to you, listening is presented a combination of space and attentiveness; it is perception:

I am listening to you: I perceive what you are saying, I am attentive to it, I am attempting to understand and hear your intention. Which does not mean I comprehend you, [or] I know you . . . ⁶

There is a similar neutrality in the works of Shen Congwen that is not found, for example, in those of Lu Xun, whose “call to arms” shouted an alarm toward a society believed to lack humane sensibilities.⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, Lu Xun’s narrators silence

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⁵ Nancy, Listening, 6, my emphasis.


⁷ The title of Lu Xun’s first collection of fiction is A Call to Arms (呐喊).
conversation and cut off potential – in their assumed grasp of the other. By contrast, Shen Congwen’s open attitude represents both a different generation and an outsider’s perspective of *unknowingness*. Born in the Western Hunanese town of Fenghuang, in a region characterized by tensions between ethnic Miao and the Han majority, Shen Congwen grew up with an awareness of how different cultures, language, and perceptions of life affect one’s identity. Shen Congwen’s literary works are thus infused with this sensitivity to otherness.

Shen Congwen’s openness can thus be understood as a form of attentiveness that does not impose judgment but awaits possibility. For Irigaray, listening is as much a gesture as a communicative act; it is less concerned with outcomes (believing that one really knows) than on perceiving and attending to another person or environment. The silence offered by listening is *the* critical moment for Irigaray, for the silence opens a space within which an other’s *existence* may emerge: “It offers you the possibility of existing, of expressing your intention, your intentionality . . .”\(^8\)

This question is particularly appropriate when applied to the context of modern Chinese literature. Intellectuals faced with the task of writing about others in their society recognized the difficulty in creating such representations.\(^9\) Lu Xun directly explored the facets of this complicated issue, showing the difficulty of both genuine interaction and attentive listening. In “My Old Home,” Lu Xun presents a scene where Runtu visits the

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8 Irigaray, *I love to you*, 118.

narrator at his family home in Shaoxing. Suddenly face-to-face with his boyhood friend, the narrator struggles to reconcile the worn and wrinkled person before him with his memory of the past. When Runtu addresses him as “Master,” the narrator retreats even further. The scene is worth presenting here:

[Runtu] stood there, mixed joy and sadness showing on his face. His lips moved, but not a sound did he utter. Finally, assuming a respectful attitude, he said clearly:

“Master! . . . “

I felt a shiver run through me; for I knew then what a lamentably thick wall had grown up between us. Yet I could not say anything.10

Notice how Lu Xun astutely presents readers with the complex non-verbal communication that passed between the two men – showing that they both have thoughts that are not presented in words. Ideological interpretations of this story typically express sympathy with the narrator’s inability to connect with Runtu because of assumed class differences. And yet, Lu Xun’s own expression appears to be much more complex. This brief passage shows that it is the narrator who steps back behind the intellectual wall, indicated above and also in a later passage: “After he had gone out, Mother and I both shook our heads over his hard life: many children, famines, taxes, soldiers, bandits, officials and landed gentry, all had squeezed him as dry as a mummy.” The irony is that, despite this declaration of sympathy, Lu Xun’s narrator did not really speak with his friend. Runtu exists mainly as a certain type of “victim” but mainly from the narrator’s own limited perspective. The narrator’s intellectualized frame replaced genuine interaction. Examining this scene through the lens that Irigaray has

provided, can Lu Xun’s non-speaking and non-listening narrator grant Runtu a true possibility of existing?

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, author of the first book-length philosophical study of listening, describes listening as an act that operates within established epistemological frames of reference. In fact, much of what we call listening is actually a rather passive acknowledgement of pre-established norms, habituated discourse, and categorized knowledge. At worst, listening becomes distorted as a form of prediction, couched within power relations:

There exists a way of “listening” geared to detect the typical traits that characterize an interlocutor’s expression, with a view to attaining a predictability of his moves. The accuracy and perspicacity of this way of “listening” allows for the attainment of a contractual power of a predictive nature. Such a strategy can be instrumental in achieving an end in the same way as any other form of knowledge. This way of paying attention, therefore, can not be regarded as an authentic listening experience. It is a kind of self-interested and manipulative “eavesdropping.”

This assessment provides a different angle by which to critique Lu Xun’s narrator in “My Old Home.” It is not only class differences or gaps of linguistic and cultural referentiality that separate the narrator from Runtu, it is the very act of listening itself which gets truncated by a closed epistemological approach. To Fiumara, the open approach is characterized by neutrality and, in its perfect state, by disinterestedness. By setting aside our self-interest, we can remain open to hear and process the meanings that come from an other.

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11 Gemma Corradi Fiumara, The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 115.

12 Ibid.
With these issues in mind, I will explore inscribed acts of listening and perception and their link to an open epistemological positioning the works of Shen Congwen. Compared with Lu Xun, Shen was a very different type of spokesman for his age. He used his writing to present a model of a modern relational self. In his literary world, characters could interact and listen to one another in meaningful ways. While communication remains imperfect and is challenged by circumstances, as seen in works such as The Border Town where misunderstanding leads to crisis in a community; nonetheless, an attitude of receptivity and listening is always on display.

The main argument that will serve as a thread throughout this chapter is the suggestion that Shen Congwen’s listening voice offers readers a philosophical vision of intellectual and hermeneutic openness, in spite of the many challenges of mid-twentieth century life in China. These are the same challenges listed by Lu Xun: caring for children, poverty, famine, taxes, war, exploitation by elites, lack of opportunity, political instability, and global imperialist pressure. However, Shen Congwen’s response to these challenges was to look for beauty rather than to critique the ugly. In his mind, this practice held a certain type of philosophical truth. In Shen’s later writings, he called this truth shengming, or Life, described as an awareness of the essential beauty in and spiritual capacity of all people and living things. The ugliness of China’s problems could only be countered with strength that derived from an inner faith in the beauty of life.13

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After a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of listening as a mode of perception, this chapter will explore the “listening voice” evident in Shen Congwen’s *Letters from a Trip to West Hunan* (1934). In this collection of autobiographical travel essays, the author constructs a narrative self whose consciousness is shaped by non-hierarchy and other-relatedness. His narrative self delights in moments of listening, watchfulness, and observation as he journeys through the riverways of West Hunan. Present, too, is a lack of ego-determination or judgment upon reception of stimuli or messages from others and from an environment as a whole.

In the second section, I will study constructions of narrative voice in key texts from Shen Congwen’s early period. This analysis will demonstrate the author’s early concern with belongingness and the function of listening and perception in relation to identity. This type of narrative openness has been termed “relational narrative desire” by critic Maureen Niwa-Heinen. Relational narrative desire is defined as effects or traces evident in a text that disclose a desire for encounter, conversation and exchange, and connectivity. The desired outcome of this desire is a feeling of belongingness. Could a desire for this emotional state of belonging be at the heart of Shen Congwen’s lyrical project? A comparative reading of Shen Congwen’s essay, “A Record of Life” (生之记录, 1926), reveals an uncomfortable I-centered subject that retreats into a more limited third-person persona. The open, polyvocal, and communal narrative voices generated by the diffuse third-person narration, point to an incomplete, open and relational identity.
Finally, I examine how Shen Congwen’s “listening voice” takes shape in Shen Congwen’s lyrical fiction from the early thirties. Readings of “The Company Commander” (连长, 1927), “Baizi” (柏子, 1928), and “Little Scenes of Guizhou (黔小景, 1931) reveal an acute attention to the creation of a lyrical atmosphere. This atmosphere, heavily dependent on sound imagery, is carefully deployed to shape the feeling and reception of a text. Just as highly visual description invites the reader to “see” the world of Shen Congwen’s story, his sound imagery opens affective responses that allow the reader to “feel” the emotions of the story. Similar to the Chinese concept of 兴 xing, or affective response, atmosphere functions as a marker of hermeneutic openness.14

The Neutrality of Listening

The quote from Gadamer’s Truth and Method that opens this chapter links together key aspects of Shen Congwen’s writing: listening, openness, and the idea that acts of listening functions at the center of human relationships. For Gadamer, listening is more than an act, it informs a subject’s desire to belong, whether to a person or a place. The feeling of belonging arises from mutual attention to listening.15 Together with Jean-Luc Nancy’s “straining toward a possible meaning,” and Irigaray’s attentive perception to others, this


15 Gadamer’s statement: “Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another,” in Truth and Method.
chapter will explore the fundamental attitude of epistemological openness critical to understanding Shen Congwen’s philosophical expression. Theories of relational subjectivity privilege an acceptance of the possibility that meaning is not fixed, but fluid, and that choices abound. In the writings of Shen Congwen, epistemological openness is reflected in poly-vocal, unstable or incomplete narrative forms of expression.

While potentially a negative capability that could lead one toward overwhelming uncertainty and despair, epistemological openness can also be a positive characteristic or response to the pressures brought by modernity. Relational subjectivity emphasizes receptivity to difference and an attitude of tolerance, both necessary for healthy social discourse. A genuine openness to others also provides opportunities for the self to learn and grow. Moving toward living something other than a “solitary destiny” is the aim of this kind of relational openness, according to Irigaray.\textsuperscript{16} I believe that Shen Congwen knew all too well the life of a solitary traveler. His works represent a reaching out, a desire to re-connect with people and places that could provide a feeling of wholeness. In the final decade of this writing career, this desire for connection took the form of a life philosophy.

This discussion will also deal with a seeming paradox: How can Shen Congwen communicate a “listening attitude” in a textual form that is a vehicle for the speaking self? The mainstream rhetoric of the Chinese literary revolution focused on who is speaking and what is being said. The trend toward subjectivism, first identified by Jaroslav Průšek, revealed that many writers of the May Fourth era took up the role of spokesperson for their

\textsuperscript{16} Irigaray, \textit{Sharing the World}, 17.
generation. They were, in fact, following in the footsteps of traditional Chinese literary values of *wenyi zaidao* 文艺载道—that literature and art embody and communicate an ethical teaching. While Shen Congwen also embraced this role of communicator, indeed as “spokesman” for West Hunan, he did so using a different set of tactics and a remarkably distinct epistemological attitude that informed the writer’s deployment of language and form.

Pursuing this very point, Gemma Corradi Fiumara argues that a discourse concerning listening is the blind spot in the logocentric and rational hermeneutic world we inhabit. Throughout the Western tradition, listening has been regarded as either an innate skill common to all, unquestioned and unexamined, or as a marker of passivity, low intelligence, or dumbness.¹⁷ In other words, if we cannot speak, we are therefore relegated to the lower status position of listener.

The approach to listening followed a significantly different course of development in the Chinese tradition. The Taoist metaphysical tradition has long privileged intuitive knowledge, the meaning “beyond words,” and the personal attitude of listening as critical to the cultivation of wisdom. In the chapter of the Zhuangzi entitled “In the World of Men,” the philosopher even asks that one goes beyond actual listening to inner awareness:

>  
> Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language*, 43.

While it may first appear that Zhuangzi advocates turning off listening faculties, his main point is to cultivate a way of listening that allows received stimuli to freely circulate in the mind and spirit. Chinese interpretations of Buddhism (Chan 禪) went even further in offering a positive conceptualization of the listening mind as part of its meditative practice of non-dualism and contemplation of knowledge that lies beyond both sensuous and rational modes of apprehension.\(^{19}\)

The art of listening was conceptualized in Chinese poetics as zhiyin (知音), or “knowing the tone.” Zhiyin would be evoked by poets and critics to point out an emotional and intellectual bond held between two individuals, often voiced by a poet who searches for this “one who knows the tone,” or “the understander.”\(^{20}\) The concept evolved from the story of Bo Ya, a zither player, and his friend Zhong Ziqi, which dates from the Warring States period of the Zhou Dynasty. Stephen Owen sums up the story: “It was hearing Po-ya play the ch’in which let his friend Chung tzu-ch’i know what was in Po-ya’s heart and thus became the first chih-yin, ‘the one who knows the tone.’”\(^{21}\) Over generations, Chinese poets and readers hoped for life moments that replicated this friendship between Boya and Zhong Ziqi, sought that type of deep connection, and lamented their fates when it proved elusive.\(^{22}\)


\(^{21}\) Owen, Omen of the World, 234.

In recent years, Western philosophers have focused on the potentially radical nature of listening, and the challenge that listening presents to constructions of knowledge and identity. True listening, meaning true openness to other points of view, in Fiumara’s words, contests epistemological frameworks as it allows for difference. She states that true listening, “actually impoverishes us from a ‘rational’ point of view because if we seriously engage in paying heed we may even come to a state of helplessness and disorientation.”

This view of listening places the act in non-linear and multi-focal positions, and shows how it can disrupt our cognitive bearings. Our notions of “reality,” “nature,” and “the world” become severed from their moorings and suddenly demand a re-negotiation. Theoretically speaking, listening thus functions as a challenge to hierarchical, structured, and even institutionalized forms of knowledge.

This cognitive disruption is not unlike the crisis of modernity faced by many Chinese intellectuals in the late nineteenth-century to the early twentieth-century. The complex, philosophically-oriented works of Shen Congwen reveals a response to these intellectual concerns, particularly the destabilization of linguistic referentiality. In his study of Shen

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23 Fiumara, The Other Side of Language, 43.

24 Fiumara suggests that if we develop skills of listening with the same effort that we cultivate those of rhetoric, subjects can engage in listening without fear of losing one’s grounding by way of “colonization” by others. Listening can be cultivated as a strength separate from the power of logocentric rhetoric. See 62-68.

25 The instability and fluidity of linguistic signs occurred as a result of the perceived overuse of artificial and archaic classical language coupled with the rise of a new modern baihua that sought to replace classical forms. Further relativizing meaning is the introduction of foreign words, concepts, and even grammatical structures into the Chinese language. See Lydia H. Liu, Translingual Practice for a discussion of early twentieth-century language reforms and the assimilation of foreign terms. See Edward Gunn, Rewriting Chinese for a discussion of western-influenced grammar in modern baihua.
Congwen’s complex engagement with literary realism, David Der-wei Wang remarked that Shen Congwen was one of the few fiction writers of his generation who placed as much emphasis on style and the rhetoric of his language as the content of his story, which often lead to ambiguities of both meaning and purpose in his writing. 

Shen Congwen’s fluid use of language evoked skepticism toward meaning and, at the same time, opened up a realm of expressive possibility. This push and pull of the real with the poetic can be found in literary texts where lyricism is undercut by realist detail, where realism is expanded by poetic flight, and where coordinates of space and time shift in “trans-temporal” and “trans-spatial” ways. With respect to Shen’s lyrical works, Wang suggests that “the dismissal of a coherent perspective, of course, functions as a new kind of perspective.”

Addressing the complexity in the author’s “native soil” fiction, Wang notes that Shen Congwen “endeavors to discover a new entry into it.” This new path of expression, one that challenged the expectations of genre, style and message, together point to the epistemological openness at the heart of Shen Congwen’s intellectual endeavors.

Shen Congwen’s “listening attitude” also stands out among writers of his age due to the way it reveals a desire for connection and belonging, both to place and to community.

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27 A good example of these tensions may be found in Wang’s reading of Shen Congwen’s short story, “Twilight” (黄昏, 1934). See *Fictional Realism*, 210-213.

28 Wang, *Fictional Realism*, 234.

29 Ibid., 255.
Returning to the concept of *wenyi zaidao* mentioned above, Shen Congwen had his own working definition of it – one that relied upon exchange and communication:

The history of literature and the arts has always existed within the meanings of “articulating the *zhi*” and “carrying the *dao*.” Everybody says that arts must have morality as one of its requirements. If we assume that the existence of this concept is justified, then, at minimum, the effect of creative works should be one which can ensure *communication between the artist and other people* based on an understanding of our *shared human nature*. From a feeling of satisfaction or completeness arise the feelings of happiness and a sense of being enlightened, these in turn, will create the courage and confidence to forge ahead. Thus we can say the procurement of this effect is moral\(^\text{30}\) (emphasis mine).

In Shen Congwen’s mind, if literature must serve a higher purpose, of either moral intent or subjective expression, then it can only be achieved through the exchange (*jiaoliu*) of ideas and feelings between self and others.\(^\text{31}\) Further, communication is grounded on *shared* meaning, based on an understanding of a sense of shared human nature (共同的人性).

Shen Congwen’s interest in interpersonal exchange (*交流*) reveals a side to his lyrical project that was inherently relational and primarily concerned with how meaning in human affairs was constructed by way of relations with others. Thematically, relationships between people also form the core of the writer’s fictional output. For example, Shen Congwen’s most famous work, *The Border Town* (*边城*, 1934), presents a touching and unforgettable relationship between a girl and her grandfather at the time when she is about to enter

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\(^\text{31}\) Shen’s phrase, “self and others,” was alternatively translated by Cheng Maorong as “artist and other people.”
womanhood without the guidance of a father or mother. In “The Husband,” (丈夫, 1930), Shen describes the complicated yet loyal relationship between a man and his wife who must engage in prostitution to help the family make ends meet. In “Baizi” (柏子, 1928), we have the fleeting, but soulful encounter between Baizi, a traveling boatman, and his lover, a local prostitute. In “Xiao Xiao” (萧萧, 1929), Shen Congwen presents the story of a girl in a web of relations, not only with her child-husband and his family, but with her lover and, at the end of the story, with the community of the wider village that chooses to accept them. All of these stories are essentially about, as the author himself said, the “flesh and blood” aspects of human life (血肉生命): our passions, bonds of affection, and the negotiations of family life.32

Relationality, Openness and the Humanist Persona

To what extent is Shen Congwen’s philosophical project linked to his persona as a humanist of his generation? C. T. Hsia was one of the first critics to point out the “dark side” of Shen Congwen’s fiction, arguing that, “. . . one does not begin to appreciate his pastoralism until one is aware of his satiric anger.”33 Yet more than anything else, Hsia was drawn to the “quality of wisdom” in the author’s works, as well as his spiritual inclinations.34


34 Hsia wrote of the Fengzi passage, “As a modern Chinese author’s religious testament, the foregoing passage, however theologically naïve, possesses a quality of wisdom which is in surprising contrast to the utilitarian materialism of his time,” A History, 190
In Hsia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, he opens his chapter on Shen Congwen with a passage from the novella, *Fengzi* (1937) that represents the author’s religious sensibility:

> I thought that, as a philosophical concept, the term God, in spite of its historical function in relation to human life, has become debased by urban civilization and that the existence of God is no longer justifiable or possible. But from the ceremonies I have just witnessed, I realize that God exists now as in earlier times. But his majesty and beauty are only apparent under a certain condition: namely, the plain honesty of human emotions, the simple purity of thought, and the presence of a pastoral environment.\(^{35}\)

In *Fengzi*, the educated narrator who had abandoned any faith in God finds himself rediscovering it in the honest expression of a Miao ritual performed in a beautiful natural setting. Hsia believes Shen’s interest in spiritual matters and deeper truths fundamentally set him apart from his contemporaries. Hsia regards Shen Congwen as a humanist, as a man whose values of “plain honesty of human emotions” and the “simple purity of thought” informed a body of work that often reached toward “higher” ground, investing stories with a “larger meaning.”\(^{36}\) Hsia does not further elaborate perhaps because the author himself made no such claim in his own lifetime.\(^{37}\) Yet even in his earliest essays and fiction, a personal philosophy that valued honesty, simplicity, and a reverence for beauty can be glimpsed. These values find their first full articulation in a collection of critical essays on modern Chinese literature published in 1930 under the title of *Froth* (沫沫集, 1930).

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 189-190.

\(^{36}\) Hsia, in reading the climax of Shen’s short story, “Night,” stresses that, “This passage, almost Dantesque in its pregnant terseness, reaches back and invests the whole story with a larger meaning,” 205. What that “larger meaning” is exactly, is not clearly stated, however.

\(^{37}\) The collection is a reediting of the writer’s notes from his work as university lecturer, first at Wusong University (1929) and Wuhan University (1930). See Jeffrey Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 192.
The essays in *Froth* present a non-political perspective that highlights literature’s aesthetic and humanist qualities. The following is a list of attributes Shen admired in the works of several May Fourth writers, including Fei Ming, Bing Xin, Zhu Ziqing and Xu Dishan.

The words he chooses to describe their style could easily be used to describe his own works:

- An easygoing feeling (从容)
- Clear and simple (清丽素朴)
- Warm and loving, motherly (怀着母性似的温爱)
- Gentle and smiling (有个柔和的笑影)
- Language of everyday life (文字在活用的语言上)

Contains a poetic atmosphere (有诗意，诗境)
A sincere and profound attitude (真挚清幽的神态)
Lyrical expression is most important (以抒情为主)
Generous and natural (大方而自然)
Presents small vignettes (人事小境)

Impressions from the past are remembered (追忆印象)
Presents another world/realm (表现一种境界)
Quiet and bashful characters (沉默而羞涩)
Hearts pure and clear like water (透明如水)
Characters have a soul (人物有一个灵魂)

Concise and simple language (俭朴文字)
A feminine tone (女性似的单调)
Presents real villages and countrymen (真正的乡村与农民)
The still beauty of the countryside (农村寂静的美)

Shen Congwen was attracted to the humanist qualities of these writer’s works, qualities that generate feelings of warmth or affection. Consider the apparent emphasis on a gentle, easy-going tone (从容 and 有个柔和的笑影), or the motherly or feminine warmth and love (怀

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着母性似的温爱 and 女性似的单调). These qualities seem to be the values he utilized in the creation of his own lyrical style.

This list of literary qualities was culled from perhaps the most important article in Shen Congwen’s critical writings: “From Bing Xin to Fei Ming” (由冰心到废名, 1930). In this critical essay, Shen suggests that these modern lyrical writers and their representative works form a unique genealogy in modern Chinese literature. These are the writers and texts discussed:

- **Bing Xin** (冰心) 《笑》, 《寄小读者，通讯二十》
- **Zhu Ziqing** (朱自清) 《桨声灯影里的秦淮河》, 《河塘月色》
- **Yu Pingbo** (俞平伯) 《西泠桥上卖甘蔗》
- **Xu Dishan** (许地山) 《空山灵雨》
- **Chuan Dao** (川岛) 《月夜》
- **Fei Ming** (废名) 《竹林的故事》, 《侨》, 《枣》

“From Bing Xin to Fei Ming” seems primarily concerned with identifying a particular attitude toward life shared by writers in this grouping rather than focusing on style. Shen begins his discussion by locating the position of these writers in relation to Lu Xun and Xu Zhimo, the leaders of what may be considered two main trends within modern Chinese literature. Lu Xun represents the trend toward realism and revolutionary writing and Xu Zhimo represents the trend toward individualism and romanticism. Though Shen clearly praises Xu Zhimo and Lu Xun in striking terms (“Xu Zhimo’s language is brilliant like fine jade, rich with color and fragrance like silk brocade”; “Lu Xun writes with a penetrating eye and clear and cold descriptive skill”), he also questions the seemingly excessive attitudes both writers bring to their works. Weariness, a sense of alienation and excited indignation (奋激) characterize Lu

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39 Ibid.
Xun’s works. And while Shen, in another essay praises Lu Xun’s contribution to the development of realist fiction, here he softly criticizes the negativity that characterizes many of Lu Xun’s stories. At the same time, he suggests (also rather subtly) that Xu Zhimo’s romantic flair is perhaps a bit too exaggerated and self-aggrandizing at times (夸张).

By contrast, Shen finds the works of Bing Xin, Zhu Ziqing and Fei Ming lacking the Lu Xun spirit of indignation as well as Xu Zhimo’s eulogizing passion. Instead, a different language and style characterize this group:

They all use a clear and simple language to express their emotions, treat the small, everyday matters of life, without exception, with the warmth of a mother’s love; from the time their pens flow, although their styles are not the same, careful readers can discern a similar impression, that is to say their works convey a gentle and smiling expression toward the “human world.”

Shen emphasizes this group’s different positioning vis-à-vis their subject matter and their readers, a certain sympathy with the world and human affairs. Rather than assume the authority to praise or blame their world (like Lu Xun or Xu Zhimo), the writers in this group, according to Shen, assume a more modest attitude and a more neutral position intellectually and politically. This chapter will further show that the attitude assumed by the author can be described as fundamentally receptive. Shen Congwen approaches his writing with a “listening attitude.”

Finally, one could easily argue that the connections sought in the works of Shen Congwen have as much to do with place as they do with people. In many works of fiction as

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40 Ibid, 221. The original text reads: 然而同样是用清丽素朴的文字抒情, 对人生小小事情, 一列俨然怀着母性似的温爱, 从笔下流出时, 虽方式不一, 细心读者欲可得到同一印象, 即作品中无不对于“人间”有个温和的笑影.
well as travel essays, Shen carefully describes the relationship between characters and their surroundings -- the landscape, aspects of weather, and the built environment -- in ways that seem to highlight its relative importance. Further, the narrator’s represented experience of the external world always seems to be foregrounded, occupying a central position that focuses the reader’s attention on the very act of perception. In this chapter, I am less interested in examining the poetics of Shen Congwen’s native place writing, how he navigated through the fragments of memory and experience to chart out a spatial and temporal nexus called “home.”

Here, my analysis will linger with the texture and structure of the description itself, locating modes of perception. Shen Congwen’s multi-sensory perception, particularly that of sound, and his spirit of phenomenological inquiry become a texture that informs an attitude of openness and receptivity. The emphasis in his writing on what is out there, also contributes to the construction of a decentered subjectivity, a position characteristic of relational subjectivity.

Another way of looking at this issue is to locate Shen Congwen’s many inscribed acts of perception as literary expression of topophilia, an “affective bond between people and place or setting.” Topophilia, as defined by Yi-fu Tuan, helps us to see the ways in which

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41 The most illuminating discussion of Shen’s native place fiction is found in David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*. See Chapter 7, “Imaginary Nostalgia: Shen Congwen and Native Soil Fiction,” 247-289.

42 Maureen Niwa-Heinen uses the term, “decentered subjectivity,” to describe the ways that authors of modernist texts “destabilize” traditional narrative modes with poly-vocal narrative techniques. This shifts narrative energies from a single-subject view to an other-directed, multiple-perspective, views more relational in nature. See “Relational Narrative Desire,” 50-52.

affect operates on a basic level in ecological perception. This type of affect, I will argue, found in Shen Congwen’s experiential descriptions of place, contributes to the energy that drives his lyrical style. While I agree with David Wang that Shen Congwen often blunts his own lyricism by incorporating the abject, the tragic or the grotesque in the same story or text, he nonetheless also imbues lyrical passages with a profound affective power. The irreducible nature of affect, like the poetic concept of xing, or affective image, contributes to the lingering of lyrical impressions in the mind of the reader. The circulation of affective energies from place attachment deepens readers’ attraction to the lyrical passages. This affective power may help to explain how many readers seem to miss, or knowingly overlook, the ironic and tragic elements so present in the fiction of Shen Congwen.

The Self as Listening Subject: Receptivity and Non-Hierarchy in Letters from a Trip to West Hunan

Examining Shen Congwen’s philosophical and humanist orientations toward writing reveals the writer’s interest in non-hierarchical perception. Two autobiographical works, Letters from a Trip to West Hunan (湘西书简, 1934) and “Green Nightmare” (绿魇, 1944) each present non-hierarchy as linked with acts of listening. My analysis has found that the author privileges sound over visual perception in many works in a way that suggests

44 Tuan’s groundbreaking works in cultural geography influenced a several generations of scholars interested in the complex social and linguistic intersections of space, place and identity. Beyond Topophilia, Tuan’s other influential texts include: Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (1977), Landscapes of Fear (1979), and Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture (1993), and most recently, Humanist Geography: An Individual’s Search for Meaning (2012). Tuan’s life-long interest in philosophy, from both Western and Chinese traditions, informs a humanist ethics operating at the center of his work.

45 See David Der-wei Wang, Fictional Realism, 201-245.
preference for this alternative mode of perception. Shen Congwen appears to take in all sounds from his environment without discrimination in a non-hierarchical manner. However, I will also explain that perception is also fundamentally influenced by mental conditioning and, as such, will also reflect cultural norms, personal interests and values. Third, Shen Congwen’s writing reveals an other-connectedness with respect to sound. He is more concerned with sound as transmission, than as received percept (as phenomenon rather than object). Shen’s sound narratives constantly evoke the maker of sounds and their imagined action, showing a humanist orientation. Finally, in these works, Shen Congwen explores the gap between language (words) and meaning. He expresses his frustration with the limitations of language. Sounds, in Shen’s experience, provide psychic links to “larger” and more holistic ways of narrating subjective experience.

The most striking element one notices about Letters from a Trip to West Hunan is the great attention Shen gives to the description of music and sound. Most travel journals focus upon observation, or on what is seen. By contrast, Shen Congwen seems to fixate on sounds and their emotional effects. The acute attention to sound may be a product of Shen’s isolation on the river. Isolated on the boat, and often inside the little cabin, Shen is limited in both movement and visual perception and thus depends upon sound to provide color and meaning to the landscape before his eyes. Yet it is also clear that the act of listening is something more than part of the diary entry of the day’s events. The following passage, a detailed account of the manner by which is boat is rowed upstream, is accentuated by the writer’s attention to the way sounds are carried to him on the water through the actions of
the boatmen. The effect reveals a highly emotional connection to the world made possible by sound and perceptive listening:

Another two of the deckhands have the duty of grasping tightly the punt pole when the boat is in the channel, they push it down to the right and to the left of the boat, striking the iron pole on the rocks in the water to make a wonderful sound. When we got to a deep channel then they pull on the oars, bending up from the waist and pulling back on the long oar, making the water go hua hua, the sound is very deep and gentle. When we get to rough waters, then two men take the tow rope over their shoulders, pulling the boat through . . . the place where I sleep is a bit low in the boat and I can make out the thin and broken sound of water flowing beneath it.46

Shen Congwen’s writing blends visual and aural perception as if the two complement the other, filling in the gaps that the other cannot provide. In fact, visual perception is more abstract and selective than other senses as Yi-fu Tuan has noted: “The eyes explore the visual field and abstract from it certain objects, points of focus, perspectives.”47 By contrast, both hearing and the sense of smell are less controllable, less subject to the mind’s power of selection. Further, hearing is connected to our emotions: “The eyes gain far more precise and detailed information about the environment than the ears but we are usually more touched by what we hear than by what we see.”48

As one reads Letters from a Trip to West Hunan, the cumulative effect of this sound weaving is deeply emotional. Gemma Corradi Fiumara distinguishes listening as a multi-layered, even multi-sensory form of experience. Comparing listening with speech, Fiumara explains that speech acts focus on one aspect of reality at a time “simply by speaking about

\[46\text{ Shen Congwen, Letters, 12.}\]
\[47\text{ Tuan, Topophilia, 10.}\]
\[48\text{ Ibid., 8.}\]
it.” By contrast, listening, especially listening to an environment such as the passage above demonstrates, allows for “a myriad of simultaneously coexisting aspects of reality . . .”

Hence, speaking falls in line with a more linear, temporal-sequential, response to reality; while listening is a multi-layered, poly-vocal, and temporally chaotic, mode of perception. Thus the comparison to poetry and the aesthetic way Shen Congwen responds to his world—with non-linear preference for the narration of impressions and emotions. At one dramatic moment in the Letters, Shen breaks from the narrative to emotionally respond to the sound of a rooster or chickens heard from the riverbank: “The mountain chicken calls out; it is really a hundred feelings intermingling simultaneously.” Shen has perfectly articulated Tuan’s understanding of aural perception.

The writer’s heightened emotional state reflects the social context of his trip. Shen traveled home to West Hunan because his mother was so ill the family feared she would soon die. The trip south from Beijing was arduous. It was also the first time Shen Congwen returned home in over ten years. He was on the road almost six weeks just getting from Beijing to Fenghuang, and had much time to reflect upon his life, his recent marriage to Zhang Zhaohe, his writing, and his relationship to his hometown region of West Hunan.

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49 Fiumara, The Other Side of Language, 24.


51 Shen Congwen, Letters, 64.

52 The letters and accompanying sketches were published for the first time in 1992, four years after Shen Congwen’s death, by his wife, Zhang Zhaohe. See Shen Congwen, Letters from a Trip to West Hunan 湘西书简 in Additional Collected Writings by Shen Congwen 沈从文别集 (Changsha: 1992), 83.
The personal journal (a collection of letters, notes and sketches) was later edited and published as a travelogue, *Random Sketches on a Trip to West Hunan* (湘西散记, 1936), long considered one of Shen Congwen’s best works of native soil writing. While the two texts share many similarities, *Random Sketches* displays evidence of polish and embellishment. Shen Congwen’s emotional outbursts, so common in the *Letters*, are smoothed over with poetic prose. By contrast, the *Letters* represent a more personal response to the landscape and the people he encountered. The raw, unfiltered, emotional response is exactly the place to locate Shen Congwen’s non-hierarchical perception.

The *Letters* begin on the last leg of the tip, upon a river boat headed upstream along the Yuan River, from Changde to Chenzhou. Because Shen Congwen spent years traveling the river as a young military officer, the place held both deep familiarity and rich emotional associations. The journal records days of sitting inside his cabin in the winter damp and cold. Shen Congwen strains his ears to hear sounds coming from the shore and the village. The effect of both confinement and connecting through listening, combined with the emotional state of homecoming, lifts his thoughts to an almost religious sentiment:

I’m sitting in the cabin, listening to the sounds of people talking coming across the water, along with the sound of oars stirring the water, and of the oars themselves squeaking, *yiyi, yaya*, in their locks. This really is a sacred place (神境).

This passage typifies the majority of entries in the *Letters*. Shen impressionistically records the way he notices the beginning of snowfall from hearing the “*sha sha*” sound of snow falling against the sails. His curiosity is piqued by the sounds of dogs, chickens, goats, and birds calling from the hills, forests, and towns. He especially loves the random voices from
the townsfolk: a mother calling her child home, a man saying goodbye to his lover at dawn, overheard arguments and swearing, and the sound of children crying. Productive labor is another attraction: Shen writes of the sounds of men hammering and pounding boards as they repair boats, rowing songs of boatmen, and fishermen singing to the dark water to attract fish into their net. This love of humanity was expressed by the author in another of the *Letters*: “... I seem to have seen very far and very deeply, and for myself, I’ve turned into a sufferer, and at this time I am very weak, it is because I love this world, and love people so.”

What type of perception is this? It seems that everything is meaningful to Shen Congwen. Yet Yi-fu Tuan reminds us that perception, even as broadly represented as this, is always indicative of meaning. Yi-fu Tuan suggests that perception always involves selection. It is a personal mode of experience shaped by both culture and experience:

Perception is both the response of the senses to external stimuli and purposeful activity in which certain phenomena are clearly registered while others recede in the shade or are blocked out. Much of what we perceive has value for us, for biological survival, and for providing certain satisfactions that are rooted in culture.\(^5^4\)

The *Letters* reveal that Shen Congwen’s value filter is very wide. What he chooses to consciously perceive and record from his lived experience is both numerous and varied. It is no wonder that many times the writer expresses his exasperation at feeling overwhelmed by attempts to record the scene. Consider this textual moment from the *Letters* from about mid-way on the trip:

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\(^5^4\) Yi-fu Tuan, *Topophilia*, 4.
My little boat is already securely moored. I’ve eaten two bowls of noodles, and now about 20 large boats are sailing down from upstream, sculling songs are filling the river, soft and loud, with a tempo swift or gentle, at times all completely different, other times creating a harmony of sound and perfection in rhyme. The setting sun has already descended behind the mountain, and at the top of the mountain there remains a daub of deep purple, the mountain town buildings and gates, tall and upright, leave a very clear outline, and on the little boats everywhere are the sounds of people talking (人语), the sound of little children squabbling, the sound of food being tossed into a hot wok, the sound of a boatmaster making inquiries. I am so moved. If we wanted to read poetry (读诗), no other place would do besides this one. All of this is poetry (这全是诗).\(^{55}\)

All of the sounds of this environment, both human and non-human are equally valued as part of the panoramic scene he reverently tries to capture. While Tuan’s definition of perception locates these images as selected, and therefore meaningful to the writer, their variety and abundance also communicate a vision of openness. Shen Congwen’s approach is fundamentally non-hierarchical and does not follow this paragraph with any attempt to judge or comment on the specifics of what he sees. He only laments that he cannot write fast enough to capture in words all that he experiences.

Shen Congwen’s mode of non-hierarchical perception can also be explained within the rubric of lyrical aesthetics: the blending of sights with sounds, inner and outer worlds, with neither receiving any privilege. Instead, sounds and visual imagery complement each other and seem to work together to create a “fuller” picture of a place. In the long passage quoted above, for example, Shen’s gaze takes in the sunset and the outlines of the town that the low light creates, he then fills in this outline with auditory pictures of vibrant village life – life that is heard, but not seen. The value of that moment, of those people, is not dependent

\(^{55}\) Ibid, 112-113.
upon visual recognition, but come to him as a form of social energy transmitted across space. This is a point we will come back to later in this chapter.

In this blending of sight, sound, cognition and emotion Shen Congwen’s aesthetics of non-hierarchy begins to takes shape. The writer captures this way of recording perception and feeling and transfers it to his later masterpieces of lyrical fiction written in the 1930s, from the story “Quiet,” (静, 1932) to the novel, The Border Town (边城, 1934), which was completed just after this trip to West Hunan. The term “aesthetics of non-hierarchy is borrowed from Shih Shu-mei, who employed it in a discussion of Fei Ming, pen name of Fen Wenbing (1901-1967). Shih argues that in Fen Wenbing’s lyrical and nearly plotless novel Bridge (桥, 1933), the lack of event hierarchy, which places characters at the center of action, is very much in the manner of traditional Chinese landscape painting: “Nature, as in traditional Chinese landscape painting, is not a background for character’s actions; instead, it shares the same space and equal significance with characters” (emphasis mine).56

While Fei Ming experimented with non-hierarchy in his attempt to write a novel that incorporated elements of traditional Chinese poetics, Shen Congwen’s non-hierarchy is not experimental but fundamental, not entirely aesthetic but also epistemic. As the Letters demonstrate, Shen is particularly drawn to the forms of knowledge and the flavor of

56 Shu-mei Shih, The Lure of the Modern : Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 197. This non-hierarchical narrative texture is just one aspect of a larger narrative form Fei Ming’s novel achieves: “Each section of the novel therefore functions like a scene in a landscape painting, giving the novel what can be called a ‘scroll form.’ Turning the pages of the book can be compared to turning the scroll of a landscape painting,” 197.
emotion that listening provides, what Maureen Niwa-Heinen calls “the knowledge of listening.”

Shen Congwen’s non-projecting self does not appear to seek subordination of the objects he receives, nor does he rely upon visual/cognitive dominance of the communities he observes. On the contrary, he opens himself to “non-visual” auditory sensations and emotional ways of knowing. I suggest further that the writer displays an opening to the possibility of subject-subject relations, which can only exist within the context of non-judgment and non-hierarchy. Subjectivity based on the subject-object model involves the substitution of self for other, the subordination of other, or the assimilation of other to the self’s needs. To philosopher Kelly Oliver, this is indicative of a non-dominant form of self-other relationality. The next section will focus directly on the relationality of Shen Congwen’s listening perception.

**Power in Transmission: Shen Congwen’s Affective Language**

I have been arguing that Shen Congwen’s writing, particularly his literary criticism and autobiographical essays, reveals a position toward knowledge that is fundamentally open. This openness takes form in the writer’s literary style and content, and it also works its way into philosophically-oriented essays. During the decade of the 1940s, Shen Congwen wrote increasingly about his philosophical views toward life. He believed that there was a critical difference between “living” shenghuo 生活, a life focused on the basic needs of food,

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work, sex, family; and Life (shengming 生命), a way of living that recognized beauty and encompassed a spiritual dimension.\textsuperscript{58} Much of his writing of that time, both essay and fiction, was devoted to a working out of questions surrounding this idea of shengming: what did it mean to live a life with a deeper spiritual connection and purpose?

One of the texts to explore this idea of shengming or Life, was Shen’s “nightmare” series, an unfinished sequence of essays and short fiction intended to explore seven key life experiences or passions.\textsuperscript{59} The word “nightmare” (魇) in the titles functioned symbolically to indicate that the piece would attempt to explore inner reaches of the human psyche.

“Green Nightmare” (绿魇, 1944) explores the human response to the fecundity of life and the natural cycle of rebirth and growth. Of the six works in the collection, it most represents a celebration of life and nature.

“Green Nightmare” opens with the author-narrator basking in the sensuousness of an early summer day in the countryside. He is lying in a field of grasses in the warm sunshine, his senses saturated by the beauty and sensuousness of his environment. His feeling is boundless and almost mystical. Moving from the visual to the aural, the narrator then describes sounds that surround him in this bucolic setting. In each case, the narrator captures a sound that has come to him from across the landscape. He hears the sound of a

\textsuperscript{58} The distinction between “living” and “Life” is also summarized by Jeffrey Kinkley in The Odyssey of Shen Congwen, 222-223.

\textsuperscript{59} The Nightmare series includes the following titles: 〈绿魇〉, 〈黑魇〉, 〈白魇〉, 〈赤魇〉, 〈橙魇〉, and 〈青色魇〉. The first three are essays; while the final three are fictional. They were each published separately. According to Ling Yu, Shen Congwen intended to publish them together as a 7-part book. However, the project remained unfinished. The seventh piece has not been identified. See Ling Yu, A Volume of Works by Shen Congwen, 390-391.
farmer hoeing the ground that comes to him from across the level field. He then hears the sound of someone pounding rice (into flour) coming from the hamlet, this person seemingly out of sight. From the brush along the hillside, he hears the sounds of “flailing” and “pouncing” — presumably the sounds of animals. And from the air above him, he hears both insects and birds, their wings buzzing and flapping.\footnote{Shen Congwen, “Green Nightmare” 绿魇 in \textit{Collected Works of Shen Congwen} 沈从文文集, Volume 10, ed., Ling Yu (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1992), 83-106.}

Shen Congwen repeats the verb \textit{chuan} 传 for each example, meaning to transmit or carry. In each case, the sound is transmitted and passes from its creator to the listener. Listening therefore becomes a way to realize the connection between people across space and time. Similarly, in \textit{Letters From a Trip to West Hunan}, Shen Congwen describes the eerie sound of water being moved by the rowers, the vibration reaching him from underneath the boat. In that passage Shen feels a connection to the rower’s strength and effort because he hears and feels its \textit{effect}. In another example from the \textit{Letters}, Shen listens to the rowing in an almost scientific way, and also probes the gap between the experience and cognitive meaning, how the mind has the power to fill in the spaces of what is not completely visible:

\begin{quote}
The boat has stopped. It is really quiet. All of the sounds seem to have solidified in the cold, leaving only the sound of water underneath the boat, softly, softly flowing past. This sound makes a person become aware it [this water, this river]. It almost isn’t in your ears, but is a product of imagination. Yet, actually, there is sound.\footnote{Shen Congwen, \textit{Letters}, 23.}
\end{quote}

Stimulation and response is the focus here. The paragraph reveals Shen Congwen as someone who has paid attention to how sound works. When it gets cold out, the ambient texture of sound in the environment changes, and the soundscape becomes quieter. This is
because the speed of sound is proportional to temperature; the colder the air, the slower sound moves. Sounds from far away often do not reach the ear, making those sounds from close by more apparent. While Shen Congwen may not have understood the physics of sound, he certainly recognized the basic principles and their effects. What he presents is a causal situation: because of the cold, he can then hear the faint movement of water moving beneath the boat, which otherwise might not be heard. The passage presents a very strange juxtaposition of stillness and movement. The strangeness of it makes him question its reality. In this question of what is real and what is imagination, we feel the writer’s anxiety and feeling of helplessness.

One cannot ignore the fact that Shen Congwen’s Letters describe his relationship with a place or an environment and rarely his specific interactions with individuals. In what ways, therefore, is this type of ecological perception linked to relational subjectivity or to epistemological openness? One answer can be found in the way Kelly Oliver, in her work Witnessing: Beyond Recognition, seeks new ways to conceptualize space as a holder of possibility – not as a gulf or gap that divides us. Oliver turns to the groundbreaking work of psychologist J.J. Gibson, first published in the late 1960’s. Gibson developed a theory of “ecological optics,” a schema for reconsidering how we perceive self and world. Borrowing from Gibson, Oliver argues that space is “full of the energy of life that connects us to the

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environment sustaining us.”64 One of the energies is social energy, an invisible psychic energy which flows back and forth, migrating from person to person. This energy has the capacity to deeply affect us, including our moods and responses to our environment: “All relationships and all of human experience are the result of the flow and circulation of affective energy. Affective energy circulates between and among us.”65 Building a theory that presents a new vision of subject-subject relationality, Oliver believes that awareness of our psychic interconnectivity is a first step in shaping our epistemological attitude toward the other:

If the dynamic energy that surrounds us touches, permeates, affects, and nourishes us, then we are neither self-contained nor separated. Rather, we are profoundly dependent on our environment and on other people for the energy that sustains us. Far from being alienated from the world or others, we are intimately and continually connected, and responding, to them.66

Our visual experience is the most important form of circulating affective energy in Oliver’s theory. Yet, the sonorous impact of sounds, whether in the form of speech, music, or the “noises” of human life should not be overlooked. Certainly, if air is the medium that connects us, then it is also that very air that transmits sound to us, itself a vibration of energy that travels through the molecules of air, and that can indeed penetrate bodies. For his part, Shen Congwen took his personal approach to writing and theorized it in his critical essays about the writing of literature:

64 Oliver, Witnessing, 193.
65 Ibid., 195.
66 Ibid., 198.
We ought to employ our every sense to capture all kinds of sounds, colors, and smells from Nature, and keep an eye on all kinds of human affairs. We must rid ourselves of all old and stereotyped constraints and learn to use our pen in a natural way. . . . In this way we can roam about freely in our remembrances and imaginations as well as in our realities, and create a work by using all of senses simultaneously.67

For Shen Congwen, cultivating the ability to harness sensory perception is critical to becoming a good writer, whose images must be fresh and connected to the real world. It is interesting here that Shen Congwen does not distinguish between perceptions gained in the past and stored in memory and those that are newly experienced in the present. As a writer, he seems to be able to draw upon both.

The attention to ecological energies, the interest in a non-distinction between past and present, and the desire to use “all senses simultaneously,” places Shen Congwen’s discourse in relationship with contemporary affect theory. While seemingly unrelated to May Fourth and post-May Fourth literature, affect theory nonetheless offers a critical discourse of non-subject-based feeling and affective response. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth describe, this track seeks “to unfold regimes of expressivity that are tied much more to resonant worldlings and diffusions of feeling/passions – often including atmospheres of sociality, crowd behaviors, contagions of feeling, matters of belonging…”68

On the theory side, affect is technically pre-cognitive, similar to Jean-Luc Nancy’s expression of the re-sonance of sound, the circulation of energies and affective response that is received and felt before language and prior to cognition – perhaps something akin to the

67 Translated by Maorong Cheng in “Literary Modernity: Studies in Lu Xun and Shen Congwen” (PhD diss., The University of British Columbia, 1999), 171.

Shen’s experience of the river energies resonating on the bottom of his boat. The challenge to utilizing affect theory in literary criticism is found in the medium of language itself, which by its very nature, is cognitive and communicative. Only radically free discourse, indirect in both subjectivity and meaning, can fit this theoretical definition. Shen Congwen’s texts are mainly subject-centered, mimetic narratives. Is affect theory applicable here?

I suggest that affect theory remains one of the few available discourses that focus attention on the contexts, territories, in-between spaces and diffuse resonances that exist beyond place-positions for subject and object – a discourse that address both the affective response to place (topophilia) and the affective energies found in social community. Shen Congwen’s Letters reveal a self who desires to connect with the social and ecological world of West Hunan through the experience of sound. Similarly, Sara Ahmed describes affect as: “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connections between ideas, values, and objects.” Sara Ahmed’s definition of affect seems particularly appropriate in response to Shen Congwen’s Letters. His descriptions of sound come across as a form of touch, yet whose meanings are not fully under our grasp but remain beyond our reach. To Ahmed, affect helps us confront “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near.”69 This “drama of contingency,” well-describes many of Shen Congwen’s works. They acknowledge that experience is messy and incomplete, and yet his narrators lean in to be touched, in

what appears to be an effort to hold onto the “connections between ideas, values, and objects.”

Because of the abstract nature of affect’s *in-between* aspects of experience, affect theory links up with issues of aesthetics. Shen Congwen’s later essays on aesthetics explore the role of the fragments of experience that function to illuminate an aesthetic experience of the sacred in everyday life. As Shen Congwen wrote in the essay, “Beauty and Love” (美与爱, 1944), beauty, spirit and an abstract sense of God are found in the objects and experiences of everyday life. Shen explains that, “a piece of copper, a stone, a thread, a sound, although these are small in substance, represent the greatness of the world.”

Similarly the gestures made by people – smiles, frowns, laughter – give the impression of something sacred:

> When a person loves all things in life, then certainly this is because he or she has discovered “beauty” (美) within one’s life, and in turn, has also discovered “God” (神). One must be aware that light and color, shape and line, represent a kind of moral virtue (德行) of the highest level . . . [spirit] is either a person, a thing, or a kind of abstract symbol arranged in parallel, which makes people lower their heads with devotion. In just this way, although it cannot come close to God, at least it is already close to God’s creation.

All of these examples show that Shen Congwen was interested in an awareness of elemental levels of experience. Like the fragments of sound that came to his ears on the boat in the *Letters*, Shen Congwen links with the effects of impressions. Far from being meaningless traces of something lost, the fleeting experiences that seem to flash with a kind of truth that

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70 Shen Congwen, “Beauty and Love,” 376.

71 Ibid.
embodies a form of beauty. Recognizing this beauty, indeed experiencing it, is how one can come closer to living Life shengming. Experiencing life on that level of awareness, however, requires a special kind of attention. The next section will explore how Shen Congwen manipulated narrative voice as a means to represent the aesthetic forms of attention he valued so highly.

Shen Congwen’s Early Fiction – Locating the Voice of Relational Narrative Desire

Shen Congwen’s later essays explore an interest in the abstract philosophical or aesthetic appreciation of life. On the creative and literary side, this interest found expression in the art of narrative detail and the literary style of impressionism. This next section will explore the literary trend toward impressionist writing in the context of a study of narrative voice in Shen Congwen’s early works. I will show that at this decisive moment in his early career, Shen begins to explore relational narrative voice.

Studies of narrative voice look at how the text “speaks,” including the tonality, color, or musicality of a text’s expression. From the reader’s perspective, voice can be understood as how one “hears” the story – the point of view, tone, and inflection which all impact a text’s receptivity. Traditionally, questions of narrative voice have centered primarily on the type of narrator presented by the author: first, second, or third person, omniscient, or limited. More recently, other categories of narrative voice have evolved that highlight both the techniques and the effects of relational narrative desire. These narrative voices are frequently marked by shifts between first or third person, limited narration, and free-
indirect discourse. According to critics such as Maureen Niwa-Heinen, these shifts point to *leanings* or openness to relationality found in the narrative structure and tonal effects of a work. Niwa-Heinen calls this “relational narrative desire,” a narratological model she uses to locate relationality in a literary text:

This model values social inter-relationality over action as a principle of narrative structure in contrast to domination and appropriation; it focuses on narrative strategies and effects that promote themes of integration and inclusivity. Relational narrative desire opposes power-structures of domination since pleasure is experienced through a recognition of self-Other interdependence.72

In retelling his own life stories, Shen Congwen employs a variety of indirect and impressionistic ways to inscribe emotion into a text. Uniquely, this level of subjective discourse finds its greatest power with limited first-person or third-person narratives that reveal a vulnerable subject in crisis. Niwa-Heinen’s category of “voice-in-process” describes a subject’s “open and incomplete with a permeable identity” that leans toward relationality.73 Stylistically, “voice-in-process” narratives incorporate unanswered interrogatives, ellipses, and free-indirect discourse which together indicate “a desire for multiplicity, possibility and inclusion.”74

The majority of Shen Congwen’s early stories are autobiographical in nature. He writes of his childhood experiences and his military life as a young man. These early stories emphasize character portrayal and reflect values of affection, family integrity, warmth, delight in discovery, and security. And yet, the fractured identity that is found in the essays


73 Ibid., 88-90.

74 Ibid.
problematize the writer’s narrative subjectivity. Subjective wholeness and agency of person are represented through works of remembrance, hence as a form of desire for what is seemingly unobtainable in the present.

The play with “permeable” identities characteristic of the “voice-in-process” narrative mode makes a strong appearance in Shen’s hybrid text, “A Record of Life” (生之记录, 1926). Part essay and part fiction, “A Record” presents in microcosm the shifting subject positioning between a present identity and that of the past; the present environment (Beijing as an ecological space) and the environment of West Hunan. Most of all, the mood, colors, and emotional tone also shifts from a state of fractured identity to one of remembered wholeness. Shen Congwen’s “voice-in-process” appears rootless, and floating; hence, Niwa-Heinen’s use of the word, “permeable,” seems particularly fitting. Shen’s world at this time is one of gaps, holes, and missing pieces.

The context in which “A Record” was written is worth noting. In early 1926, Shen Congwen was still working to become established as a young writer. He arrived in Beijing two years earlier with hopes of becoming a university student. However, he quickly realized that dream was out of reach. Reading on his own, and occasionally auditing courses at Peking University, Shen lived a minimal existence, renting a small room at a local hostel and eating barely a meal a day. He called this room the “cramped and moldy studio,” for it was indeed damp, musty and, according to most accounts, was barely large enough for a bed and

75 Wú, Lìchāng 吴立昌, Shen Congwen: Constructing a Humanist Temple 沈从文 - 建筑人性神庙 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1991), 323. Shen Congwen missed the entrance exam period his first year in Beijing and apparently did not try again for reasons unknown.
a small table.\textsuperscript{76} The majority of Shen’s works from this earliest period were identified by the author as having been written in this hostel room, perhaps to emphasize the relationship between \textit{place}, including its psychological impact, and the literary product. In his study of Shen Congwen, Jeffrey Kinkley describes the works from Shen’s early period as experimental, rambling and nostalgic. Early works also reflect the mental and physical crisis of his life in Beijing: “Besides hunger and cold, then, loneliness is the constant refrain in the young man’s melancholia. It is a romantic spiritual loneliness, but with physical and social ramifications. The young man’s little room, where he is thrown back on his own fantasies and neuroses, is his prison.”\textsuperscript{77} Deprivation, along with physical and social isolation, provided the context through which fantasy and nostalgic writing was nurtured. And yet, Shen’s melancholy and nostalgic yearning was not just about loss of identity, but was also an active creation of a new identity.

“A Record of Life” captures the day-to-day shifts of mood that living in such deprived circumstances could produce. Comprised of five mini essay/stories, “A Record” is an experimental piece that offers readers disconnected snapshots of five days or moments of the writer’s life that jump over a several month period.\textsuperscript{78} The chosen diary mode

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{78} “A Record of Life” is a collection of 5 essays published under the same title. However, according to Jeffrey Kinkley, some essays were originally published as separate pieces initially and were brought into this configuration in 1926. While classified as “essay” (\textit{sanwen}) by editors, the pieces all fall in the hybrid category of essayized fiction, a fictional form based on real life experience.
discursively aimed at both remembering and recording (as the word “record” jilu in the title suggests), gives the essay an emotional tone characterized by loneliness and homesickness.

“A Record” (essay one): Impressionism and the “Permeable” Identity

The first mini-essay is part fable and part impressionist story. It opens with the narrator describing his position leaning against a brick wall in the afternoon sun. It is early spring, the grass is not up nor are there leaves on the trees, but the author notes: “From the rays of the sun, I recognize that spring is on the way.” The stillness of the afternoon leads into a silent reverie: “There was no wind; the entire sky was blue. I, and all that surrounded me, was bathed in the warm evening sun, none of us speaking a word.” The narrator then breaks the silence by striking up a conversation with a pine tree. It is obviously an interior dialogue presented as an imaginary conversation. Shen’s pine tree asks why the young author is not outside in the sunshine more often. This question leaves the narrator silent and choking on his tears. The narrator answers the tree as if talking to himself: “Because of exhaustion, and an aching back, I wanted to cry.” His gaze turns to the base of the tree where he notices two little yellow chicks. Their presumed cheerfulness seems to be an affront, and soon the narrator even suspects them of mocking him. Self-pity takes over (in an almost Yu Dafu-esque manner) and the narrator sinks into a complaint of his relentless work-load and the lack of passion in his life. The narrator asks himself: “how does one


80 Ibid.
nurture the soul, the passion that gives life meaning?” The narration cuts off into fragments of memory presented impressionistically without context and separated by ellipsis:

- Mother, a face sallow and yellow, gaunt and haggard, it was a memory from the first time I left home as the assistant to an officer . . . . .

- Sis, it was once when I returned home in a grey military uniform, you saw me but because of the strangeness of the grey uniform, you hid behind mother’s back, your forehead bandaged by a green scarf, covering a wound caused when you bumped your head . . . . .

- Eldest Brother, says, “careful not to drink too much”, a reply, “soon it will be hard to see each other again.” Seeing the two candles with only one inch of wax remaining, says, “it’s just like listening to the rooster crow from beyond the compound,” large tears roll down gaunt cheeks burning red from wine, . . . . . 81

A one sentence paragraph immediately precedes the break to impressionist images. It declares the following: “I suddenly thought of all the many wasted years, why has my flame of passion not burned out yet? Thinking of a possible reason, I wonder, who has been secretly (anli 暗里) increasing my passion all along?“82 The impressionistic passage above seems to provide the answer: mother, sister, eldest brother -- and not just the fact of their existence, but also something more effusive. Within the abstract images, the colors, the gestures that mark individual identity (Little Nine hiding behind her mother’s back), there is a desire to identify the connecting elements, the parts that “stick.”

According to the theory presented by Niwa-Heinen, a “permeable narrative voice” is characterized by the shifting between points of view, gaps between discourse (here

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81 Ibid, 40. This last passage is difficult to translate due to the lack of referents. It is not clear who is speaking or responding, or who is crying. The rooster crow seems to be a statement loaded with emotional meaning, but it is left unexplained.

82 Ibid.
indicated by ellipses), and also by way of fragments and impressions. Impressionism, in its early phase, sought to faithfully record the precise qualities of light and air that shape human perception of a certain scene. However, in literary impressionism the impressionist detail was used to blend present scenes with memory, weaving sensory response with mental images to create a highly personalized poetic mood. In the works of Marcel Proust, for example, personal details are presented as impressions at the edge of non-language, what Pascal Ifri calls the “residuum of reality.” In the residuum, elements that cannot be transmitted in talk find their way to the surface through a pattern of details.

In Shen Congwen’s passage above, each scene is presented in an impressionistic color palate: yellow, grey and green, then candle-lit red, each color carrying the weight of the emotions felt by the author. Memory is presented as a pattern of discreet details, a unified meaning perhaps in the mind of the author (existing with or without language we can’t know), but comprise barely coherent residual elements on the literary page. Subjective “permeability” can be found in many impressionist texts. Here, the self in Shen’s “A Record” is open, receptive to the environment. It is a self who loosens ego boundaries to talk with trees and small chicks. The open mind entertains concrete thoughts but even those fall away to reveal an open gulf. Filling the void, the mind turns to the relationships (here presented as impressions) that seem to be woven into the framework of the author’s identity.

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84 Ibid.
The introversion and heightened subjectivity of the first essay quickly shifts into a fictionalized storytelling mode in the middle stories. Interestingly, each of these mini-essays opens with an observation of the surrounding atmosphere. For example, essay two (the sections are only numbered and do not have unique titles) begins with the description of a grey, cloudy night where sight is occluded. The darkness of the night is pierced by the melancholy tune of the flute, which in turn, makes the narrator feel homesick. He retells a Miao folktale about the origin of the bamboo flute told to him by his grandmother sometime in the past. In the third essay, it is early summer now and the chirping of birds and insects after a rainfall make the author nostalgic for the chickens and roosters of Hunan, which, by the way, have an entirely different cluck or crow as compared with Beijing chickens.

“A Record” (essay four): The Subjectless Sentence and Communal Narrative Voice

The storytelling mode evident in essays two and three signals an important shift in narrative voice. The permeable identity found in the first essay/story is symptomatic of an open, incomplete self that desires belongingness. Yet by the fourth story, the permeable narrative voice gives way to the beginnings of a “communal” narrative voice. This voice is characterized by a more general, “historicized,” narrative consciousness. A narrative “communal voice” emerges to present knowledge of the community or group, and other times reaches toward an expression of universal or spiritual values.\(^85\) This mode presents a

\(^85\) “Communal voice” is one of Niwa-Heinen’s six types of narrative modes indicative of relational narrative desire. See “Relational Narrative Desire,” 88-90.
narrative self who imagines his or her existence as part of community and who also imagines the community as an integral part of the self.

Story four presents the clearest example of a communal narrative voice. It is also the most atmospheric of the five pieces, its opening paragraph largely comprised of subjectless sentences that set an experiential tone:

Night came, the patter of light rain was heard, interspersed with the wengweng longlong sound of soft thunder, can count on one’s fingers the passing of the season, recalling when I was little, aware that the exciting Dragon Boat Festival would soon arrive.

As night came, I heard the patter of light rain, interspersed with the wengweng longlong sound of soft thunder, and with that one can count on one’s fingers the passing of the season [to June and summer], this makes me recall when I was little, aware that the exciting the Dragon Boat Festival would soon arrive.  

I offer two versions, the first as a literal translation to demonstrate the lack of subject in the original Chinese text. The subject is implied, which is typical of Chinese lyrical essay style. In this style, the author/narrator, assumed to be writing in an autobiographical mode, can drop direct references to him or herself in order to present the content and feeling of the moment more directly. In the Chinese poetic tradition, the aesthetic here supports the idea that the reader to connect with the “mind” (志 zhi, or intention) of the poet. But this also worked in reverse, the poet’s inner world could be known by way of these same words which have left behind traces, or to use Ifri’s term, “residuum.” This idea of poetic language drawing the reader deeper into the text needn’t remain with classical Chinese poetics.

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86 Shen Congwen, “A Record,” 45.

87 The aesthetic formulation is known as shiyanzhi (诗言志), “poetry speaks forth the intentions of the [poet’s] mind.”
Modern writers were also seeking new ways to connect psychically with readers. Pascal Ifri reminds us of Marcel Proust’s intentional manipulation of impressionist details, a point also noted by Roland Barthes who found the effect of Proust’s impressionism was to create “moments of truth, when the literary text and the deep emotions of the reader merge powerfully.”

In this early story, the rain evokes nostalgia for the Dragon Boat Festival Shen Congwen enjoyed as a youth. Yet, without a river in Beijing there can be no Dragon Boat Festival. What is missing, according to the narrator, is not only the event, but the means by which a community comes together. This fourth story describes family preparations for the Festival, yet it repeatedly steps away from these activities, without transition, to describe the rain outside. These subjectless passages which linger in the natural world appear to function poetically as an incantation, as a link to communal experience. Weather is particularly appropriate in evoking a communal voice, for it is a phenomenon shared by many at the same time. The whole town has to deal with this rain, a connection stretching across time and space:

Evening, [there] continued to fall this kind of heavy rain, continuously until morning, it moved across eaves, through the downspouts and into the wooden rain basins and barrels, both of which became dressed with rainwater falling over their sides. This rainwater did away with the efforts of Old Jiang who came out onto our streets selling water to households. The bamboo leaves used for wrapping zongzi were also being washed clean by rainwater in these barrels.

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88 Ifri, “Reading and Impressions,” 41.
89 Shen Congwen, “A Record,” 46.
Shen Congwen utilizes weather and its impact on a community, in this case a family and a small neighborhood, to create a narrative voice that is not tied to any one individual consciousness, but seems to resonate with something larger. The eaves and downspouts are not just his, but those of the entire town. Furthermore, the second-person plural is a distinctive feature of the communal voice and Shen uses it here with his evocation of “our” street. These narrative strategies deflect the subjectivity of the passage away from the narrator and his personal memory to the community and its collective experience. It illustrates a form of relational narrative desire concerned with “themes of integration and inclusivity.”

“A Record of Life” began with an I-centered melancholic narrator whose identity is challenged by the notion that it is not singular, but perhaps co-created through family relationships. By the fourth story, this singular consciousness is fully open and “permeable,” and the voices and impressions of family and community seem to flow through it. Niwa-Heinen talks about this aspect of relational narrative voice, where the third-person narrator expands to take on multiple perspectives:

The flexible style of third person narration reflects intentional cognitive and psychic dimensions of SELF, wherein expressions of, and figures for, the first person I can be stylistically inflected with “Otherness,” thus retaining the framework of individuation while at the same time simulating the integration of other identifiable voice/perspectives, or those attributable to a more generalized, anonymous Other, as indicated by the neutral pronoun “one.”

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91 Ibid., 86.
Shen Congwen’s text marks one of the early examples of his experimentation with an other-directed narrative texture. In such a text, the limited subject position, particularly the use of subjectless sentences, allows the reader to approach the text in a hermeneutically open way, knowing that the author has deliberately left out interpretive stage directions. Shen Congwen began to challenge the conventions of form and genre from an early point in his career, developing a hybrid text that combines aspects of both essay and story. The result is a text whose challenge of hermeneutic boundaries presents a model of unrestricted, other-aware relationality.

**Shen Congwen’s Lyrical Fiction – Calling Readers to Listen**

In the short story, “Baizi” (柏子, 1928), there is a startling moment when the flow of narrative appears to stop still. In the silence of that brief moment, the narrator addresses the reader directly: “Open your ears, listen.” It appears that Shen Congwen’s narrator is not saying listen to me; rather, he is suggesting that readers step into the scene to come closer and hear what is going on. Whereas the first suggestion (listen to me) feels akin to a storyteller’s voice (a voice that Shen Congwen certainly experiments with in other contexts). Here, the evocation to listen is more poetic, reminiscent perhaps classical Chinese poetry, particularly landscapes poems of enlightenment: “This is what I am seeing, this is what I am hearing- do you hear it too?” The reader’s mind then listens from within, following the nuance offered by the poetic language and its sensually employed tapestry of images, both

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visual and aural. The power of Shen Congwen’s lyrical style builds from this kind experiential mode of reader receptivity.

This section will tackle perhaps the most important question that has been left unanswered thus far: to what extent does Shen Congwen’s “listening attitude” become manifest in his most famous works, his lyrical fiction? Lyrical fiction blends fictional and poetic elements in a single work. Plot is minimally presented; description of both place and human personality carry the power of the story. Because of the beauty of Shen Congwen’s descriptions, which include the Chinese aesthetic of blending emotion and scene, highly experiential descriptions of atmosphere and mood, and warm-hearted descriptions of tenderness between characters, many of his works have been interpreted as pastoral, idyllic, romantic or critiqued as escapist by generations of readers. Critics have also pointed to the nearly ubiquitous tone of melancholy and irony underlying Shen Congwen’s lyrical works.93 “Little Scenes of Guizhou,” discussed at the end of this section, is one such story that combines the sublime with the grotesque.

The stories discussed here were written in Shen Congwen’s “middle period,” 1928-1935, and are characterized by a shift away from autobiographical writing to more structured fictional works that exhibit a focused attention to style, form and aesthetics. The list of favored literary values from Froth (沫沫集, 1930), discussed earlier, were written at the beginning of this period. The values he once praised in the works of others, such as,

93 See C.T. Hsia. A History of Modern Chinese Fiction And especially David D.W. Wang Fictional Realism, 201-245. Wang’s main thesis: “I suggest that, despite the tenderhearted, ‘nature-oriented’ posture he seems to assume in most of his works, Shen Congwen writes ‘radically’ in response to the turbulent cultural/political scenes of the twenties and thirties, and that his works must be understood as a dialectical part of, rather than an exception to, post-May Fourth realism,” Fictional Realism, 202.
“contains a poetic atmosphere,” and “lyrical expression is the most important,” now take center stage in the writer’s own work. Non-hierarchical vision and open narrative voice is deftly deployed with greater sophistication as part of an aesthetic vision. Similarly, Shen’s ecological perception has been absorbed into the overall “feel” or atmosphere of a text. What purpose these efforts serve is a matter of debate. The author himself has left the question of a larger message unarticulated.

Atmosphere and the Listening Voice – “The Company Commander”

In Shen Congwen’s fiction, the work of generating an atmosphere begins with the opening sentence. Whereas the setting is often the place where a story takes place, an atmosphere is all-pervasive, it is the mood within which a story unfolds. Many other May Fourth writers begin their short stories with poetically-flavored natural description as part of the setting but often leave this kind of attention to description and tone behind once the characters and the plot are introduced. In Shen’s lyrical stories, by contrast, the mood established in the opening lines continues throughout the entire piece, intensifying the story and its emotional impact.

No other symbol, object or phenomenon plays a greater role in creating a lyrical atmosphere than Shen Congwen’s use of weather: rain, mist, snow, fog, as well as bright warm sunshine all figure prominently in his writing. As was evident in “A Record of Life,” weather is used to connect people to environment. In this example, the effect is to create an otherworldly sense of place:
A clean and delicately thin drizzle falls hard and fast and then and then almost not at all in this season when the weather hasn’t yet made any big changes, where it wants to snow but cannot. Beneath the foot of this tall, large and steep mountain slope, and facing a small river, sits a small village shrouded within a curtain woven by threads of fog and mist-like rain.\(^4\)

These are the opening lines to “At Market” (市集, 1925), one of Shen Congwen’s earliest published lyrical works. Showing Shen Congwen’s aesthetic approach to writing, the author utilizes weather to blend spatial planes and perspectives. The incessant rain, mist and fog, enshroud the little village at the foot of the mountain, and one can barely make out a small river. Rather than presenting readers with a series of surfaces, of objects seen from a particular point of view, we “see” the village as if simultaneously viewing it from afar and standing within in, breathing in its mist. In fact, our first impression is an almost three-dimensional experience of place as water surrounds and connects all elements in the scene. The descriptive technique is similar to that employed by painters in the Chinese landscape tradition, who manipulated perspective to allow multiple points of view to co-exist in a single work. The aim of such technique was to simulate a journey through the space of the painting, its intimate scenes and inspiring vistas. Similarly, Shen Congwen’s atmospheric descriptions also lead the reader into the fictional world of his creation so that we can see and feel it from the “inside.”

In “The Company Commander” (连长, 1927), atmosphere similarly becomes the common force that holds all other elements in relation. The opening paragraph is one of the

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most beautiful in Shen’s oeuvre; it connects but then blurs the sense of time and space through its evocation of both sound and weather:

In summertime the bugle call for lights up from the army barracks carried far enough for even the grazing horses to soon recognize it as the signal to return to the stockade, but with the arrival of winter it was no more than companion to the howling of the wind and died dejectedly away into the woods that covered the surrounding hillsides.95

The narrator explains that during more active times, the bugle was the sound that organized the soldier’s lives – and the lives of many outside the barracks. It dictated each man’s daily movement in, out and around the camp. Yet wintertime in this peaceful this was no longer the case. With nothing to do, the soldiers go through the motions of their work day, their only task to meet for roll call in the mornings and evenings. The sound of the bugle is practically meaningless and joins the wind as companion, following it into the landscape in all four directions. These opening lines fittingly set the tone for a story that presents an impressionistic picture of an army camp in the quiet middle of winter.

Borrowing the structural development from classical Chinese poetry and lyrical prose, “The Company Commander” is presented in four sections that read much like a classical Chinese poem: setting (起 qi), more detail (乘 cheng), twist (转 zhuàn), and conclusion (合 he). Section one introduces readers to the camp itself and its routines that center around the bugle. Section two introduces us to the man in charge, the company commander and his

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relationship with a young widow from the nearby village, a half mile away. Section three is the “twist” and the lyrical center of the story. Here, the emotional world of the man and his lover is explored at the precisely the moment they realize that they have been only pretending the roles of husband and wife. In fact, the cold stillness of winter has kept hidden the possibility of inevitable separation due to camp movement or re-assignment.

This is the only plot presented in this impressionistic story. What most readers experience is the feeling of winter, the steamy world of interior spaces warmed by stove-fire, and the quiet, muffled sense of the world covered in snow. The lyrical power in this story evolves from more than just sensual description that operates at a surface level. The narrator’s attention to the reality under the surface of things mirrors the emotional world of the two characters who also, perhaps for the first time, notice a deeper reality to their lives:

Were it not for the snow, it would have been dark by now. Because of the snow that blanketed the ground and the roofs, reflecting a silent and subdued light, the time of day appeared earlier than normal. The features of the two people facing each other could still be seen distinctly, but the corners of the room and the vessels and crockery under the table were already lost in the stealthy embrace of darkness.

Now that they had fallen silent, the two could hear the very faint, very regular sound of the snow falling on the ground outside. They also heard the bamboos in the back garden spring upright as great wedges of snow slid down from their crests. Otherwise, all was still. No dog barked, no voice was heard, there were no gongs or trumpets; everything in the village seemed asleep or dead.96

Visual perception is highlighted in the first paragraph, with the more abstract sensation of aural perception in the second. In both descriptions, the nature of perception itself is explored, such as the way the snowy ground makes the sky appear lighter into the evening.

96 Shen Congwen, “The Company Commander,” 166.
It is not really lighter outside, just the play of light. The snow is affecting the natural world in certain ways – not unlike the way the snow has also created a temporary insular world. Like the bamboo letting go of its snow, the village too will soon be released from the grip of winter. With spring, the army will move again; the relationship between the commander and his woman will soon be over. Shen Congwen masterfully manipulates perception and scene to depict a wintery silence in which the vulnerabilities in a fragile relationship find their way to the surface.

How might the literary technique of inscribing a scene with a mood-evoking atmosphere relate to relationality or epistemological openness? The connection is found in the aesthetic effect that atmosphere generates as a cluster of images. For these types of images, meanings remain unfixed, not only in the text itself but also in the reader’s own particular response. Atmosphere functions like a modern variant of the traditional poetic concept of xīng 兴 or affective image. Like Shen’s suggestive atmosphere, xīng is almost always an image from the natural world set in juxtaposition with a feeling or situation in the human world. Meaning is found as an effect of the combination of images. Thus the images on the page resonate with pregnant capability, suggesting far more than is transparently visible on the page. These are the “meanings beyond the words” of Chinese aesthetics,

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97 In Chinese poetic criticism, 兴 xīng (affective image) functioned together with 比 bi (comparison) and 赋 fu (narration) as the three basic modes of poetic expression. Whereas bi metaphorically created direct comparison, xīng allowed for the resonance of abstract connections between image and feeling. Stephen Owen explains that xīng uses words to generate a response or evoke a mood. Liu Xie, in his Literary Heart and the Carving of Dragons (文心雕龙 Wenxin diaolong), stresses the covert or hidden place of xīng images; their function is indirect. See Owen, Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies), 1992), 256-258.
which has been linked to a form of epistemological and hermeneutic openness. Ming Dong Gu defines openness critically and not as content or a mode of description:

In contemporary theory, openness means that a literary text is not an enclosure of words, the messages of which are finite and limited, but a hermeneutic space constructed with verbal signs capable of generating unlimited interpretations. Its commonsense meaning is that a literary text has no ‘correct’ interpretation, or, in other words, it has multiple interpretations. Both in theory and in practice, the Chinese conception of suggestiveness is compatible with unlimited semiosis or openness.98

In two influential articles on the concept of openness in the Chinese philosophical and literary traditions, Ming Dong Gu explains that hermeneutic openness in the Chinese tradition is a form of “aesthetic suggestiveness,” a fundamental value that shaped the Chinese conceptualization of language and thought from the fourth century B.C.E. onward.99

As a form of openness that values multiple perspectivism and unfixed meaning beyond the referentiality of linguistic signs, aesthetic suggestiveness also points to a mode of reading that is interactive, where meaning is produced through a sense of creative collaboration between author/text and the reader. What is considered a recent trend in western post-deconstructionism, is, according to Gu, an inherent, long-standing assumption in the Chinese philosophical tradition.

If the deployment of atmosphere in “The Company Commander” links Shen’s work with concepts such as xing and Chinese aesthetic suggestiveness, then what does it suggest

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99 Gu references Mencius (孟子 390-305 BCE): “He is a good speaker whose words refer to things nearby, but allude to things afar.” See Gu, “Aesthetic Suggestiveness,” 491.
about modern lyrical short story in general? This chapter has argued that Shen Congwen approached his literary works with a particular philosophical vision of openness and receptivity; in fact, the majority of works model this receptivity as a mode of being and as a way of understanding the world. In “The Company Commander” and other seemingly “plotless” stories, the lyrical shift of attention from what happens (action) to how things happen (human response and feeling) inform an alternative approach to storytelling and to knowledge. David Thornber similarly describes the uniquely modern stance that James Joyce has taken in *Dubliners*: “One can see that these are all stories about moments in which almost nothing happens, except life. The ordinary world, our smallest interactions and encounters, in Joyce’s universe, are locales of complexity and wonder.”¹⁰⁰ I believe a similar effect is achieved in Shen Congwen’s narrative. His creation of atmosphere and staging of perception (both visual and aural) directs readers to notice the wonder in these ordinary lives. Shen Congwen expressed an equal desire to capture the ordinary in his fiction.

Writing upon the first publication of his novella, *The Border Town*, Shen observes:

I [intend to] deal with how a couple of ordinary people, living in a small town seven hundred li upward of Taoyuan, along the You River, are involved in a common human problem, and how they express their destined sadness and happiness, thereby serving as an appropriate example for the ideal of love of human beings . . .

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In the life of an individual, small moments are as, or more, important than larger, historical forces. Shen’s focus is on particular moments of living, on life itself.


Structures of Listening: Opening Perceptive Agency in “Baizi”

Besides evocative atmosphere, Shen Congwen also developed a sophisticated literary structure in his mature works. This next reading will show how the structure of interruption, or the “poetic pause,” reaches toward a greater level of awareness and engagement in readers – bringing them into a position to listen. “Baizi” is one of Shen’s early “well-made” stories and stands at the beginning of his middle period. It is the story of a romantic rendezvous between a boatman and a woman in a river town, likely a prostitute. The story contains several elements now considered common to Shen Congwen’s fiction: description of a busy, bustling waterfront scene, the singing and playful swearing of men at work, and precipitation of some form. Rain always seems to be falling in West Hunan, especially when romance is in the air.

The original Chinese version of the story is filled with short paragraphs carefully written that hang loosely together. The fragmentary structure is made cohesive by the use of two simple frames, one temporal and the other spatial. Temporally, Baizi’s boat docks in Chenzhou, then leaves several hours later. Spatially, Baizi goes ashore, then returns to the boat. The tension between these two frames and the opening of the spatial realm contributes to the story’s lyrical qualities. I will argue that the spatial opening of the text is coupled with moments of perception that ask the reader to pay attention to the details of the scenes presented. While these moments of perception are mostly visual; one is presented as an act of listening. This moment forms the key turning point in the story.

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102 Some of these breaks were kept in the English translation; others were blended in and are less noticeable. Furthermore, the subjectless nature of many of the paragraphs in Chinese could not be maintained in English.
In “Baizi,” the moment becomes more important than the sequence and progression of events. In “Baizi,” Shen Congwen employs what I term a “poetic pause,” a one-sentence paragraph that breaks up the flow of the narrative and challenges the dominance of time. By structuring his story this way, Shen pushes for a widening of space. The reader is forced to slow down with each paragraph, so short that they leave large white spaces on the page. These spaces force the reader to linger for just a moment before moving on. For this reason, the paragraphs feel important, weighty, as if they were truly significant, even though they are simple description. In this way the scene described becomes expanded, like the release of air from a more constricted space. The narrator releases a little bit, then he returns to close in again – so the rhythm of the text is almost a kind of breathing, of expanding and contracting elements that are, by the end of the story, fully released. In this way, the story’s form can be seen to figure Baizi’s sexual tension and fulfillment. “Baizi” opens with one of these short, one-sentence, descriptive sentences. Emphasizing the story’s space and place, the subject of the opening sentence, who is also the agent whose effort brought the boat ashore, remains unidentified:

[They] brought the boat to dock for a while beside the shore; the shore is the riverbank at Chenzhou.

把船顿到岸边，岸是辰州的河岸。

“Poetic pauses” develop the impressionistic mood of the story using a doubling effect: on the surface they describe the mundane, while their symbolic meaning suggests a meaning beyond the words. For example, the following example establishes that travel has been made difficult by the rain, but it also means something more:
As of late, evenings brought rainfall, and the muddy riverbank became so slick that no man could be assured sure footing, but there were still men who went up the bank and into the rivertown streets.

如今夜里即落小雨，泥潭头滑溜溜使人无所立足，还有人上岸到河街去。

This one paragraph stands alone, but follows with the words: “Baizi was one of them.” By creating the pause, Shen Congwen forces the reader to pay attention more to the rain and the mud – both laden with symbolic meaning here and evocative of mood. The rainy, wet, and slippery conditions act as a foil to demonstrate Baizi’s determination in going ashore. Further, they euphemistically set the scene for the sexual encounter that Baizi longs for.\

Poetic pauses increase toward the climax of the story where the couple’s encounter is carefully sidestepped by means of impressionistic images. Once the narrator tells us the two had just “rolled onto the bed.” What follows are three single-sentence paragraphs that lead the reader through the mood of their lovemaking:

The lantern light brightly shone, reflecting upon muddy footprints on the yellow floor.

Outside, the rain came down heavy now.

Open your ears and listen, there are the sounds of singing and those of laughter and cursing.

While the narrator won’t show us what is happening on the bed, he asks us to listen for the “songs” of love that the couple make, along with their laughter and romantic bantering.

More significant, in terms of this argument, is the shift from visual perception to the aural,

103 The phrase, “clouds and rain,” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.
here highlighted by the narrator’s request for readers to “open your ears.” It is as if the narrator says, “Now, it is time to listen.”

While the attention is clearly focused on Baizi and his world, this direct appeal to the reader may also ask that the reader listen more carefully to the narrator himself. He is about to comment on the scene with a fragmentary “poetic pause” that feels like an attempt to locate meaning in Baizi’s life:

An unabashed exertion, a divine wrath – a resumption, a fresh beginning.\(^{104}\)

一种丑的努力, 一种神圣的愤怒, 是继续, 是开始。

This is the narrator’s commentary inserted into the scene, a statement that mixes the idyllic with the profane. It raises the question: what had just happened in the lives of these two simple people? What is this story about? Once again, I turn to David Thronber’s interpretation of *Dubliners*: “Joyce redefines the idea of plot; he redefines what an event or a story is. Every moment for Joyce is an event, potentially rich, not to be ignored.”\(^{105}\)

Similarly, Shen Congwen tells his story, essentially a small portrait of a simple boatman, without moralizing and without blatant appeals to the reader’s sympathy. He gives his character a “soul,” an achievement he will note a few years later when summarizing the writings of Chuan Dao (date) and Xu Dishan (date):

Although that which is written concerns human affairs, they don’t stress the behavior of love, only the feelings of love. Of importance is that they express a particular style,


\(^{105}\) David Thronber, “James Joyce’s Dubliners.”
a kind of poetic realm. Their characters are quiet and shy with hearts pure like water. They give these characters a soul, and the feeling of loss that comes from the joys and sorrows of human affairs, moves back and forth at the border of this feeling of loss. Compared to the average works of this time, these works are so different!  

Simpleminded and living a transient life, Baizi labors from day to day for a few dollars that are spent on a simple pleasure each month. There is no tomorrow for a person like Baizi, only the present. While many readers find the story an example of the writer’s critique of a system that exploits laborers like Baizi, it is, nonetheless, a critique that is contextualized with in a frame of compassion, emphasized through the use of poetic pauses that force the reader to notice the details of Baizi’s life.

An “Ethics of Listening” in “Little Scenes of Guizhou”

“Little Scenes of Guizhou” (1931) is not a typical lyrical story. In fact, it reads as more of a nightmare or perhaps a gothic lyric. The story is haunting in multiple ways: the horrors it depicts are truly terrible and unforgettable: people and animals near starvation, decapitated heads dangling from trees (some still dripping blood), corpses left to rot by the side of a mountain path. Yet its middle section is also hauntingly beautiful for the calm beauty and quiet sadness it presents. In this discussion, I maintain that this middle section presents an “ethics of listening,” an intentionally placed moment of relationality and social

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106 Shen Congwen, “From Bing Xin to Fei Ming,” 231.

107 A good example of this reading can be found in an essay by contemporary author, He Liwei. While He also notices that the main effect of the story’s lyricism is compassion, he argues that it mainly serves to heighten the author’s indignation at Baizi’s tragic life. See “The Compassion and Beauty of the Southern Flute” in Readings of Shen Congwen’s Famous Works, 1993.
exchange. Shen’s listening is now about noticing, asking questions, and conversation. And like his other lyrical works, the overall success of “Little Scenes” resides in its non-linear, non-plot-driven narrative style. My reading will show that this beautiful “core” points to a redemptive ethics grounded in listening and exchange. The “ethics of listening” found there encapsulate the moral vision that so attracted critics like C.T. Hsia where meaning is found in acts of appreciation and simple camaraderie among honest folk.

“Little Scenes” tells the story of two peddlers who regularly move goods through the mountainous region of West Hunan and Eastern Guizhou. It is a hard road. It is March, time of the early spring rains. The road is wet, muddy, and cold. Crows can barely caw from nearby trees; they are starving. People are suffering, too. In this lengthy first part of the story, our two main characters are merely part of a generalized peddling world: peddlers, innkeepers, the road during New Year compared to the rainy season. The narrative’s iterative voice suggests that this is how it has been for years.

After a separation of ellipsis that clearly demarcate a new section, readers enter the middle or “core” of the story which zooms in on two specific peddlers, an uncle and his nephew, and a solitary innkeeper (the old man) who hosts them for a night. The narrator takes his time here, and presents in close detail every event since the arrival of the peddlers at homestay inn, as well as direct dialogue between the three men. The narration allows readers to follow their every conversation, watch the evening with them as the sky clears and the early evening sunlight touches everything with a soft light. We watch the old man make the simple dinner of chickpeas and sweet potatoes. Then evening comes and the
three men sit around the fire chatting about life. The old man is taken aback as the younger peddler resembles his son who recently died, especially when his son’s old shoes fit the younger peddler perfectly. The climax of the story happens later at night when the three men talk around an evening fire:

The old man said he wanted to go to sleep, and already walked over to his own room separated from the main room by a wooden plank; however, after just a while, he walked back out, saying he didn’t want to sleep, and he sat down alongside the two peddlers by the stove.

These few people started talking, the peddlers asked him if he had 60 years yet, and he said they needed to add ten more and then guess. They also asked him if he lived in this place a long time, and he said, actually not too long a time only 20-30 years. They asked him if he still had many relatives around, here in this place . . . they asked him when that son who went to Yunnan on business would be back to visit. [The old man] considered this for a moment, then said, “Over the winter, at New Year’s he came for a visit, and gave me some datou cai grown in Yunnan.”

[They were] saying a lot of talk that he himself really didn’t understand. Why did they have so much to say? He himself felt that today was a little strange, usually he just never thought about those relatives or people close to him, and he never thought about who he might want to talk about these things with. But today it was very apparent, that those things he didn’t necessarily talk about he talked about, and further some words coming close to lies were also spoken of a lot. Later, that older of the two peddlers, suggested that they turn in, this nephew however, felt that it was still too early to go to bed, therefore he remained at the fire warming a bit. Thereupon the older peddler went to sleep, and the younger peddler still sat on that plank stool, and continued to talk with the old man about this and that in an easy going way.

In the end, this younger peddler also went to bed, the old man promised to wake them at dawn but continued to sit beside the stove, gazing at the flames flickering from inside the stove, not getting up.108

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When the peddlers awake in the morning, the old man is dead. They make haste to notify neighbors, pay their fee for a night’s stay and more to help with funeral expenses, then get back on the road. They soon encounter new adventures and new horrors, from mountain lion tracks to young men recently killed in local militia fighting. The narrator confesses that the two soon begin to forget about the old man and his passing. The peddlers trudge on in a strenuous effort to complete their trip and return home.

Critics have been puzzled with how to make sense of this story. To Shen Congwen biographer and critic, Wu Lichang, “Little Scenes” is an example of essay-style fiction, as it has almost no plot. To Wu, this style grants the author the power to critique the moral bankruptcy of a society that does not value life; all of the various characters in this story (including the two peddlers), in his mind, are numb, are too shrouded by “fog” of self-centeredness to notice or to care about each other or the world around them. Other critics make sense of the fragmentary nature of the story, and its lyrical middle section, by contending that the beauty stands as a foil so that we feel the tragedy more deeply. The following excerpt shows Wang Shaoming trying to work out a solution for the problem of beauty in this story:

Since the very end of the story brings you to a melancholy state, how could you still continue to be intoxicated with the work’s infatuating beauty? Or, precisely because

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109 Wu Lichang, “The Fog of Sorrow, Everywhere Covering the Deep Mountains: Reading ‘Little Scenes of Guizhou,’” 黔小景：悲凉之雾遍布深山 in Wu Lichang ed., Appreciating the Works of Shen Congwen 沈从文作品欣赏 (Guangxi: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1988), 118. Wu states that, “... the entire piece revolves around and emerges from this picture of the value of life being great then becoming devalued in the sorrowful life of this mountain villager’s sorrow. Behind this picture there is buried under the surface a deeper level of the Chinese people’s traditional psychology of ‘following heaven and entrusting oneself in fate’ and at the same time also fully concentrates upon the writer’s grief and personal worry.”
there is this contrasting melancholy, the beauty itself is even more able to stir the reader’s emotions.110

In his reading of “Little Scenes,” Wang Shaoming shares his own melancholy after reading this story, how he had a strange feeling like being awakened from a dream: “... you want to return to that happy place at the center of the dream, but it is impossible to go back.”111 Wang’s pleasant dream is the middle section of this story, which is clearly threatened by harsh reality, by death and devastation, on both sides. But could it have been more than a dream? Could Shen Congwen have had another message in mind?

Wang Shaoming’s essay presents a common response to the story, yet throughout this chapter, I have been presenting the idea of an open, multi-vocal text that can communicate more than one idea or more than one set of feelings to readers. According to Niwa-Heinen, a narrative structure weak in plot but strong in description is a characteristic of a relational dynamic. Plot-directed narratives are typically considered mimetic, teleological, event-oriented, outcome-driven, and even masculine.112 Relational texts shift the emphasis, the “meaning” of the texts, from plot to voice and reconsider event structure in terms of a different set of values: interpersonal relationality, non-separation of agent from action, and a tolerance for ambiguity and non-closure. Narrative events are presented by the narrator in a discontinuous fashion, in some cases without connectives or interpretive


111 Ibid.

judgment by an implied narrator. The effects of such a non-linear, non-action-driven narrative are critical to understanding the purpose of a story like Shen Congwen’s “The Company Commander” or “Little Scenes of Guizhou”: these stories offer a sense of fluidity of identity, a feeling of equality among subjects presented, and in some cases even a “shared subjectivity.”

More significantly, these types of narratives, that include non-linear plots, multi-vocality, shifting focalizations, and impressionistic sensations, also point to an alternative epistemological position for both author and reader. In this respect, I find the theory of Peter Brooks useful in establishing the epistemological orientation of narrative desire. To Brooks, reader motivation is highly informed by a desire to know what happens. Plot acts as a means to that knowledge and assumes primarily a rational reading mind. Yet other critics have argued for a different epistemological position, one not based on the need to quench a rational thirst, but one that is based upon reader experience of individual moments that offer emotional fulfillment. The desire to understand how something happened or what it felt like, points to a non-linear mode of both reading and writing.

Whereas “The Company Commander” read like a classical poem with its four-part movement, “Little Scenes of Guizhou” moves in a spiral. It begins on the outside with the narrator/tour guide’s general introduction and gradually moves inward until it stops to rest (for only one night) at the home of an old man before moving out again. In “The Company Commander,” a slice of emotional purity is presented at the center in a lyrical way, yet

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“Little Scenes” presents something much deeper. Shen Congwen now utilizes his ability to manipulate non-linear plots as a means to spiral into a personal glimpse of human relationships. If there is meaning in the story, it is found in the way the author brings readers inside the intimate space of one man’s home to observe the interactions between ordinary people. In the space of this world, a quiet, yet powerful, search for relational meaning is found in conversation and acts of listening.

**Conclusion**

Shen Congwen, like other modern artists such as James Joyce, resisted a dominant linear view of history as progress. In his works, we find instead a vision of history as moving as a spiral in and out of individual lives and personal relationships. This idea is discussed by Charles Taylor in a section of *Sources of the Self* that explores modernist writers’ and painters’ challenge to the Romantic era’s spatialization of time. For him, this challenge to linear concepts of progress represented a key *moral* orientation:

Modernist writers took up this critique of the spatialization of time. But their challenge went deeper: it touched the basic modes of narrativity of disengaged reason, and of Romanticism. The first spawned a view of history as progress, in which the development of reason and science leads to even-greater instrumental control and hence well-being. The second often presents history as decline, but it also has an *optimistic variant*: *of history and growth through a spiral, moving in the end towards a reconciliation of reason and feeling.*\(^{114}\) (emphasis mine)

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Could Shen Congwen be part of the alternative, “optimistic,” strand of intellectual thinking in the twentieth-century? Does he stand apart from many of his generation in seeking a conceptualization of history that attempts to reconcile reason and feeling, poetry and narrative, tradition and modernity? Building on this idea, Gemma Corradi Fiumara, in her philosophy of listening, argues that a shift toward cultivating the skills of true listening opens the possibility for a shift in how we as humans define our existence as relational beings:

If we were apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse we might perhaps promote a different sort of coexistence among humans: not so much in the form of a utopian ideal but rather as an incipient philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species.\textsuperscript{115}

Similarly, by examining Shen Congwen’s works by way of their “listening voice,” this study compels readers to re-examine the lyrical and humanist tendencies of the writer in larger, epistemological terms. Shen Congwen, in depicting characters of all types, and in representing social and natural environments, presents an intellectually open mental outlook. While this may sound exceedingly simple, it points to a radically different point of departure for his work. As Fiumara has further noted, “Listening . . . involves the utmost concentration and, as a consequence, the reawakening of our epistemic potential.”\textsuperscript{116}

By the early 1940s, Shen Congwen was increasingly drawn to writing a personal philosophy of both life and the literary arts. Many of his essays of this decade were devoted to a working out of the concept of Life \textit{shengming}. While searching for spiritual meaning of life, Shen also expressed an increasing faith in abstraction as a form of higher truth, a

\textsuperscript{115} Fiumara, \textit{The Other Side of Language}, 57.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 83.
blending of experience and emotion in a place “beyond words.” This search for meaning became a life-long project, as noted here by Jeffrey Kinkley:

Shen Congwen started and ended [his career] with faith in humanity – a faith that he could reconcile with biological science, Christian love and pacifism, and the cosmic holism of the Indian faiths – a belief system to keep society from heading dynamically forward in a world of struggle and energy, but also to unify it and lift it up toward higher things.117

Yet Shen’s vision for how to heal the brokenness of his world was too out of step, too abstract, to be embraced but by a few kindred spirits. His influence would skip a generation before having a major impact on Chinese culture. In the 1980s, the “root-seeking” generation of Chinese writers re-discovered Shen Congwen and bathed in the sensual richness of his works. They no doubt were also attracted to the intellectual openness inscribed in the unstable language, hybridity of form and the layered texture of his works. Stepping out from the proscriptive and one-dimensional discursive practices established by years of Communist control of language and form, these writers studied Shen Congwen’s literary practice of epistemological openness, and also likely noticed his way of listening to rather than speaking for the world.

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117 Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, 277.
The Epistemology of Love: Feminist Ways of Seeing in the Works of Bing Xin, Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang

There is a Taoist monk who walks the streets begging for alms, clad in a great adept’s cloak made of faded black cloth. His hair is worn in a little gray coil on the crown of his head, not unlike the massed curls of a stylish modern woman. With his squinty eyes and hair pulled back across his temples, his sallow face has something of the look of an embittered woman who’s fallen on hard times. It is difficult to tell how old he might be, but because of malnutrition, his body is tall and gaunt, seemingly stuck forever in the lanky frame of a seventeen-or eighteen-year-old. He holds a length of bamboo at an angle, beating out a slow rhythm with a mallet: “tock . . . tock . . . tock.” This, too, is a kind of clock, but one that measures a different sort of time: the time of sunlight slanting inch by inch across a lonely and ancient temple in the mountains.

Eileen Chang, “Days and Nights of China” 中国的日夜

How might this description of this abject Taoist monk represent a conceptualization of love? Is it merely description made by a detached observer, writing down remembered impressions, embellished, perhaps, with layers of juxtaposed detail? Surprisingly, Eileen Chang (张爱玲 Zhang Ailing) was a writer who was very concerned with matters of love, and not just love in the form of sordid love affairs as seen in the collection Romances (传奇, 1944). Throughout her non-fiction essays, collected in the volume Written on Water (流言, 1945), Chang seems to be “on the lookout” for moments which engage her intellectual and emotional curiosity, moments that draw connections between seemingly disparate

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moments of life. As for the wandering Taoist monk, it is not only his unusual appearance that catches her attention (his grey hair coiled and pinned, his squinty eyes, and his lanky, malnourished body), it is also the bamboo woodblock and its “tock . . . tock” rhythm that calls out to her from another space and time. He works the street, begging for alms, and is ignored by all. From Chang’s perspective, he stands out of place in the bustling metropolis of 1940s Shanghai: “Around him is a riotous profusion of advertisements, store fronts, the honking of automobile horns.” The monk is observed kowtowing on the ground to “no one in particular” in what seems to be an utterly pathetic gesture, the sight of which leaves Chang feeling desperately melancholy, as she comments: “To watch him is to feel that the dust of this world is piling ever higher, to know that not only will hopes turn to ash but anything and everything one touches will ultimately crumble to nothingness.” In many such descriptions in Written on Water, the dizzying pace of change is documented, individuals, including the writer herself, are portrayed as caught between worlds. The vulnerability of these in-between positions attracts Chang’s attention, and she turns her keen observer’s eye on the details that mark that vulnerability.

But can this type of writing be considered a discourse of love? I will answer, yes, but the move requires re-defining our conventional understandings of love as word and concept. More than a deep emotion or loyalty shared between lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings or close friends, this discussion will present love conceived in

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2 This concern with tender, emotionally moving moments of life seem to only arise in her essays and is absent or extremely rare in her fiction.

epistemological terms as an (re)orientation toward otherness. In narrative, this can be located as inscribed ways of seeing. In narrative discourse, love is felt in the texture of language and image, through the details that present self, other, and world. Love as an orientation to the world and as an intellectual positioning of identity and subject relations has been the subject of discussions by Luce Irigaray, Jessica Benjamin, Kelly Oliver, and Noëlle McAfee from the fields of philosophy, political science and psychology, and Wang Lingzhen and Yan Haiping in the field of Chinese literature. Though each of these critics discuss this broader, philosophical, understanding of love from the perspective of their respective disciplines, they share a fundamental assumption: our capacity to love others is not limited to bonds of obligation or desires of self-fulfillment, but can also be found as a non-dominating mode of horizontal movement of the self toward others and toward understanding, fundamentally (re)shaping both the nature of relationships and constructions of knowledge. Love, in this conceptualization, can be described as a way of seeing.

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4 It is important to note that my use of the term “love” in this context represents the impact of post-May Fourth imported theory, including Western enlightenment configurations of selfhood and Freudian models of both identity and sexuality. As such, my discussion must be situated within the “enlightenment structure of feeling” as outlined by Haiyan Lee in Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). However, prior to the May Fourth historical moment and extending into the past by several millenia is the indigenous concept of 情 qing, often translated as “sentiment.” The concept of qing encompasses a wide range of human affective response, from describing human emotions (anger, fear, love, hate, desire, etc.) to describing a type of authenticity as an extension of a person’s innate nature and experience. For an etymological study of qing, see Chen Bohai 陈伯海, “An Exegesis of Feeling and Intent” 釋情意, in Chinese Poetics: A Modern Perspective 中国诗学之现代观 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006). For English-language sources, see Wai-yee Li, Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993), and Chad Hansen, “Qing (Emotion) in Pre-Buddhist Chinese Thought,” in Joel Marks and Roger T. Ames, eds., Emotions in Asian Thought, A Dialogue in Comparative Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). I wish to thank David Der-wei Wang and Li Feng for sharing their insights and scholarship on this topic.
The Chinese women writers I will explore in this chapter, Bing Xin (冰心, 1900-1999), Xiao Hong (萧红, 1911-1942) and Eileen Chang (张爱玲, 1920-1995), each present a discourse of the visual that holds back from domination and appropriation of the other. Descriptions appear neutral, open, or in some cases, without closure. For example, in Eileen Chang’s “Days and Nights of China,” it would be easy to argue that the passage is an example of Chang's "aesthetics of desolation," the accumulation of narrative details, juxtaposing space, time, and culture, and identity, that together create a feeling of absurdity and detachment. However, I also find that Chang’s extended description creates a figure too round, to individualized to be completely appropriated as a singular mood or statement. The narrative produces too many remainders -- left over details that spill out and resist simple interpretation. Chang’s style of “overstating” provides a verbal abundance that, in the end, cannot be fully controlled. Readers are left with realistic details and cultural insights that collide semantically and offer only a confusing puzzle that they have to put together. This “letting be” of images and identities, this resistance to manipulating alterity solely for the purpose of self-making, represents the key feminist gesture that will be the focus of this chapter.

This “letting be” of the other in the descriptive writing of these Chinese women writers brings them into conversation with contemporary theorists on intersubjectivity who

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5 For example, Leo Ou-fan Lee notes that Chang’s “aesthetics of desolation” not only reflects the despair of life during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, but also her attitude toward civilization as a whole: “It seems that she is also referring to the hurried march of modernity – of the linear, deterministic notion of history as progress that would eventually make the present civilization a thing of the past by the force of its destruction.” See Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 287-289.
present love as epistemological and relational openness. Luce Irigaray’s ethics and
“economy of relations” will be particularly applicable, given her interest in the function the
senses (mainly sight and listening) in shaping our experience of others and our approach to
love. Much of Irigaray’s recent philosophical work explores the meeting of two subjects
(rather than subject and object) who are each aware of the limitations of their own identities
and are open to the possibilities of the other’s essential difference. In Sharing the World
(2008), Irigaray writes that subject-subject relations offer an alternative mode of interaction
and relationality, made possible by way of spatial and temporal openings. The neutral space
created between two must be free of desires to claim or dominate. In Irigaray’s view,
“Appropriation has dominated the rules of construction in a monosubjective culture.
Recognizing one’s own limits, as well as the existence of the other as irreducible to one’s
own existence, and searching for the means of entering into relations with him, or her, will
then substitute for appropriation.”
Irigaray’s specific wording matters here. Her
philosophical effort describes an approach: we search for the means of entering into
relations with others. Therefore, it is the search not the practice (we are not there yet) that
is the critical point of inquiry, and this search is made possible by the subject’s position and
attitude toward the other. Irigaray suggests that a change begins with how we interact with
the other visually and allow for the free circulation of knowledge from what we see.

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6 The term “economy of relations” comes from Krzysztof Ziarek’s article, “A New Economy of
Relations,” in Returning to Irigaray (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 51-75.

The three woman writers whose works will be studied here are known for their highly imagistic and visual texts, though significant differences can be found among their works: in the types of images presented, the figuration of their deployment, and in the relationship between image and the work as a whole. While Bing Xin’s visual images function more symbolically as poetic figures, Xiao Hong’s images tend to be more performative, as an extension of the seeing self. Eileen Chang’s kaleidoscopic interplay of images reflects a modernist distance and “play” with meaning, representative of a world in flux. In each case, visual images predominate in a way that foregrounds their importance as critical to the success of the literary work. In all of the works explored, visual details are not decoration or embellishment, but make poetic, philosophical or political statements. I argue that visual details reveal an open epistemological position, making possible a wider, more tolerant view of the other, and a more limited, compassionate, view of the self. As a result, these literary texts present the beginnings of a shift toward new forms of knowledge and new ways of acquiring knowledge about others.

Yet Irigaray also problematizes understandings of the visual by introducing a theory of its other: the invisible. Irigaray’s politics of invisibility threatens the primacy of the visible as the knowable, including the power to name, claim and hence, manipulate. She introduces instead a call to respect the unknowable of the other. Irigaray’s invisible acknowledges the invisible energies and potentialities that emerge between two subjects. Krzysztof Ziarek, interprets Irigaray’s approach as identifying a new energy, a new way of seeing: “If previously, seeing concerned grasping and knowing, now it involves, or better evolves,
becoming and transforming, where becoming transpires without ends or objectives, and becomes enabled by the relational energy of difference.”

Ziarek stresses that Irigaray’s re-conceptualization of the terms “visible” and “invisible” should not be understood as a wholesale negation of the role of sight or the role of observation in the creation of knowledge. What Irigaray aims to accomplish is rather a re-insertion of “letting be” into the dynamic of knowledge gained from our most powerful faculty: sight. She does not seek to replace one mode with the other, but to strike a balance, as Irigaray herself has stated: “The blossoming of man requires, in fact, a making and a letting be.” In other words, the constructivist, creative, “making” drive in humankind is enhanced by an equal drive (or need) to observe, interact, learn and “let be” without appropriation. Strength, indeed love, is found when both modes are engaged. The problem, according to Irigaray, is that as moderns, in our world of making, manipulating, dominating, and profiting, the visible as appropriable knowledge is so ubiquitous that the function of “letting be” has become suppressed, even invisible.

In many ways, it has long been the world’s writers, artists, naturalists, and spiritualists who engage in a practice of “letting be.” However, this engagement is not as

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9 Irigaray writes that, “... the invisibility of the other is no longer felt as a lack of seeing but as an invisible source of seeing.” Quoted by Ziarek, “A New Economy,” 60. Ziarek further explains that, “... the very term ‘lack’ reveals the economy which regulates relations within the optics of visibility: it is an economy which consists in making appear, in rendering visible, and thus, to echo Heidegger here, in procuring or making available: for knowledge, manipulation, production, mastery, and so on. Within this economy, invisibility signifies negatively, that is, as a lack or a gap which needs to be either redeemed or covered over, either appropriated and rendered visible, or marginalized and excluded” (60).

10 Luce Irigaray, quoted by Ziarek in “A New Economy,” 72.
“pure” as theory makes it seem. Artistic or literary production happens in a cultural, economic and political context. Conscious or unconscious intentions to “let be” in artistic expression are necessarily mediated through these conditions. Consider once again Eileen Chang’s essay, “Days and Nights of China,” which describes the Taoist monk. Readers familiar with the works of Eileen Chang might find it difficult to separate the beauty of her observation from two sociological conditions: the author’s self-proclaimed desire to create a sensational literary style and her equal desire to profit from her work. Chang’s creative wording, often outlandish analogies (“His hair is worn in a little gray coil on the crown of his head, not unlike the massed curls of a stylish modern woman”), clever literary allusions, and witty expressions are all hallmarks of this carefully crafted literary aesthetic. One could easily dismiss Chang’s monk as another figure who has become but a plaything of her imagination. With this complexity in mind, however, I will argue that a vector of “letting be” can still be found with regularity in her essays and that the pattern of such intimate descriptions presents a critically modern and feminist way of looking and relating as a historical subject with a civil identity. For example, Chang does not attempt to speak for her object, nor does she try to explain the forces that contribute to his impoverished state. She does not create a victim, nor does she find an entity to blame. In this resistance to cast that type of judgment, we locate a lingering openness in her text.

The question of how civil identities are formed concerns Irigaray and her readers. Irigaray suggests that by changing the way we see and approach others, we can also change
our “modality of relations” as individuals within a community. A fundamental egalitarianism functions here, based on the equal value of both self and other. According to Maureen Niwa-Heinen, “A civil identity . . . protects the right to exist [as a unique subject], and within that right, the right to cultivate interiority.” This idea has fascinating implications for the Chinese historical context, for just as the rhetoric of the May Fourth New Culture Movement served to emancipated subjects with the construct of individuality, it simultaneously placed individuals within new social and political categories of social and economic class, region, and gender. And politically, as the idea of individualism gained momentum, individual autonomy and agency was challenged by other ideological forces, such as the resistance to Japanese occupation or movements for workers’ rights.

What is compelling about the women writers studied here, and one can include the male writers of this thesis as well, is their commitment to articulating a vision of relationality that does not subsume the role of individual subjectivity to established structures of knowledge. The radical nature of their vision may be found in the power ascribed to subject-subject relations to produce affective energies that signify potentials for relationality, community and love outside pre-existing networks of social, economic or political control. In short, the love produced relies on a form of neutrality while also taking a stance against all

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11 The wording here is Ziarek’s.


13 For example, the “revolution + love” formula that was promoted as a way to counterbalance the discourse of modern romantic love and blissful marital relations as the center of one’s life. Notice that revolution comes first, before love. See Jianmei Liu, Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women’s Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction (Honolulu, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003).
forms of dominance. Krzysztof Ziarek understands the difference as thus: “[This way of seeing] gives without becoming part of the economy of information, it enables without producing, and operates in a manner that is neither passive nor active.”

Irigaray herself phrases this shift in thought and behavior as a form of heightened awareness that allows a subject to make a choice. In this case, the choice is an acceptance of limitations of knowledge and control: “To accept not to make, in favor of letting be, is a gesture required for turning back to the ground of oneself and for recognizing the other as other.” It is important to note that Irigaray does not promote “losing oneself” in the other or a kind of metaphysical “merging” of two identities into one. She envisions instead two subjects approaching the other and creating a third space within which they may interact freely. A stable, grounded self, is the type of subject capable of creating what she calls a “threshold,” a neutral space at the limits of our own self-identity that makes possible the welcome of the other into our lives. This welcoming is also an attitude characterized by intellectual and emotional “availability for that which has not yet occurred.” It is “an ability and a wanting to open ourselves to the unknown, to that which is still unfamiliar to us and, in a sense, will always remain unfamiliar.”

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15 Luce Irigaray, quoted by Ziarek in “A New Economy,” 72.

16 As Irigaray explains: “If we are not dwelling where we ought to dwell, being what or who we are, we are not prepared for an encounter with the other. We are only able to impose on the other our alienation, misunderstanding, or ignorance,” Sharing the World, 7-8.

17 Irigaray, Sharing the World, 18.

18 Ibid.
Returning to the Chinese Context – and Outline of the Chapter

The critical perspectives provided by Irigaray’s view of otherness and relationality will assist in identifying philosophical directions, narrative strategies and aesthetic patterns that point to an underlying epistemological and hermeneutic openness existing among modern Chinese women writers. The theories will not be adopted wholesale or without contextualization. In this light, this chapter aims to show how three woman writers opened up new ways of seeing that impacted the creation of a discourse of self-other conceptualization and relationality. Methodologically, I will proceed by consideration of narrative and poetic detail as marker of epistemological openness and as informing affective texture. The first may be understood as more philosophical, the second more literary.

The first part of this chapter will investigate Bing Xin’s writings on love and the legacy of her “philosophy of love” as it evolved throughout her lifetime. In many ways, Bing Xin’s writing set the terms for a discourse of love from the May Fourth moment onward. Her conceptualization of love was universal in nature, a parental love that all people could potentially experience and share. Leftist critics exposed the naïveté of this vision by arguing that not every parent has the capacity to love in the same manner and that class differences also impact the nature of love. This critique was voiced almost as soon as the works were published, but this did not diminish Bing Xin’s popularity. Her Letters to Young Readers (寄小读者, 1926) reached its 36th edition by 1941 -- only fifteen years since its first run.19 In fact, it has been said that during the decade of the 1930s, Bing Xin was better known and

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more widely read than Lu Xun.20 The simplicity of Bing Xin’s expression of love as it appeared in poetry, lyrical essay and short stories soothed readers but did not challenge them. As a result, her status as a modern Chinese writer has never been highly regarded. And yet I will argue that her discourse of love represents a key moment of modern Chinese history in which an alternative cognitive horizon was presented – and embraced. Bing Xin offered readers a new set of possibilities for thinking about love. To expand on what this horizon represented, I will further present a reading of the dialogism inherent in Bing Xin’s early works on love, showing that her discourse of “motherly love,” with its physical closeness, intersubjective bonding, and constant caring, partnered with a discourse of vulnerability, a complexity that has been largely overlooked by critics.

The second half of the chapter will return to Irigaray’s epistemological approach to the concept of love and its fundamental openness. Examination of the ways in which narrative detail functions in the fiction and essays of Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang will show how an epistemology of love can be understood not only in thematic ways (as in Bing Xin’s writings) but also as an aesthetic deployment. The aesthetics of the detail reveal an interest in love as a form of knowledge. Xiao Hong’s way of seeing presents both realistic and lyrical details. Realistic details create a precise description of a scene, while lyrical details reveal emotional moods and affective energies that operate under the surface. Where Bing Xin deploys vulnerability as a trope that stands for the expectant self, Xiao Hong writes from within a position of vulnerability. A young woman betrayed by her own family, and later by

her first lover, Xiao Hong joined the ranks of the Chinese diaspora youth in the early 1930s. At times homeless and hungry, Xiao Hong wrote of the sufferings of the Chinese people. And yet her works are both grounded and transcendent in surprising ways. Along with Bing Xin and Eileen Chang, Xiao Hong was an adept noticer of life, and her acute observations reveal a “loving gaze” at the heart of her literary expression.

By contrast, the words “critical,” “cynical,” and “self-serving” describe Eileen Chang’s gaze. She was more like Lu Xun than any other writer of that era in her ability to critique society with a deep intellectual probity that cut into the fabric of life as with a sharp knife. Chang also shares with Lu Xun a profound compassion for her fellow men and women caught in struggles beyond their control or swept up in the currents of historical change. As is widely acknowledged, Chang differs from Lu Xun in her lack of faith in political change and in political discourse in general. Even more radical is Chang’s seeming resistance to all forms of structured knowledge and top-down deployments of ideology. Hers is a way of “seeing with the streets,” to borrow the title from an essay from Written on Water. Chang’s independent intellectual inquiry stripped reality down to raw essences, even to reveal base and violent aspects of human nature.

Eileen Chang’s neutral way of seeing represented a path toward the other, not unlike the path Irigaray describes in her work – a path marked by the tearing of the spatial and temporal weaving that surrounds each person. Chang’s details of observation, and the closeness and thoroughness of her observation, establish that she has stepped out from her own subject position and advanced toward the other. As a whole, the chapter will
contribute to understanding how relational subjectivity, as subject-subject contact and as an epistemological position, was uniquely and radically constructed by modern Chinese women writers.

**Bing Xin’s “Philosophy of Love” in the Context of May Fourth Reforms**

Love, probably more than any other discourse (except perhaps that of the nation), catalyzed intellectual inquiry in May Fourth and post May Fourth decades. Debates over the definitions and deployments of love touched every aspect of life, from concepts of individual identity and free will, to discussions of differences between the sexes, women’s rights, patriarchy and the Confucian family structure. Re-conceptualizations of love also impacted configurations of the modern family as a social, economic, and political unit. Because of the intensity of these struggles and the ways they challenged existing belief, social practice, and political organization, the discourse of love operated as a vehicle or at the very least a marker for the dramatic epistemological and hermeneutic shifts occurring in the intellectual realm. In its largest sense, love marked the opening of a cognitive horizon where networks of desire and networks of sociality interacted. Tensions swirled over competing conceptualizations of love of self, love of other, and love of country. In the 1920s, writings on the theme of love, especially those that explored free marriage (恋爱结婚), saturated

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21 Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). While “love” is in the title, her main interest is qing as sentiment or as romantic love. Later chapters discuss how romantic love, along with the “Enlightenment” structures of feeling on which they are based, become subsumed under the discourse of national sympathy. Throughout her study, however, universal or fraternal love is rarely discussed.
literary works, including poetry, plays, fiction, and newspaper profiles. This sampling of articles published by noted writers and critics of the 1920s and 1930s reveals an intense interest in desire-driven versions of love:

By male writers:
- “Between Men and Women” 男女之间 by Qian Gechuan 钱歌川 (1903-1990)
- “Our Sexual Lives” 我们的性生活 by Qian Gechuan 钱歌川
- “About Romantic Love” 关于恋爱 by Chen Wangdao 陈望道 (1891-1977)
- “A Discussion of Youth and Marriage for Love” 谈青年与恋爱结婚 by Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986)
- “Analyzing Love” 析爱 by Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 (1900-1990)
- “The Evolution of Men” 男人的进化 by Lu Xun (1881-1936)
- “Speaking of Lust and Desire” 说食色与欲 by Yu Dafu 郁达夫 (1896-1945)
- “About the Loss of Love” 关于失恋 by Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967)

By woman writers:
- “Romantic Love is Not a Game” 恋爱不是游戏 by Lu Yin 庐隐 (1898-1934)
- “Men and Women” 男人和女人 by Lu Yin 庐隐 (1898-1934)
- “Talking about Romantic Love” 谈恋爱 by Zhang Xiuya 张秀亚 (女, 1919- )

Imported ideas about desire and sexuality also opened new possibilities for experiencing the sexual relationship and sexual longing. And yet, change proved to be slow and arranged marriages continued to be standard cultural practice throughout the 1920s and 1930s, until the destruction and dislocation of war damaged family structures more completely.

Bing Xin represents a complex starting point for an analysis of a Chinese other-directed discourse of love. Raised in an elite yet progressive household, Bing Xin was

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22 Wu Danqing 吴丹青, ed., *Writings on Love* 爱情论 (Shenyang: Shenyang chubanshe, 1997), 1-5.


24 For an analysis of women’s narratives that explore the complex territory of arranged vs. free marriage during this time, see Amy D. Dooling, *Women’s Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 65-102.
educated in the Chinese classics as a child and enrolled in the American-run, Christian, Bridgman School for Girls in Beijing as a teen. By the time she entered college in 1918, she was functionally bilingual. Her intellectual world was as influenced by a classical Chinese educational background as readings in Western literature, philosophy, and the Bible. Bing Xin also excelled in science, and initially considered pursuing a career in medicine. Bing Xin’s writing, therefore, is infused by intertextual, trans-lingual deployments of language. Her writing has been characterized by a blending of classical and modern Chinese vernacular (白话), creating what has come to be known as the “Bing Xin style.” Not surprisingly, Bing Xin’s writings on love, both as theme and as aesthetic orientation, are also highly multifaceted and derive from many different sources.

Love was a thematic emphasis throughout Bing Xin’s entire career, especially the image and expression of maternal love and the mother-daughter bond.25 Wang Lingzhen sums up the opinion held by many Chinese readers of her works: “Bing Xin, famous for her writing on love, expresses a strong desire to return to the blissful unity with the mother, whose love she claimed to be the origin of the whole world.”26 Bing Xin’s autobiographical writing expressed a desire for the physical and emotional closeness and the unwavering support and unconditional love that her relationship with her mother provided. Bing Xin also utilized mother’s love to make philosophical statements about the role of love in

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constructions of identity and community. Bing Xin believed that the example of love provided from mothers was the foundation of all expressions of love.

This was, in fact, the main message communicated by her famous short story, “Superman” (超人, 1921), the story of a misanthrope whose world is awakened by the innocent love of a child. In this short story, Bing Xin’s logic is made clear: since everyone has a mother and every mother loves her child (male or female), human beings should be able to relate to one another on this basis of shared understanding. “Superman” remained controversial for over a decade, inspiring multiple readings and commentaries. Critics argued that not all children are loved unconditionally, and that not all families have the means to love their children in the same way. Unfortunately, many critics, such as Mao Dun’s (矛盾 1896-1981) dismissed her work entirely:

... due to her own harmonious childhood, [Bing Xin] would like to think that everyone is capable of loving their fellows. Her “innocence” and her “good intentions” are all very beautiful and praiseworthy, to be sure, but this does not in the least validate their applicability to society and human life in reality.27

Indeed, from a materialist point of view, Bing Xin’s story does not provide many answers. And some passages, such as the protagonist’s “It is true that all mothers are good friends,” do seem overly simplistic.

Yet the focus on mothers and motherly love as the object of critique occludes the larger ethical statement that “Superman” makes. Mao Dun’s critique misses the value of a shift in attitude from hate to love, from selfishness to compassion. In fact, “motherly love”

was itself the bridge to *universal love*, an important building block for civil society. The protagonist’s letter illustrates this shift: “There was not a shade of love or sympathy about the money I offered you to see the doctor. It was only meant to stop your moaning, and, in fact, it was a denial of my mother, of the universe and life, and of love and sympathy. . .”

In fact, with Bing Xin’s early works, a new vocabulary of love (爱 ai) entered the cultural mainstream and this word for “love” came to be associated with a web of other meanings precisely due to her writings: mother, father, friends, extended family, nation, God, and even nature.

**The “Loving Self” and Visions of the Other in Bing Xin’s Miniature Poems**

Bing Xin’s miniature poems, published in the collections *Myriad Stars* 繁星, and *Spring Water* 春水 (1923), offer readers a “way of seeing” that stood side-by-side with other dominant discourses of her day: the discourse of individual identity and romantic love, and the discourse of ethnic identity and national salvation. In fact, Bing Xin’s discourse represented a third conceptual realm of self-identity and relationality, which I will call the “loving self.” This loving self has been called by some critics Bing Xin’s expression of “universal love” (博爱). It is first marked by an overall spirit of egalitarianism expressed as representations of people and relations as fundamentally non-differentiated with respect to gender, class, educational background, ethnicity, and even nationality. In this sense, the

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loving self is not limited by culture or geography, or even by gender. Rather, it is closer to a spiritual identity. Socially, Bing Xin’s loving self is an identity that looked outward horizontally across society. While not radical in the political sense, nor greatly diverse in thematic content, this loving self was fundamentally an attitude toward life, and as such represented the construction of a new cultural horizon:

> Love on the right, sympathy on the left, walking along two sides of the road of life. At times we sow seeds, at times the flowers bloom, and along this long distance path, we adorn ourselves with flowers such that their fragrance fills the air. It makes the travelers who get poked by branches or who brush off leaves, who step on thistles and thorns, not to feel the pain and suffering; they may shed tears, but they are not sorrowful.

The statement appears at the conclusion of an emotionally-charged essay from *Letters to Young Readers*. While simplistic and even romantic, Bing Xin projects a vision of an empowered human subject who has within him or her the “seeds” to create a meaningful life. In Bing Xin’s ethics, good will is sown as seeds through our love and sympathy to later flower and become a shield against life’s difficulties. Bing Xin’s loving self found general expression in her miniature poems as well, such as no. 12 from *Myriad Stars*:

> Human beings! 人类呵！
> Love each other, 相爱罢，
> For we are all passengers on a long journey, 我们都是长行的旅客，
> Going to the same destination. 向着同一的归宿。

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Bing Xin’s use of the social scientific term “human beings” (人类) exemplifies the universalist position that she often assumed. The vocabulary of love employed in this poem derives from multiple sources, including Christianity and Hinduism by way of Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) Stray Birds, a collection of miniature poems on which Bing Xin’s were modeled.32

Bing Xin’s mature writings of the 1930s, 1940s and beyond are somewhat vague about her faith, yet early works are quite specific both in her following of Christian beliefs and in the integration of Christian imagery, language and world views into her writing.33 For example, in the poem, “Midnight” (夜半, 1921), later collected into a grouping of poems entitled Holy Poems (神思), Bing Xin writes of a greater love at the center of all creation:

God is a God of love, 上帝是爱的上帝，
The universe is a universe of love. 宇宙是爱的宇宙。
God! I thank you, 上帝啊！我称谢你，
Because you guide me, amen. 因你训诲我，阿们。

That same year, Bing Xin wrote a short essay entitled “Freedom, Truth, Service” in which she wrote the following: “Jesus says, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’ Jesus is the crystal

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32 For an analysis of the intertextual relationship between Tagore’s Stray Birds and Bing Xin’s Myriad Stars and Spring Water, see Xiaqing Liu, “Writing as Translating: Modern Chinese Women’s Writing in the Early Twentieth Century” (University of South Carolina, 2009).

33 According to Lijun Bi: “Bing Xin felt extremely grateful for God’s love, as she felt that this was something that humans were lacking; and hence, love became an imperative component of her social remedy. God exists everywhere, from the glittering of the stars to the rustle of the leaves, and it was her belief that the whole universe resonates with love.” See Lijun Bi, “Bing Xin: First Female Writer of Modern Chinese Children’s Literature, Studies in Literature and Language 6, no. 2 (2013): 25.

of universal love, so He himself is Love, is Truth.”\textsuperscript{35} Later works, however, personalize (thereby also secularize to a great extent) the link between this kind of love and its Christian source.

Locating the precise boundaries of Bing Xin’s religious beliefs are outside the scope of this paper, but expressions like those quoted above help to locate the position of vulnerability common to Bing Xin’s writings on love. Bing Xin filled her poetry and prose with references to the small, the fragile, the faint, the gentle, the partial and the childlike. These represent intellectual connections among these references to Christianity, Taoism and Tagore – in addition to Bing Xin’s own experience of childhood of which she frequently wrote. The innocent child is a well-known trope in the Bible representing a pure-hearted approach to faith, but also, essentially, a willingness to imagine the self in relation to a higher power. Indeed, children were specifically revered by Jesus, as quoted in Matthew 18:1-5: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”\textsuperscript{36} Bing Xin seemed particularly fascinated by this understanding of the child as both pure and full of promise. In\textit{ Myriad Stars} poem No. 35, Bing Xin writes:

\begin{quote}
A myriad of angels
Begins to extol a child:
A child!
A tiny body
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
万千的天使，
要起来歌颂小孩子；
小孩子！
他细小的身躯里，
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Translated by Silvia Canuti, “Christian Faith,” 54. Bing Xin’s 1984 essay, “My Time at Bridgman Academy” 我入了贝满中斋, also states that her early belief in universal love was shaped by the Christian teachings she learned while there. See “My Time at Bridgman Academy,” Bing Xin Literary Museum 冰心文学馆, accessed June 10, 2013, \url{http://bingxin.org}

Holds a huge soul.\textsuperscript{37} 含着伟大的灵魂。

Bing Xin’s poem presents heavenly angels as a source of spiritual power. However, this type of expression underwent a personalization that secularized the concepts and turned the essence of the expression into a philosophical statement, as found in Myriad Stars poem No. 74:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
An infant & 婴儿。 \\
Is a great poet. & 是伟大的诗人， \\
From his incomplete speech, & 在不完全的语言中，
Come the most complete poetic lines.\textsuperscript{38} & 吐出最完全的诗句。
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

The truth inherent in silence matches themes found directly many of Tagore’s Stray Birds poems. For example, Tagore writes: “the small truth has words that are clear; the great truth has great silence.”\textsuperscript{39} Bing Xin must have also felt the deep resonance such statements have with Taoism, especially the Laozi, chapter 56: “Those who know don’t talk, those who talk don’t know” (知者不言, 言者不知)\textsuperscript{40} In all of these examples, the position of vulnerability is turned upside down and is presented as a position of strength and wisdom.

\textbf{The Controversy Surrounding Bing Xin’s “Philosophy of Love”}

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\textsuperscript{37} Bing Xin, Myriad Stars, No. 35, translation adapted from Lijun Bi, “Bing Xin: First Female Writer,” 27.

\textsuperscript{38} Trans. Lijun Bi, “Bing Xin: First Female Writer,” 27.

\textsuperscript{39} R. Tagore, Stray Birds, poem no. CLV, quoted by Xiaoqing Liu, “Writing as Translating,” 42.

\textsuperscript{40} Lao-tzu (Laozi), Taoteching (Taodejing), translated by Red Pine with selected commentaries of the past 200 years (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996), 112.
\end{flushleft}
Bing Xin attracted the attention of critics like A Ying, Mao Dun, and Shen Congwen precisely because her presentation of love not only had religious overtones, but was also abstract and far reaching. It presented a humanist face and was not as concerned with romantic love or marital love, at least not in her celebrated “love” texts. Bing Xin’s discourse of love overlapped with the discourse of the New Culture Movement and Leftist social reform that followed. And yet, it did not fit into either dominant world-views, but occupied an uncharted middle ground. Yan Haiping, speaking specifically to Bing Xin’s *Letters to Young Readers*, describes the in-between status of Bing Xin’s non-hierarchical discourse:

[Bing Xin’s] writing turns into a process where dialogues on equal footing across social boundaries should, are, and can happen, which undoes the principles of the “old” Chinese hierarchy that divide the learned literati and unlearned commoners and misses the binaries of “new” Western order that divides the advanced adult and the undeveloped child-like.

In Yan Haiping’s analysis, Bing Xin creates an alternative discourse, a cognitive space that is unique to itself, and which is also uniquely feminine, even feminist, in its intersubjective conception of self. Thus, Bing Xin’s intellectual contribution is no less than a cognitive space “where dialogues on equal footing across social boundaries should, are, and can happen.” This may not seem groundbreaking, but in the historical and social context of that time, it communicated its own radical position.

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41 Most discussions of Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love” cite the following representative texts: “Smile” (笑, lyrical essay, 1921), “Superman” (超人, short story, 1921), “The Realization of Love” (爱的实现, short story, 1921) *Myriad Stars, Spring Water* (繁星、春水, miniature poems, 1923), and *Letters to Young Readers* (寄小读者, essays written in epistolary form, 1926).

At the heart of nearly every negative critique of Bing Xin stood the reality of her class position and the relative lack of class consciousness in her works. Critiques of her work also derived from a concern regarding her intended audience – her peers and the generation beneath hers – youth (青年). The Leftist critic, A Ying (阿英), who is credited with labeling Bing Xin’s works, a “philosophy of love,” wrote an objection to Bing Xin’s efforts to write literature as social remedy capable of lifting the spirits of depressed youths.\(^{43}\) To him, Bing Xin’s discourse of love was too limited in scope and too out of touch with the everyday lives of ordinary people to effect any real change:

The concepts of ‘universal love’ and ‘motherly love’ that she has put forth, are used to understand everything in society – she believes that all of the roadblocks people encounter in their lives, and the various kinds of evil produced by society all stem from the problem of people not loving one another. She believes that if human beings could only love each other, then a glorious, idealistic era will arise from this.\(^{44}\)

Speaking in a derogatory tone, A Ying notes that the content of Bing Xin’s works included only three main areas: motherly love, the greatness of the sea, and memories of childhood; and that her “philosophy of love” could be summed up with three aspects: as motherly love, love of childhood, and love of nature.\(^{45}\)

More sympathetic contemporaries, already borrowing the term “philosophy of love” in their own discussions, describe an all-encompassing love that permeates her works, such as this description by Li Xitong (李希同), written in 1932:

\(^{43}\) A Ying, “Xie Bing Xin,” 1-3.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
As for her literary works, their content includes love for mother, love for children, love for the sea, love for friends, love for small plants; her basic tone is one of love. Her literary style is both elegant and plain, simple and succinct, integrating the poetics of the ancients. In short, all of this together is what can be described as Bing Xin’s unique style.46

Li Xitong concludes his short remarks by stating that he is not writing on behalf of Bing Xin as a supporter, but is merely presenting what is “objectively” apparent about her works and her literary style: “Let Bing Xin be Bing Xin” he declares.47 Representing just a small sample of the variety of views published on Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love,” these two excerpts nonetheless provide a glimpse of the conflict her works. On the one hand, her warm depictions of loving relations between family members and among friends were embraced by readers who also appreciated her elegant style. Yet on the other hand, Bing Xin’s loving expression also frustrated more social and political-minded readers who hoped Bing Xin would cultivate a more critical, socially-conscious edge. Despite this conflict, her popularity continued for decades and reprints of her best known works, the poetry, essays, and short fiction of the early 1920s, persisted into the decade of the 1940s.

The controversy surrounding Bing Xin and her works reveals the threat her popular works must have presented to the Leftist literary movement. Writing as late as 1936, Mao Dun offered the reading public a thorough dismissal of Bing Xin’s early writings on love. For Mao Dun, Bing Xin wrongly aligns herself with May Fourth reformers, a point that Mao Dun responded to vehemently. To Mao Dun, Bing Xin was not engaged politically with the core

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47 Ibid.
aims of the movement and its fundamental concern with the lower classes, poor and dispossessed. Combined with a critique of Bing Xin’s privileged class position, he concludes that she should not be praised as a vanguard writer of that movement. To press his case, Mao Dun takes up one of Bing Xin’s most famous “motherly love” poems from *Myriad Stars* (no. 159), criticizing what he believes is its message of escapism:

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Mother!
When the rainstorm comes from the sky,
Birds hide themselves in the nest;
When the rainstorm comes to the heart,
I can only hide myself in your bosom.”
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Mao Dun focused on the verb 躲 *duo*, meaning to hide or to seek shelter, which he interpreted as “escape” (躲避 *duobi*). Sympathetic readers interpret this poem as Bing Xin’s cherished feelings of a mother-daughter bond that originated in childhood and continued to provide shelter for the injured self through adulthood. As such, the poem speaks as much to the quality of the relationship that enables such comfort that welcomes it. For Mao Dun, however, Bing Xin fails to offer her youthful readers any kind of “resolution” (解决 *jiejue*) to her troubles, she can only “escape” into her “mother’s bosom. Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love,” therefore, is an empty promise that misleads readers:

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Therefore we can understand that Ms. Bing Xin’s attempt to “inhabit the Real” (舍现实的) is rather a place of the “ideal.” From very early on, she presented a kind of “escape,” which in later works turned into her “home.” This became a situation not unlike wearing “elephant skin” from day to night to repel the wind and the rain”
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Clearly, for Mao Dun, Bing Xin’s ideas could not serve society. During a time when the country was under siege and about to be at war (1936), Mao Dun found Bing Xin’s depiction of the intersubjective bond between mother and daughter horribly out of place. Mystified, he could not fathom why readers continued to be attracted to her works.

From a female critical perspective, the view toward Bing Xin is much more nuanced. Ding Ling (丁玲, 1904-1986) wrote a short review of Bing Xin in 1951. In it she praised Bing Xin’s “elegant and flowing” writing style as she critiqued Bing Xin’s purported audience: “gentry readers and young men and women of the petty bourgeoisie.”

Ding Ling’s short review is worthy of closer attention for the way she describes the impact of Bing Xin’s works on readers of that time:

Bing Xin originally received the influence of the “May Fourth” movement and began her literary life at that time, but all she spread (感染 ganran) was a kind of atmosphere or feeling (气氛 qifen). She once described herself as a pale and delicate flower blossom in early spring, and for this cannot be said to represent the spirit of “May Fourth.” Therefore, she only obtained what she herself once described: “I set down my load halfway through the journey.”

Ding Ling’s choice of words here is of key importance. Bing Xin “spread a kind of atmosphere,” she “infected” readers with a kind of “mood.” Ding Ling makes Bing Xin sound like a passing fad that caused a fervor and went away just as quickly, the only last effect being an “elegant and flowing” literary style. Yet, the word ganran (to spread, infect) suggests the movement of something from person to person, which is important in

\[50\] Ibid. \\
\[51\] Ibid.
identifying Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love” as a social phenomenon. Further, qifen (atmosphere, mood) in the Chinese usage suggests a spatialization of mood. Bing Xin’s works had the impact of weather phenomena, such as mist or fog, which can change the way one sees and relates to the world.

Shen Congwen (沈从文, 1902-1988) was one of the writers “infected” with Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love.” In his essay, “From Bing Xin to Fei Ming” (由冰心到废名 1930), discussed briefly in the previous chapter, establishes a genealogy of writers whose work speaks to an alternative tradition in modern Chinese writing of the 1920s. Bing Xin, a woman writer, stands at the head of this genealogy. To Shen Congwen, Bing Xin’s works present a “fresh, simple and beautiful language to express emotion.” Toward life, they tend to focus on small events and “embrace a motherly-like warmth.” In addition, she “treats the “human world” with a gentle smile.”

Shen Congwen identifies a small group of writers whose works share similar styles and writerly approaches – beautiful writing that contains poetic resonance, which transports and deeply impacts the reader, heartfelt expressions of human sentiment, in short, a modern lyrical style. According to Shen Congwen, these writers do not separate themselves from society, from other people, in their need to assert their self-identity, as was his reading of both Xu Zhimo and Lu Xun:

Xu Zhimo’s “The Cambridge I Know” . . . [and other works] . . . there is not one that doesn’t reveal his kind of “pursuit of solitude” just exactly like having a withdrawal or an ultimate struggle with the present age, even though the present age is still beautiful and magical in his eyes. This perhaps has something to do with his real life:

\[\text{\textsuperscript{52}}\] All three quotes from: Shen Congwen, “From Bing Xin to Fei Ming,” 由冰心到废名 Collected Works of Shen Congwen 沈从文文集, Volume 11, ed., Ling Yu (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1992), 219-231.
falling in love, getting divorced, and getting re-married. Lu Xun, in his *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, especially expresses this need and yearning for solitude as if in order to possess a “self” one must be alone. Another aspect of his passion originally came from his intense focus on the past and the consciousness expressed in his fiction. Look now at yet another example of his withdrawal from the modern world:

[excerpt from *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*]

This kind of feeling of dislocation and weariness arising from the “present era” exactly forms one part of the unique characteristics of these two writers’ works. Yet there are other writers who lack this kind of [dislocated and weary] feeling towards “the present” who have created works with different kinds of characteristics. Among new essay writers, I choose the works of Bing Xin, Zhu Peixian and Fei Ming as representative.\(^53\) (all quotation marks in the original).

The contrast of perspective and opinion is striking – it was precisely Bing Xin’s literary depictions of family members, of her mother’s love, of beauty in nature that led Mao Dun to critique Bing Xin as escapist. But here, Shen Congwen is reading the same works with a different set of eyes, with different understanding of literature and what literature should achieve. *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* is a very unusual memoir. Eschewing nostalgia, Lu Xun instead uses the platform to critique society, including those family members who loved him, such as his Nanny A Chang, producing distance and a sense of emotional void. Readers finish the volume with a clear picture of Lu Xun the man, but it is, as Shen Congwen has suggested, an image of the man standing alone.

Shen Congwen wrote a second essay that positively assessed Bing Xin’s contributions to the literary field, noting that her works received “unprecedented” praise and in the ten years since their first printing brought more “joy” to readers than any other work by a writer

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
of that time. Clearly, he felt her works had a significant social impact, exactly the impact that so troubled A Ying and Mao Dun. For Shen Congwen, Bing Xin ultimately offered readers a kind of hope:

The love in Bing Xin’s writings is a kind of love without sexual desire. Rather it is a kind of motherly sympathy, and a kind of child-like purity, it is a basic element of morality and a kind of desire for peace.55

To Shen Congwen, Bing Xin’s writings inspired in readers a desire for peace; it is also a hope to feel warmth, kindness, love, whether motherly or not. The writer, Ba Jin, who became a personal friend to Bing Xin and edited later re-printings of her works, reveals how this desire for peace might have looked like, especially in the context of the new cognitive horizon that Bing Xin created:

We all like Bing Xin. We love the stars and the sea along with her. The lonely child like me finds the warmth and the lost maternal love in her works. I still remember that summer before I left home, I read Myriad Stars with my cousin, and we learned how to write short poems together. Those short poems are still etched firmly in my mind, although I only wrote ten or twenty poems. I am not a poet, but I often feel that with someone reciting a poem before me, I can follow suit to recite my poems and move onward.56

For Ba Jin, Bing Xin provided the model not only for miniature poems but also for a discourse of love. By imitating her poems, Ba Jin and his cousin learned to express themselves in a

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54 Shen Congwen, “Discussing Bing Xin’s Writing” 论冰心的创作, Bing Xin Literary Museum 冰心文学馆, accessed June 10, 2013, http://bingxin.org. Shen’s two essays are relatively short and not as well-researched or comprehensive as those of A Ying or Mao Dun.

55 Translated by Xu Lanjun, from her diss., “Save the Children,” 98.

similar mode – using Bing Xin’s subjectivity as a guide.\footnote{Incidentally, Ba Jin is also noted for having started a “short poem movement” of his own in the mid-1920s, championing Bing Xin’s form and style as a healthy exercise for youth to experiment with as a form of self-expression.} And this maternal love was itself also bound up with another, bigger kind of love – universal love – or the loving self: “In the past, we were all lonely children. It is from her beautiful and kind works that we come to know how to love stars, to love the sea, and to experience again the maternal love, which we have lost forever.”\footnote{Ba Jin, “Preface” to Selected Works of Bing Xin, 1941. Translated by Lijun Bi in “Bing Xin: First Female Writer,” 27.} Unfortunately, Ba Jin did not recall more images besides the stars and the sea as there is so much more to her poetry. And yet, these were the images that came to represent Bing Xin’s message: the twinkling stars represented a vision for common values in the modern age; while the sea represented a life-giving force of nature set in a context of emergent globalization.

**In Darkness there is Light – Bing Xin’s Intellectual Dualism**

Might Bing Xin’s works have been so popular or influential if she only wrote about her mother’s love, the sea, or her devotion as a daughter? Those works were the most popular and most anthologized by Chinese readers from the 1920s up to today. As nationalism turned China into a “motherland,” Bing Xin’s expression of love for mother was also read as a love for country. In fact, these two sentiments were blended by the author herself in her *Letters to Young Readers*, written over the three years the author was a graduate student of literature at Wellesley College in Boston. Nostalgia for home (China)
and longing for mother’s love made these letters deeply moving for generations of Chinese readers.

And yet the overall breadth of Bing Xin’s interests, which extended well beyond the themes of motherly love, provided the counterbalancing weight that grounded her philosophy of love. With what I term an “aesthetics of vulnerability,” Bing Xin presents a self-identity as drawn to darkness as to light, concerned with mattes of death, solitude, and weakness. The vulnerable, partial self is presented as one open to the world of others. In miniature poems and essays from Letters to Young Readers, one finds an emphasis on small things – puddles, leaves, grass, a single orchid. The stress seems to be on their vulnerability, but also their beauty and potential. A few examples:

*Spring Water*

**#23**

Common little pool of water,  
The sun draws near you in its setting,  
And makes you a sea of gold.  

#29

An ordinary emerald green  
But only more gentle.  
O West Lake  
Are you the little sister of the sea?

#35

Tender green leaves,  
You resemble the thoughts of a poet,  
The colour, leaf by leaf, grows richer.

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In Bing Xin’s “aesthetics of vulnerability,” love is expressed by a poetic self that presents as small and vulnerable, not strong but childlike. Bing Xin’s love is a reverence for the “childlike heart” that can see the world simply and without judgment or a desire for personal gain. But it is also the child as set dialogically with a parent, West Lake with the sea, the small pool and the sun. In each case, the small presence is identified in relationship with something larger.

Bing Xin’s aesthetics of vulnerability is also found in her dualistic poems of darkness and silence, which appear right alongside her poems of childlike wonder and motherly love. Together these two types of poems create dialogic interaction. In her poetry collections, *Myriad Stars* and *Spring Water*, the manner by which Bing Xin presents the glimmer of stars and the moon indicates that she was equally attentive to the darkness of the night sky that makes this glimmering visible to the human eye. The logic is very simple: how else can one see the stars but at night, and the darker the sky the better! Hers was a philosophical interest that sets up a type of complementary bipolarity – opposites that support equilibrium rather than compete for dominance. Dyads are common throughout her works: dark sea-bright moon, activity-rest, life-death, child-parent, vast sea-small lake, garden rose-roadside dandelion to the rose. Her preference is for the weaker of the dyad, such as the common dandelion. The critic, Li Ling finds a modern echo of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* in Bing Xin’s works, especially in the frequent image of the innocent child-like state of mind.\(^6\)

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those charming images resonated well with readers, death, loneliness, and fear provided the
key backdrop – as if these were the intellectual underpinning that completes a picture:

  A shimmering expanse, 万顷的头动
  deep darkness near the island – 深黑的岛边，
  the old moon rises. 月亮上来了。
  The source of life, 生之源，
  is there, 死之所！
  where death is. 62

Even though light of the rising moon shimmers on the water, the entire scene remains
nocturnal. At the edges of moonlight is the deep black of the sea. Like many of these
miniature poems, meaning is obliquely created through juxtaposition, as in these last two
lines. The dark sea is both the source of life and the place of death; or the poem might say
that just as the moon rises and falls, so too does life come and go. Bing Xin was surprisingly
philosophical in these poems, written while she was a college student at Yanjing University
in Beijing, a young woman in her early twenties. As much as the word for death in the final
line may be shocking for some readers, it is delivered with such equanimity as to have an
almost calming effect.

Bing Xin’s philosophical poems express an attraction to the mysterious, but in a
contemplative way. She does not express fear of the dark, but writes of it conceptually. This
could support a Taoist reading of her works, but perhaps also a Christian one. Her approach

(Autumn 1989), 109. Another translation of the same poem reads: The trembling of the boundless sea -/ From
the pitch darkness on the side of the island / The moon is emerging. / The fount of life, / The destination of
reflects a faith, and certainly a self-confidence, that makes the embrace of pure darkness possible:

Darkness,
How do I describe you?
You are in the deepest spot of our souls,
At the furthermost end of the universe,
And amid a place where the brilliant light pauses for a rest.\(^{63}\)

This is deep darkness (深黑 shenhei – poem no. 3) and a blackest black (黑暗 hei’an – poem no. 5) felt in the deepest part of one’s soul; it should be the place of our greatest fears, and our greatest awe. Does Bing Xin’s naiveté show here? It may be possible to stand with critics who might argue that Bing Xin’s appreciation of the night sky happens from within the safe confines of a family courtyard or even from her own room – there is such a lack of demons here. Bing Xin’s darkness is a quiet, neutral, and non-threatening kind of darkness, an abstract source of power and of life. For a Chinese reference, consider the Laozi, Chapter 1: “The one we call dark, the dark beyond dark, the door to all beginning” (同谓之玄，玄之又玄，众眇之门).\(^{64}\)

The darkness was also a place of silence. Bing Xin now points to the place where meaning exists, where connection is being made through the texture of touch -- the receptivity of a smile that comes before the words that would limit its meaning:

The mystery of the edge of heaven,
How could we begin to search for it?


\(^{64}\) Lao-tzu (Laozi), Taoteching (Taodejing), translated by Red Pine, 2.
Following a gentle smile,
And before language,
There is this limitless mystery.  

微笑之后，语言之前，便是无限的神秘了。

Bing Xin’s curiosity about the potential for silence and non-linguistic experience provides an opportunity to link back to Luce Irigaray’s theories of relationality and love. Irigaray speaks of the “path towards the other” as a movement of openness characterized by silence. In Irigaray’s theory, we step out to the limits of our own identity and stand at the “threshold,” her image for the place where we can step off to meet another subject. Irigaray characterizes the meeting of another subject (in subject-subject relations) as a willing tearing open of our own “temporal weaving.” Each individual exists in a space-time nexus unique to his/her own identity. In order to truly meet the subject as subject, without domination or absorption, one has to be willing to create a separate space-time world in which a new relationship can exist.

The effort here is not to read Irigaray backwards onto Bing Xin, but we can at least acknowledge an affinity in the ways these women approach matters of relationality. Bing Xin’s attitude is one of a little smile (微笑 weixiao), a humble smile, and perhaps a knowing smile. The noun, weixiao appears many times in the collection *Myriad Stars* and is also evoked in the lyrical essay, “Smile” (笑 1921). Culturally, weixiao in Chinese offers an image of openness, non-judgment, and welcome. It is the smile of quiet wonder and reflective curiosity. Weixiao groups together with other vocabulary in Bing Xin’s poems and essays: 温弱 wenruo – warm and fragile, 微柔 weirou – warm and gentle, 安慰 anwei – consoling and

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comforting, 沉默 chenmo – silent, and 融化 ronghua – blending, melting, com mingled and integrated.

Like Ye Shaojun’s short fiction, Bing Xin’s preference for dialogism offers multiple perspectives, and therefore multiple entry points to understanding. Neither of these can be understood in the Irigaraian sense of “letting be,” but they are significant in locating an interest in difference, particularly of acknowledging an other outside the self. Within the poetic form of the miniature poem, juxtaposition is the method by which difference is introduced:

Hometown!
How can I bear to gaze distantly toward you,
When can I return to you?
The white haired grandpa,
Is no longer in our garden!

故乡！
何堪遥望
何时归去呢?
白发的祖父，
不在我们的园里了！

In this modern version of the hometown poem, melancholy longing for a place of intimate familiarity is mixed with grief over the death of someone who represents that place.

Readers know that the “feeling” of hometown is truly lost for the speaker of the poem. It can never be the same without the people who made it feel a certain way. This is Bing Xin’s relational identity at work.

**Conclusion to the Bing Xin section**

At the time when the traditional family unit was under attack and delegitimized, Bing Xin articulated a distinctly modern envisioning of the family, of female accomplishment and

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femininity. Following the break-up of the traditional Confucian family structure and its social and moral norms, modern writers struggled with how to represent their family attachments, particularly when these attachments linked them with the “old society.” Yet Bing Xin’s distinctive bicultural position granted her a confidence to present a vibrant picture of a modern family with enlightened sensibilities. Bing Xin’s works not only inaugurate a modern lyrical language and style, they also establish a semiotic landscape of feeling that allows for the validation of bonds of affection of both family and community. This stands in contrast to the other beginning – the Lu Xun-type beginning that propelled into the public sphere a discourse which focused negatively on the distress, decay or complete disintegration of bonds that connect people with one another.

Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love” also influenced modern re-imagining of social space and relationality in the face of China’s social, cultural, political and economic transformations. Her representations of co-created individual identities and the “sisterly” personas she used to connect with readers contributed to the creation of an alternative cognitive horizon. As noted by Haiyan Lee in her thesis section on Bing Xin: “True to her Christian upbringing, Bing Xin interprets love as hope, or the enduring faith in hope. One may give up all else, but never the hope that love will soothe and connect all lonely souls and ultimately unite humanity as a whole.”

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67 Haiyan Lee, “In the Name of Love: Virtue, Identity, and the Structure of Feeling in Modern China” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2002), 232. When Haiyan Lee edited and expanded her dissertation into a published book, she omitted the section on Bing Xin. The reason must have been that the book focused more narrowly on qing as romantic love and how this concept evolved and changed from the late Qing through the early revolutionary period.
Xiao Hong and the Relationality of Compassionate Details

During her short but prolific career as a writer, Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911-1942) worked among Leftists and was considered a writer of anti-Japanese resistance literature. Her novel, The Field of Life and Death (生死场 1935), was one of the first to directly portray ordinary Chinese struggling against an oppressive and brutal landlord. These same villagers then plan to fight against Japanese occupation in Manchuria. In addition, Xiao Hong’s short stories, such as “Hands” (手) and “On the Oxcart,” (牛车上), both written in 1936, depict tragedy in the lives of the common people and pay special attention to the plight of women. Less well-known is Xiao Hong’s concern with issues surrounding the relational aspects of these lives. Beyond the political overtones in her stories, there was, first and foremost, a keen interest in sensitively portraying “round” characters full of life. Fictional works read like plays with characters acting out scenes as if on stage. Details not only heighten the drama of the stories, but also serve to energize the relational connections between characters and their surroundings. Xiao Hong’s “aesthetics of the compassionate detail” functions to open up alternative spatio-temporal awareness, like a crack in a door through which the reader can peer into another room where something else is going on.

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68 Critics have hailed Xiao Hong as a writer of national allegory, but this threatens to erase the ambivalence found in her works, as Lydia H. Liu has noted: “Consequently, one can hardly read Xiao Hong today without an awareness of the highly developed, institutionalized, male-centered critical tradition that has tried to frame and determine the meaning of her work.” See Liu, Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China, 1900-1937 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 200-201.

69 Xiao Hong’s The Field of Life and Death was published in Shanghai by the Slave Society (Rongguang shuju) late in 1935 with the help of Lu Xun who also wrote a preface to the novel.
These details open up awareness of different personal realities, aspects of otherness that always point to a strong other-centered human concern.

While promoted by Lu Xun and others as a novel of resistance, *The Field* can more accurately be described as a novel about community, even a community at the point of fracture and dissolution. In this discussion, I will focus thematically on how relationships and relational values are depicted in Xiao Hong’s narrative; at the same time, I will examine how Xiao Hong utilized narrative perspective and affective texture to present a glimpse of relational energies and ways of seeing.

Xiao Hong’s richly detailed narrative operates with a feminist “loving attention” toward the world she depicts, even when presenting violence or suffering. Xiao Hong imbues her narrator with loving eyes that witness the joys, sorrows, and oppression suffered by the villagers in her novel. I do not suggest that the entire novel should be read as a warm-hearted embrace of her home region of Manchuria, thereby reading over the brutality, oppression and suffering that so characterize the novel. On the contrary, “loving eyes” speaks more philosophically to a narrative form of witnessing: “By seeing with and seeing through ‘porous’ [open and fluid] eyes, witnessing subjects oppose the objectifying, contestatory Lacanian gaze which separates subject from object.” This mode of acceptance, according to Kelly Oliver, focuses attention on acts of noticing that acknowledge

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70 About Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death*, Lu Xun wrote that, “[The novel] will infuse in you the strength to persevere and to resist.” In Lu Xun, “Preface to *The Field of Life and Death,*” trans. Howard Goldblatt, *The Field of Life and Death and Tales of Hulan River* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 2002) 4.

and respect the other: “When we look at someone we love, when we caress with our eyes, we are giving living attention necessary for psychic life.”\textsuperscript{72} Pressing the concept even further, Oliver stresses that “the loving eye is also a critical eye.”\textsuperscript{73} It does not assume, but questions, reflects, and reinterprets: “The loving eye is a critical eye in that it demands to see what cannot be seen; it vigilantly looks for signs of the invisible process that gives rise to vision, reflection, and recognition.”\textsuperscript{74} My research has found that Xiao Hong deploys a modern Chinese narrative of living attention, witnessing the full range of human suffering and joy experienced by the villagers in her novel. In the pages that follow, I will discuss the practice of attentiveness and ways of interpreting literary detail as establishing a new approach to reading Xiao Hong’s \textit{The Field of Life and Death} as a relational text.

\textbf{Narrative Detail as Mediator in \textit{The Field of Life and Death}}

Writing with fidelity to the range of human experience, including the many contradictions that characterize human lives, often entails writing with details that bring that range of experience to life in narrative. Three female writers of the 1930’s and 1940’s, Ding Ling, Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang each excelled at detailed writing, as did Shen Congwen who also wrote in this period. If details represent fragments of feelings, ideas or perspectives of reality that interrupt the text, then in a text of national allegory they can also be seen as elements that can potentially challenge the narrative’s aim to present a unified

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 215.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
political message. In early revolutionary and resistance literature, details whose referents were not easily identified were considered suspect. Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker described Ding Ling’s persistent efforts to rid her works of the extraneous and impressionistic details that could too easily be interpreted to convey the author’s subjectivity or, even worse, betray naïve sentimentality.  

From the field of architectural design comes a theory of the detail that I would like to expand upon in my readings of Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang. Anthony Viscardi presents the dynamic idea of the detail “as mediator,” something as novel in architecture as it would be in literary criticism:

The role of the detail, particularly as a joint or connection, is to intervene in such a way as to form a new relationship. However, to intervene one must also mediate, forming a negotiation between two, sometimes diametrically opposed, situations to culminate in a resolution that is mutually beneficial to each party.

It is the detail, especially as a joint, that acts as the wild card or catalyst for this alchemist feat; its role is to ignite or precipitate a dialogue between what may seem like two antithetical circumstances.

At the transition areas between the different hallways, formal joints were designed to act as connections in the expression of structure and space.  

In the architecture studio, the detail becomes a way for an architect to imagine the dialogical elements of their design: the way the parts speak, even across seemingly “antithetical circumstances.” At the same time, attention to detail also offered the


76 All three quotes are from Anthony Viscardi, “The Detail as Mediator: Notes from a ‘Joint’ Venture between Architecture and Early Education,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 51, no. 4 (May 1998): 244.
architects an opportunity to maintain their concern with part to whole: “In the design of a
detail, the concern is not only with a single object by itself, but also with the collective
congestion that is generated by the relationship it negotiates among the parts.”

How might this view of the detail as mediator translate to the practice of fiction
writing? Could the narrative detail also function as a joint, catalyst, or dialogical element? In
the context of the theories of relational subjectivity discussed thus far in this thesis, this type
of mediating detail seems a perfect fit for a model of relationality that envisions the
connection of two subjectivities at a third space in between. Could it also be a marker for
the kind of loving gaze found inscribed in this text?

If narrative details operate as mediators in this novel, the place to find them should
be around the main issue of the novel: the body of woman. *The Field of Life and Death* is a
novel of community, but it is the community of women who occupy center stage. If girls
survive childhood, they become the prey of hungry men and suffer rape, pregnancy, and
childbirth. Marriage offers new challenges: childrearing, fieldwork, and housework. When
something goes wrong, such as the illness that paralyzed the young beauty, Yueying, a
woman risks dying of neglect by her resentful husband. In this world, the only reliable
relationship seems to be that of mother and daughter. Indeed, as Lydia Liu has noted,
“Critics have often wondered about the fact that Xiao Hong’s ‘anti-Japanese’ novel is filled
with details about village women’s lives and does not begin to deal with the Japanese

77 Ibid.
invasion until the last two chapters.” Some details function realistically to amplify the horror of these women’s lives, such as those surrounding the pitiful state of Yueying, who sits in her own excrement while the flesh of her bottom rots away. Mother Wang does her work of caring for Yueying without words, washing her filth and covering her with a blanket, but the narrator shows that its impact is internalized by the character:

Carrying the boots with her, Mother Wang left the little hillside house. People walking along the top of the desolate hill were silhouetted against the sky. She was dazed by the bright light, by the stench of the paralyzed woman, by worries about birth, old age, sickness, and death. Her thoughts were blocked by all these waves of worry.

When Fifth sister reached her door, she waved goodbye to Mother Wang. The long distance yet to go was thus left to an old woman who had more experience with life. Knotting the blue scarf tighter around her head, Mother Wang quickened her step. Underfoot, the snow also quickened its accompanying howl.

The passage offers a retreat from the oppressive misery of the house with its dying woman. It also reveals the mediating details of the silhouettes and the blue scarf, both symbols of life moving forward. This symbolic moment places Mother Wang in a wider, cosmic, context. Mother Wang is “dazed” by the life-giving light of the sun and equally dazed by the work of caring for the dying. Mother Wang thus serves as the soul of her community, as she links the living and the dead, the natural world and the human.

Mediating details operate in the world of village men as well as they struggle to find purpose after successive rounds of epidemics and Japanese aggression tore the village from its place in the natural cycle of life. In one particularly moving passage, Xiao Hong presents

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78 Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 203.
79 Xiao Hong, *Field of Life and Death*, 35.
Mother Wang’s husband, Zhao San, in a moment of exhaustion, seeking solace in nature only to be confronted by the remnants of war at every turn. The juxtaposition of beauty and death overwhelmed the old man who falls to the ground in grief:

Feeling flushed and lightheaded, he went out to walk in the woods. There the treetops traced an arc against the blue sky, a lovely, symmetrical arc that billowed like the clouds. A curtain of blue sky hung straight down before him, the treetops hemming it in with a scalloped border. Butterflies flitted to and fro, even though the wildflowers were not yet in bloom. Spread out before him were isolated thatched huts, some left only with sections of walls standing in the sun, and some with the roofs carried off by bombs, while the main parts of the houses remained intact.80

Every detail in this passage, written to reflect the visual experience of Zhao San, competes for meaning. The mediating detail functions “to intervene in such a way as to form a new relationship.” What then is negotiated and brought together in this passage? An answer is found in the pages that follow, with Zhao San’s impassioned speech supporting the revolutionary cause: “The nation . . . the nation is lost! I . . . I am old, too. You’re still young, you go save the nation!”81 While often interpreted as a late addition of propaganda to the novel, Zhao San’s speech nonetheless represents the culmination of experiences and encounters with fellow villagers and with nature, that together create a new relationship between the soil that has so shaped his life and his identity as a Chinese man. His passion comes, in part, from his experience on the walk where the beauty and fecundity of nature reconnect him to energies of the land and memories of a vibrant community that had been lost. The experience empowers Zhao San with a new kind of moral agency.

80 Ibid., 66-67.
81 Ibid., 73.
Scholars of Xiao Hong, such as Lin Xiandai, describe The Field of Life and Death as a novel of “poeticized tragedy” (诗性悲剧). 82 Within the freedom of her “essayized” (散文化) narrative style, Xiao Hong succeeds in blending tragic moments with the strength of lyrical expression. By minimizing plot, Xiao Hong is able to “allow the writing to return to a primitive expression, that lets spiritual and material life forces come together to breathe, dialogue and chant together (呼吸、对话、吟唱).” 83 The mutual breath points to the organic quality Xiao Hong achieves in her depicted village and each character’s strength, wit, and resolve occupies as much literary space as their misery, perhaps more.

Mediating details, particularly images of nature, create the link to the organic forces of strength and compassion. Compassion, engendered by way of narrative detail, reflects an open orientation toward knowledge even while it is challenged by hierarchical pressures. Shan Chou writes of Du Fu’s (杜甫, 712-770) poetry of social conscience, “…it appears that for Tu Fu [Du Fu] the large and the small, the trivial and far-reaching, were not dissimilar but part of one continuum. For him, even the large subject of the sufferings of common folk could be expressed through arresting, trivial details . . . and subjects as far apart as affairs of state and the clothing of his children could fall under the same thought (italics mine).” 84 The

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82 Li Xianzhi 李贤治, “Xiao Hong and Her Weak Literature”萧红和她的弱势文学, Field of Life and Death 生死场, ed., Li Xianzhi (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2009), 145-164.
83 Ibid, 159.
84 Shan Chou, “Tu Fu’s Social Conscience: Compassion and Topicality in His Poetry,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 51, no. 1 (June 1991), 13-14. An example of Du Fu’s detailization in a poem about poverty within his own family. This is the second poem from the series, “Seven Songs, Composed in the Year 759, While Living Temporarily in T’ung-ku County” (乾元中寓居同谷县作歌七首). A Long-handled hoe of white ash, of white ash, My life depends on you for its life –
power of Du Fu’s moral vision affected readers precisely due to his way of seeing: a non-differentiated, empathetic mode of witnessing all aspects of life during the time of national crisis. Similarly, Xiao Hong also offers modern readers the experience of reading the world in its wholeness, as a continuum of experience rather than as a vertical, power-driven, world where individual identities are trapped beneath larger forces. The horizontal movement in her works counterbalances the powerlessness of national crisis and offers readers, as in Du Fu’s poetry, a vision of empowered individual subjectivity.

To illustrate this point, I will examine a scene from the opening of *The Field of Life and Death*. Right on the first page, Xiao Hong introduces us to her main protagonist, Two-and-a-Half Li, a simple and illiterate peasant who is searching for his lost goat. His immediate world is treacherous, the type of place where daring to cross a neighbor’s cabbage field in search of the goat calls for a rough beating. The poor man, taken for a thief, runs for his life. A moment later, the narrative takes us on a short detour into the man’s consciousness, opening a window onto a more sensitive side of the man’s personality:

Wild vegetables fringed a short path at the edge of the vegetable plot. At the far end of the path was Two-and-a-Half Li’s house, in front of which stood a poplar tree; the leaves were always rustling. Each day, as Two-and-a-Half Li passed beneath the tree, he stopped to listen to the rustling of its leaves and to watch them move. So it was with the poplar day after day, and day after day he stopped. On this day, however, he abandoned his routine.\(^{85}\)

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\(^{85}\) Xiao Hong, *The Field of Life and Death*, 5.

No sprouts on the yellow turnips, the mountain snows lie thick,
I tug at my short clothing, but the shins are still bare,
And now with you I come back empty-handed,
The boy cries and the girls wail, the four walls are still.
Alack, alas! The second song, and the song just begins
The village shows its pity for me.
(Translated by Shan Chou, 47)
In this novel that presents one calamity after another, it seems fitting that this type of aesthetic experience may also be lost. Yet, the moment of beauty, appearing on the first page of the novel, becomes imprinted in the reader’s mind – the play of flickering light and the ethereal musicality of the poplar leaves is indeed a magical experience that can easily transfix a sensitive soul. The relational energy depicted in this detail between man and nature becomes further deepened by the depiction of Two-and-a-Half Li’s familial bond with his pet goat. Perhaps part of the novel’s irony, the relationship between Two-and-a-Half Li and his goat is one of the strongest of the novel. By depicting instances of the human-animal bond, Xiao Hong is able to access the type of raw affective energy that operates without language. We should not assume that Xiao Hong limits this affective energy to the animal world alone. This early scene directs the reader’s eye to notice moments like this that occur throughout *The Field of Life and Death*.

**The Practice of Attentiveness**

Aesthetically, Xiao Hong’s use of lyrical narrative details to further relational ways of seeing simultaneously cut across the male-dominated, revolutionary narrative form she inherited. The result is a complex, multi-vocal text whose moments of relational meaning resonate beyond the novel’s plot. Mediating and poetic details, in the words of Willard Spiegelman, “create rhetorical schemes that invite us to see the world through their eyes.”

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Epistemologically, narrative details in modern lyrical fiction can be seen to challenge the rise of hierarchical structures of knowledge by continuing to assert the continuum of experience that connects the local and particular to the national.

Modern writers, such as Xiao Hong, were also intensely concerned with acts of noticing, particularly in their efforts to *make visible* the previously underrepresented and largely misunderstood lower classes, or proletariat. Many of Xiao Hong’s “compassionate details” are highly subjective, revealing the inner thoughts or habits of proletarian characters, such as Two-and-a-Half Li’s moment of aesthetic reverie noticing the play of light and sound of his poplar tree. In a recent lecture at Harvard University, Stephen Owen told a hall full of undergraduates that Chinese poetry is fundamentally about the “practice of attentiveness.” It is about how poets use literary discourse to express their attention to the seemingly small moments of life that resonate with larger meanings.\(^87\) Hence, acts of noticing in themselves can be understood as attempts to know and to make connections between individuals or between layers of reality.

This practice of attentiveness, the noticing of small details of life, was not the end in itself for modern Chinese writers. The crucial step was in connecting this detail to something larger and to show interrelationship of part to whole.\(^88\) This connection, a cornerstone of


\(^88\) As noted by Jaroslav Průšek: “We realize that the modern prose writer can do quite well without any story, all he needs is to explain the social significance of the observed phenomenon, in which he sees the reflection of the unhappy fate of certain groups of population. Here a definite shift is perceptible toward the capturing of reality achieved not by the recording of facts, but alone through emotional coloring.” See “Yeh
Chinese lyric aesthetics, produces resonance, an expansive feeling. But in the modern context, it more tellingly points to shifts in epistemological understandings, of how subjects relate and gather meaning from their world. Chinese poetry has long been an epistemological discourse. For example, the Chinese poetic genre of “poems on things” (咏物 yongwu) marks the intersection between poetic conventions and philosophical orientations. Turning again to Owen, yongwu poems “are epistemological models that teach readers how to know, and at the same time reassure their readers of the world’s ultimate intelligibility.”

In Xiao Hong’s modern fiction, acts of noticing are also grounded in the narrative point of view of a text. Consider the memorable Chapter Three of Xiao Hong’s later work, *Tales of Hulan River* (呼兰河传, 1940), where she relates fondly the experience of learning to recite classical Chinese poetry with her grandfather. It is a touching and playfully comic moment in her novel, typically read autobiographically as a moment of warm relationality in an otherwise cold and, at times, abusive, childhood. But the moment also stands out as a form of aesthetic education and as an early practice in the art of noticing. At first read, it may appear not to be so. Xiao Hong’s depicts herself as a child too young to understand the meaning of the poems she studies. Poetry is to her but a game, and she recites it as loudly as she can for its aural pleasure. Yet a few chapters later, a more mature child is shown to be engaging in a habitual practice of poetic study and aesthetic appreciation. Tellingly, the

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passage shows in a dramatic way how a mode of aesthetic appreciation is transferred from the realm of study into a way of seeing and interpreting the sights and sounds of her world. In the passage below, a study of Meng Haoran’s poem “Slumbering in Spring” sets the mood for other types of listening and attentiveness in Xiao Hong’s own life – in this case, the morning work of the cook for the household:

“Someone sleeping on a spring morning slowly awakens to the new day, and the first thing he hears is the sound of birds all around. His thoughts return to the rainstorm of the night before, but he doesn’t know how many fallen flowers are on the ground today.”

As granddad was explaining the poem to me, our family cook was up and around. I could hear him coughing as he carried the water bucket out to the well to fetch water. Our well was quite far from the rooms where we slept, too far for us to be able to hear the sound of the well rope being pulled up during the day; but in the early morning the sound came through loud and clear.” 90

The last sentence completes the aesthetic transference, for just as Meng Haoran poetically describes being able to hear the singing of early morning birds due to the absence of other sounds; so too is Xiao Hong able to hear faint sounds of her surrounding world in the early morning: the rope stretching in its pulley as the cook pulled the bucket up, or his cough heard from the other room. Xiao Hong’s writing, from the autobiographical to the fictional, is filled with this type of humanist detail – which can be seen as presenting a critical attentiveness to the realities of others’ lived existence.

While Xiao Hong was attracted to the beauty of the world, she knew all too well that the world is also a place of violence, oppression and death. Just pages after narrating Two-and-a-Half Li’s poetic moment under the poplar tree, the narrator presents the story of Old

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90 Xiao Hong, The Field of Life and Death, 191-192.
Mother Wang who “let her [daughter] fall to her death.” The three-year-old was gruesomely impaled on a pitchfork after falling from the top of a haystack where she was perched by her mother. This is the same Mother Wang who later becomes a gentle caregiver to the dying Yueying. In Xiao Hong’s novel, however, details of the beauty and fecundity of nature exist side-by-side with violent details of human suffering, particularly seen in the many startling images of the brutalized and bloody female body.\textsuperscript{91} However, the violence and suffering of Xiao Hong’s world also serve to illuminate the many acts of kindness and social interaction. In fact, Xiao Hong’s gift, not unlike that of Ye Shaojun, is to present a working out of strained relational identities. From this new forms of sociality are born, creating linkages across class and gender that could not have existed under the Confucian social system, as noted by Yan Haiping:

\begin{quote}
\ldots around such a gender-specific land of mutilated bodies [a] certain kinship of caring gathers, with implications entirely distinct from that of the Confucian family codes that produced an ontologized order of social classification and relations.\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

In her feminist reading of Xiao Hong, Yan Haiping notices the constructions of new non-kin-defined bonds that strengthen the community. Termed “mobile kinships,” these networks of sociality come to life in an alternative spatial-temporal matrix, marking the beginning of other-oriented individual subjectivity. Might this identity, capable of relating across family and class lines, also reveal a new type of civil identity in modern China?

\textsuperscript{91} See Lydia Liu, \textit{Translingual Practice}, 199-213.

\textsuperscript{92} Yan Haiping, \textit{Chinese Women Writers}, 140.
Xiao Hong languished in a hospital bed in Hong Kong during the start of the Japanese invasion. As she faced her own mortality, she reportedly said: “We don’t live as receivers, but givers.”\(^{93}\) This statement makes an interesting conclusion to the writer’s “everlasting longing and pursuit for warmth and love,” quoted at the opening to the Introduction. In her short lifetime, marked by loss, rootlessness, and only fragile moments of joy, Xiao Hong transformed her dream of receiving love by becoming a subject who freely gives of it through her friendship and her writing.

**Historical Transition, 1943: The Sufferings of War and the Loneliness of the Heart**

In his “Preface to *Tales of Hulan River,*” the writer and critic, Mao Dun, expressed his grief over the sudden loss of Xiao Hong to illness in 1942. How could a vibrant life and an inspired career be cut so short: “An untimely death had dealt me a cruel blow, one I longed to forget yet could not easily banish from my mind.”\(^{94}\) Perhaps to ease his aching heart, Mao Dun visited Xiao Hong’s grave during a visit to Hong Kong. Xiao Hong was buried far from her birthplace in Northeast China – at Repulse Bay on the far side of Hong Kong Island, facing the South China Sea. The location of the grave and circumstances of Xiao Hong’s death amplified for Mao Dun the deep loneliness he felt characterized her life. It was a loneliness he believed saturated the pages of her fictional autobiography, *Tales of Hulan*

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River: “The little town of Hulan River was full of sound and color of every kind, yet it was
dead and dull. Life in the little town was lonely. Xiao Hong passed her childhood in these
lonely surroundings. It goes without saying that they left an indelible mark on her mind.”
Variations on the word, “lonely,” appear over nearly twenty times in Mao Dun’s “Preface,”
certainly representing his own depressed state of mind. Writing in 1946, and reflecting
back on the devastating final years of the War of Resistance with Japan, Mao Dun was likely
weary and lonely himself. His “roundabout route” from Chongqing to Shanghai via Hong
Kong, would give the writer an opportunity to recapture some of his own memories before
they were forgotten:

I planned to go to Prince Road in Kowloon to see the house where I lived during my
first stay in Hong Kong, to Butterfly Valley where my daughter liked to take her girl
friends to play, and to find the American comics my son collected so carefully in
those days. I would have a look too at the house on Kennedy Road where I lived
during my second stay in Hong Kong, and the Dancing Academy on Tennessee Road
where we took refuge after fighting broke out on December 8. Most of all, I was
eager to visit Xiao Hong’s grave by Repulse Bay.

This is an amazingly wistful expression by Mao Dun, written just months after the
resumption of the Chinese Civil War in 1946 (and seemingly out of place in the opening
paragraph of a preface to Xiao Hong’s novel). Mao Dun, the Leftist writer and critic who so
thoroughly dismissed Bing Xin’s “philosophy of love” some years earlier, now utilizes his
personal resources to plan a farewell voyage to Hong Kong out of love of place and

95 Ibid., 99.

96 The word, 寂寞 jimo (which can also mean silence), appears the most frequently. It is an interesting
word choice because it implies social isolation more than physical separation. The word for the latter, 隔都 or
guli, also appears in the “Preface” to describe Xiao Hong’s situation in Hong Kong during the final year of her
life.
97 Ibid., 95.
attachment to certain moments of his own family life. The visit to Xiao Hong’s grave, perhaps the only “revolutionary” activity of the trip, brings to focus the writer’s feelings of grief and guilt amidst the strong pull of nostalgia for the past.

Even more significant, is the date of December 8. December 8, 1941 marks the start of the Battle of Hong Kong. This places Mao Dun, Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang on the island at the time of the Japanese invasion. In response to indiscriminate Japanese shelling, Mao Dun took his family to a nearby Dancing Academy for shelter. At that time, Xiao Hong was already in hospital, a situation that greatly complicated her medical care and most certainly contributed to her death. Across the island, a young college student by the name of Eileen Chang, was evacuated from Hong Kong University and sent to a shelter at the foot of the mountain. Later, Chang volunteered as a nurse’s aide in a make-shift hospital, changing wound dressings and comforting the dying.

One wonders if Eileen Chang knew of Xiao Hong at that time. Could Chang have heard of her death? It is curious that two descriptions from Chang’s essay “From the Ashes” (烬余录, 1944), written about her experiences during the Battle of Hong Kong, remind one of scenes from Xiao Hong’s writing. First, Chang describes living through the eighteen days of the battle as akin to sleeping on a hard plank bench, “Although in terrible discomfort and ceaselessly complaining of such, we managed to fall asleep all the same.” Similarly, Wang Yaming, the protagonist of Xiao Hong’s “Hands” (手), slept for months on a hard wooden

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98 In one of the first battles of the Pacific War, Japan attacked both Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong on the same date. Due to the International Dateline, this date was Dec. 8 in Hong Kong and Dec. 7 in the United States. Surprisingly, few Americans seem to know about the attack on Hong Kong, which was resisted by a joint coalition of British, Canadian, Indian and Chinese forces.
bench, having been segregated from the dormitory rooms due to her black-dyed hands. Further, Chang’s most memorable patient at the war hospital was a young man whose wounded buttocks were infected with an incurable gangrene. Chang uses the words *shilan zheng* 蚀烂症, which evoke an image of maggots, immediately bringing to mind the tragic fate of the beauty, Yueying, in *The Field of Life and Death* who also slowly and painfully wasted away. Both writers chose a matter-of-fact way of responding to the horrors of death. Chang and the other young nurses practically celebrated the man’s passing, for the end of his suffering and for the conclusion to their own misery in caring for him: “Selfish people such as ourselves went nonchalantly on with living.”99 In *The Field of Life andDeath*, the narrator presents the thoughts of Mother Wang, who also ministered to the dying patient: “The dead were dead, and the living needed to figure out how to stay alive.”100 Are these statements really so different? Both narrators express a desire for survivors to keep on living in the way they know how.

A year after the Battle of Hong Kong and Xiao Hong’s death, Bing Xin attempted to renew her *Letters to Young Readers* in Chongqing by publishing a *Second Letters to Young Readers*. On New Year’s Day of 1943, in the widely-circulating newspaper, *Dagongbao*, Bing Xin published the first installment of a *Second Letters to Young Readers*. With nature imagery, Bing Xin expressed her optimism for the second run of what had been a wildly popular and stylistically influential collection of essays back in the mid-1920s: “In the clear


100 Xiao Hong, *Field of Life and Death*, 35.
light of the day, a pair of emerald-green birds fly up from their perch near a small pool, calling out with beautiful birdsong . . . everything before one’s eyes all show forth tranquility, bright optimism and joy.”

Yet now, China was splintered politically and at war with Japan. These were what historian Diana Lary called the “grim years,” a short period characterized by famine, steep inflation, exodus and eviction of rural village populations, conscription of men to both Japanese and Guomindang forces, and war weariness in the western region of “unoccupied China.” These contingencies of war as well as the demands of her own family life made a Second Letters to Young Readers impossible to sustain or complete. Bing Xin wrote no more than three letters at the beginning of 1943 and then a final, fourth letter, in December of 1944.

The year 1943 proved to be a watershed year for modern Chinese literature, distinguished most of all by the wide-ranging diversity of works appearing in print. In May, the text of Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” was published nearly a year after this influential speech was given at the Communist base of Yan’an. When I was in Xia Village (我在霞村的时候, 1943), the first collection of revolutionary stories written by the feminist writer, Ding Ling, received strong but mixed reviews. The impressionistic stories, “When I was in Xia Village” and “Night,” were considered too “subjective” by some critics as they continued to probe the nature of reality from an interior

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perspective, rather than showing the “objective” reality of the times. True “proletariat” literature rose up this same year, such as Lu Ling’s (1923-1994), *The Hungry Guo Su’o* (饥饿的郭素俄) and Zhao Shuli’s (1906-1970) short fiction, both representing the turn toward the authentic and earthy voices of proletarian writers.

On the other side of the artistic spectrum stood Shen Congwen, then teaching at Southwest University in Yunnan and writing philosophically-minded essays and short stories. Shen’s essay, “Beauty and Love” (美与爱), part of the collection *Gazing at Clouds in Yunnan* (云南看云集, June 1943), movingly calls the nation’s attention to the need for aesthetic education as a means to regain a faith in love and human kindness. With all of the competing voices on the literary scene at that time, however, one wonders if Shen Congwen’s call fell on deaf ears. In 1943, China was split both politically and geographically. Japan occupied the eastern one-third of China, following a line running from Manchuria in the north down through Beijing, Wuhan (on the Yangtze), and south to Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Works published in the “occupied zones” were unlikely to make their way to the “unoccupied” cities of China’s West – and vice-versa. Similarly, some regions operated as cultural and economic islands. Such was the case for Shanghai in 1943, occupied by Japan.

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103 See Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling’s Fiction*, 64.


but still home to international settlements of British, French, American, and Russian émigrés, businessmen, and missionaries who had yet to leave China.

The year 1943 also represents the break-out year for Eileen Chang, writing in and publishing for her “island” home of Shanghai. During that one year alone, Chang published ten major short stories and one novella, including “Love in a Fallen City” (倾城之恋), “Sealed Off” (封锁), and “The Golden Cangue” (金锁记). These stories of romance, chance encounter, and the decay of traditional Chinese culture, were published by the most popular magazines in Shanghai at the time: Zazhi, Tiandi, and Wanxiang (Phenomena). Chang left Hong Kong in 1941, deciding to forego finishing her university degree. She sailed on a Japanese ocean liner whose passage to Shanghai went by way of Taiwan. Back in Shanghai, Chang began to publish short essays for English-language periodicals, such as The XXth Century. It appears that, according to Kam Louie, Eileen Chang gained a fresh perspective on her native city by going abroad to study. Upon her return she was able to “see” the complex world of Shanghai with a more distanced, critical eye. In the section that follows, I will examine the subjectivity of Chang’s visually-attentive narration in her critical essays published in Written on Water (流言, 1945). More so than her fictional works, these essays present a historical subject confronting the dizzying and complex world around her, seeing with open eyes and with an epistemological orientation of “letting be.”

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107 See Kam Louie, “Introduction,” Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, 5-6.
Eileen Chang’s Alternative Vision of Love – The Search for “Harmony”

This final section to this chapter on the “epistemology of love,” will explore Chang’s aesthetics of “letting be,” an aesthetics presented with philosophical overtones. I will argue that a discourse of love is found in the everyday moments that occupy privileged positions in her essays. The feeling of reverence set among impressionist description place Chang among the century’s best modernist writers. Like the surrealists of Europe, Chang found the sacred in the everyday. While the relational aspects of these encounters are more virtual than real, they represent forms of urban sociality as communal energies born of recognition of difference. Chang’s attention to the individual characteristics of the other, grants a space for the other’s existence as separate and unique, and therefore as a holder of his or her own subjectivity. In this study of relational subjectivity, Eileen Chang stands alone in her persistent characterization of the other as other.

Chang’s essays in *Written on Water* (流言, 1945) strike the reader as distinctly modern in their depictions of the intersections of public and private spaces. For example, “From the Mouths of Babes” (童言无忌) covers an astonishing range of topics from Chang’s family life and early experiences with money, food and clothing to her view of herself as a “self-supporting pettie bourgeoisie,” living in her own rented apartment with the means to visit the cinema or purchase fabric to take to the tailor’s for personal fittings.108 Chang tells readers she also “venture[s] into the streets” (上街) to buy groceries, a routine the author

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relished for providing the opportunity to wander about, “seeing with the streets.” Her essays are thus a literary reflection of these daily excursions, which provide sustenance on two levels: the food she needs, and the raw material for the observations and social commentary recounted in her essays.

What makes these essays appealing to readers, and important as a record of lived historical life, is that any object, action, or passer by attracted the attention of Eileen Chang. Using lively diction and precise detail, her narratives animate these seemingly random people and things, from shop window mannequins, traffic jams, to the parade of fashions worn by men and women of all social classes. Often, Chang’s eye is drawn to a subject that communicates to her a relational identity, as in this observation of a bike rider and his unusual passenger:

Most people who ride on the back of someone else’s bicycle are attractive young women or, barring that, small children. But the other day, I saw a postman in his green uniform riding a bicycle with a little old lady on the back, who must have been his mother. A deeply affecting sight.

Chang was no doubt drawn to the colors of the pair in motion, attracted as she was to the colors of the street. Next she assigns emotional meaning to the scene by assuming the mother-son relationship, reading into it a son’s devotion and allowing herself to be “deeply moved” by the blending of “scene” and “emotion.” The observed historical moment,


therefore, immediately transfers its meanings to the aesthetic realm, and becomes the source for further social commentary:

And yet the era in which a Li Kui would carry his old mother on his back has passed us by. The mother, unaccustomed to such lavish favors, looked somewhat ill at ease. Her feet dangled in the air as she sat cautiously and conscientiously, her face reflecting her diffidence... as she rode into the wind, smiling... 112

The description is even more detailed than space allows for here. Time must have stood still for Chang to capture so many details of this bike rider and his passenger, from the comic dangling of feet, to the stiff body braced against the wind. The moment takes Chang back to the Ming Dynasty novel, *Outlaws of the Marsh* (水浒传) and the figure of Li Kui, a tragi-comic hero recognized for his devotion to his mother. The mother’s looking “ill at ease” could have been due to many factors, but Chang here ascribes a social interpretation: mothers are not accustomed to being treated so well in the upside-down world of modern Shanghai. It is the 1940s in China, after all, a war-torn country. Families have been split apart or have degenerated under the pressures of modern life, as happened in Chang’s own family. Relationships operating under Confucian norms were less common. So, isn’t this image of mother and son a wonderful sight, then, Chang seems to say.

Esther M. K. Cheung, in her study of fashion and mnemonic art in Chang’s essays, argues that Chang’s literary works should not be read as philosophical discourse, but as a reflection of “profane illumination,” a feeling of transcendence that the “strangeness” of

112 Ibid., 58-59.
encounters with the secular, earthbound, and mundane elicit.\textsuperscript{113} I do not believe these aspects must be held in contradiction, the everyday and the philosophical. However, Cheung’s work reminds us that granting Eileen Chang a philosophical voice in mid-century China is a controversial position. Eileen Chang’s stated indifference to history and politics combined with the formal and stylistic inconsistency of the essays that reveal a possible lack of seriousness, and even the writer’s relative youth (she was in her mid-twenties when she wrote these essays), all support non-philosophical readings of her works.\textsuperscript{114} Further, Ban Wang also reads Chang’s essays as part of a discourse of personal creativity and pleasure, written outside the realm of historical discourse: “The essay for her is a writing practice that mitigates against the historically oriented and politically charged literature, the teleological historical narrative, and the monumental work of art. Formally, the essay is random, self-contradictory, narrowly expressive, and therapeutic.”\textsuperscript{115} To be sure, the essays were written to meet editorial deadlines for the purpose of publication (and the receipt of payment). They were written one at a time, likely without a blueprint for how they might be read as a collection. At the same time, this alone cannot diminish the quality of ideas found therein, even if the essays are packaged in an open, impressionistic style. To the contrary, the

\textsuperscript{113} The term “profane illumination” is borrowed from Walter Benjamin. See Esther M.K. Cheung, “The Ordinary Fashion Show,” 73-74.

\textsuperscript{114} In a recent compilation of critical essays on Eileen Chang, several scholars express concern over the inconsistent quality of these essays, among them, Nicole Huang, “Eileen Chang and Things Japanese,” and Esther Cheung, “The Ordinary Fashion Show,” in \textit{Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages}.

\textsuperscript{115} Ban Wang, \textit{Illuminations From the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 169. Wang here builds from Theodor Adorno’s “The Essay as Form.”
“randomness” of the essay form might have been exactly what gave Eileen Chang the freedom to express a wider range of sensibilities and thoughts.

Liu Zaifu is one critic who interprets Eileen Chang in more philosophical terms. In an influential paper given at a conference on Chang in Hong Kong, Liu Zaifu opened his talk by responding to C.T. Hsia’s assessment of Chang as a writer of materiality and historical awareness. Instead, Liu feels that Chang’s ability to transcend history is “precisely what makes these works such remarkable masterpieces.”\(^{116}\) Liu’s reading of Chang’s works as philosophically substantive supports the position of this paper, but his conclusions differ from mine in some respects. For Liu, Chang’s movement beyond “the boundaries of politics, the nation, and history” only serves to produce a deep sense of personal despair:

In this century, Eileen Chang is one of the few philosophical writers to ponder deeply over abstract issues. Consequently, her works are permeated with a profound pessimistic feeling about life and the world. As a writer she is in possession of a unique perception. She sees a wilderness where other people see civilization, the powerlessness of human emotion where other people see emotional strength and possibilities where other people see impossibilities . . . Eileen Chang is pessimistic about life, human civilization and the world. To her everything in reality -- successes, failures, glories, and humiliations--will turn into nothingness and death in the end. So only nothingness and death are real.\(^{117}\)

This view is more consistent with many of Chang’s fictional works, such as the brutally dark “The Golden Cangue.” Chang’s essays, however, present a more complex (and less


\(^{117}\) Ibid., 2. Liu quotes from an earlier speech he made in 1996.
pessimistic) view toward both history and philosophical inquiries. Her aesthetics of the everyday reflect a localized, almost feminist, characterization of history with a small ‘h.’

Philosophically, answers to questions about the meaning of human existence are found in Chang’s depictions of the resilience, simple courage, and routine activities of her fellow urban dwellers, including many depictions of children:

One night as I walked along a desolate street, I heard a song about roasting gingko nuts: “Sweet so sweet and sticky sticky too.” It was a boy about ten years old who was singing, and he had yet really to learn the song by heart so as to be able to sing it with conviction. I cannot forget that dark, gloomy, long avenue, with the boy beside his wok, kneeling on the ground, chest lit up by the light of the fire.  

The Gingko seller vignette is the final image in the essay, “Seeing with the Streets” (道路以目), which also produced the comic portrait of the aged mother riding on the back of her son’s bicycle. As a concluding passage, the Gingko seller image resonates with a lingering beauty and sweetness. Interestingly, the Gingko seller’s song connects with two other short fragments on sound that precede it: the sound of a young bugler playing in an army barracks nearby and the sound of a beginning huqin player, his notes squeaking roughly. In a manner reminiscent of Shen Congwen’s listening attitude, Eileen Chang also “tunes in” to the sounds of her environment – and similarly, the sounds she attends to are always those made by people. As Chang states, the music of their lives reflects their existence, important in itself for its imperfection: “When one’s technique has yet to be perfected, struggle, anxiety, disorder, and adventure predominate, and the human element remains strong. I

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118 Eileen Chang, “Seeing with the Streets,” 63.
like the sound of humanity because it’s ‘always about to reveal itself.’”

Eileen Chang’s vision echoes Bing Xin’s aesthetics of vulnerability in its preference for “fragmentary squeals and squawks” over masterful playing. Consider once again Liu Zaifu’s statement that, “She sees a wilderness where other people see civilization.” Liu supports a pessimistic reading of the writer’s vision, where chaos reigns beneath the veneer of civilization. However, in “Seeing with the Streets,” this chaotic “wilderness” is seen instead as a realm where subjects exist “in-process” whilst living in the “disorder” of becoming. Their imperfection is their humanity, and this defines Chang’s primary interest in Written on Water.

In such a way, readers and critics who have looked for expressions of History in Chang’s work, instead come face to face with the quotidian details of mundane history. Chang defiantly defends her alternative historical positioning in her essay, “Writing of One’s Own” (自己的文章, 1944), a commentary on her approach to fiction writing. Here, Chang not only rejects the content of grand historical narrative, she also objects to the intellectual assumptions that underlie the discourse of History, assumptions that shape the language deployed, the styles of narration, and the techniques of character development: strength, struggle, direct contrast, and narrative closure. Using highly original critical language, Chang argues instead for a literature grounded in daily life, beauty, uneven contrasts, lack of closure and love. Chang’s famous anti-historical stance is her preference for an “aesthetics of desolation” over the types of tragic literature that “heroic” or “uplifting” characters and

\[\text{\textsuperscript{119}}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{120}}\text{Eileen Chang, “Writing of One’s Own” 自己的文章, in Written on Water, 15-22.}\]
storylines. While this “desolation” may help readers to contextualize the despair, loneliness, and desperation of the characters in her stories, the term should not only be interpreted descriptively. Chang deploys the term as both style and as part of her overall aim: “Tragedy is a kind of closure, while desolation is a form of revelation.”121 How this revelation works, however, deserves closer examination.

Among all of the interpretations of Chang’s aesthetics of desolation, Kam Louie’s expresses the strong philosophical position I seek to uncover: “[T]o me, desolation is Chang’s perception of the human condition mercilessly described; humanity stripped and exposed.”122 In other words, the project of desolation opens up epistemological boundaries not only by reaching out, but more often, by looking at the intricate surfaces, the interweaving of details that together make up individual lives. Desolation is Chang’s way of pointing to a new form of knowledge that her descriptions provide access to – as well as the new ways of acquiring knowledge through acts of noticing.

The stripping bare of humanity, as Kam Louie puts it, was not an end in itself, however. Chang’s essay further identifies a startling purpose, one seemingly out of line with the selfish, mean-spirited, shallow or even mad characters her fiction portrays. According to “Writing of One’s Own,” uncovering the “placid and static” (安稳) aspects of life offers the best hope for regaining a sense of harmony in life. Offering a radical challenge to Leftist writers, such as the critic Fu Lei, whose harsh assessment of Chang’s fiction motivated the

121 Ibid., 17.

writing of the essay, Chang presents harmony as the key goal: “In reality, people only engage in struggle in order to attain harmony (和谐).” Rather than seeking more noble pursuits such as justice, liberation, or national salvation, Chang defines the ultimate human value as a feeling of peace. Chang’s feminist version of history is thus expressed in this preference for the “eternal” grounding forces of life:

An emphasis on the uplifting and dynamic smacks more of less of the superman. Supermen are born of specific epochs. But the placid and static (安稳) aspects of life have eternal significance (永恒): even if this sort of stability is often precarious and subject at regular intervals to destruction, it remains eternal. It exists in every epoch. It is the numinous essence of humanity (人的神性), and one might also say it is the essence of femininity (妇人性). While Chang’s does not provide specific examples of this “placid and static” aspect of life, I believe answers may be found amidst the rambling and impressionistic essays collected in Written on Water. It is here that the sweetness of the Gingko seller’s song and the Taoist monk’s ethereal “tock . . . tock” can be heard along with other voices and personae that together reveal the spiritual aspects of existence (人的神性).

The “Moment” in Chang’s Written on Water: The Sacred of the Everyday

Surprisingly, few critics have commented on Chang’s historical position as flâneuse on the streets of Shanghai, a figure that barely existed in European society prior to the

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123 Eileen Chang, “Writing of One’s Own,” 16. A note on the translation: Zhang’s original phrasing of the final sentence reverses the order of the two phrases: “it is only in pursuit of harmony that they engage in struggle” (人是为了要求和谐的一面才斗争的). The difference is slight, but in my mind the original word order privileges harmony over struggle as the key message of the sentence.

124 Ibid.
Second World War. Yet here was a young, financially and socially independent, Chinese woman who regularly took to the urban streets with a mission of recording her vision of life found there. It was Virginia Woolf in England, who introduced an updated, female version of the flâneur in the form of Mrs. Dalloway, its opening sequence first appearing as a short story in 1922. As noted by feminist critic Janet Wolff, the figure of the ever-observant Mrs. Dalloway represented Virginia Woolf’s “comment on the ways in which women’s perspective transforms the spaces of masculinity.” In other words, the streets of London, especially Westminster Square, represented the constructions of male-oriented physical and social spaces. When women assumed the power and freedom to walk the streets, and when women writers chose to inscribe a woman’s visual experience, the result is a distinctly female way of relating to public life and to the types of otherness found there. Whether the context is England or Shanghai, readers should be careful not to take woman’s interaction with public spaces for granted or to overlook the radical nature of the mobile female writer’s modes of self-expression.

Chang’s own narrative persona is of a modern “noticer of life,” one who pays attention to the wide range of gestures and expressions performed by men and women in her contemporary urban milieu. The question for critics has always been how to weigh such impressions. Is Chang merely recording the material surfaces of modern life, or do her descriptions also metaphorically reveal deeper meanings? To a critic such as Esther Cheung,

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126 Janet Wolff, Feminine Sentences, 60.
the essays of *Written on Water*, present a “fashion show” of ordinary people, a colorful procession that granted the writer the power to comment on the vestiges of the cultural past in the present world, such as the out-of-place Taoist monk still begging for alms, or the outdated Confucian values of a son’s devotion to his mother. These images represent fragments of a decadent culture that is quickly retreating into the past. To Cheung, the materiality of Chang’s vision betrays a historical consciousness rooted in the past: “Chang’s face is always turned to the past, not only to witness how the wind of progress piles up debris on debris, but also to see uncanny familiarity in this antiquated memory.”

In my opinion, we miss Eileen Chang’s feminist epistemology of love if we only read her as looking backwards. Chang’s journeys through her streets also represent her lived experience in the present and, as Henri Lefebvre suggests in the discussion that follows, her desire toward the future.

Even if we take the critiques of daily life at face value as descriptions of material existence, we may still interpret them as “moments” that encapsulate a desire or hope.

Henri Lefebvre, in his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1961), defines moments as: “those instances of intense experience in everyday life that provide an immanent critique of the everyday: they are moments of vivid sensations of disgust, of shock, of delight, and so on, which, although fleeting, provide a promise of the possibility of a different daily life, while at the same time, puncturing the continuum of the present.”

In this double movement, the critic

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127 Cheung, “The Ordinary Fashion Show,” 76.

analyzes the present and sees within his or her response a desire for new possibilities, a different future. Eileen Chang has not been read as a writer who offers readers “a promise of the possibility of a different daily life.” That would be the role of revolutionary writing. However, in the discussion that follows I will explore three types of “moments” together with the details that make those inscribed moments profound.

Moments – a Welcoming for the Other

In Eileen Chang’s narratives that record “instances of intense experience,” bodies enter center stage to perform history in the mundane tasks of everyday life. These tasks include specific occupational roles, but more often are found in the small gestures that together give life its “grounded” nature:

Then there is the young girl who walks past holding a lidded wok. The handles on either side of the wok are threaded with blue cloth so that it is easier to carry. The indigo-colored strips of cloth look dirty but somehow make you feel that she shares an intimate bond with the wok, that “the heard connects to the hands, and the hands connect to the heart.”

In this example, the observation zooms on an object and not the person (as in the detailed way we saw the face of the Taoist monk). Chang takes note of one precise detail: the blue cloth tied around each handle in order to make it easier to hold and carry. Truly an ordinary, wholly mundane object, not only the cloth, but the wok itself – a carrier of food that is being transported from one household to another or to a job site by a servant. Chang does not even speculate on why or how this wok is in the hands of the girl; she is focused instead on

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the cloth itself as a marginally useful and more likely trivial form of feminine decoration.

More importantly, the cloth represents an action – it was carefully tied with the hands.

Chang looks at the cloth and imagines the person who tied it, the hands that purposefully performed an action that was deemed intrinsic to the success of the delivery.

People also appear in Chang’s essays as characters in a movie and they are as specific and as life-like as if you were watching a film. Here is a moment of a scene that plays out at a butcher shop counter. The customer is a middle-aged woman who looks to Chang as if she is “a prostitute who’s no longer young, or a madam in her own right”:

She asks for a half pound of pork, but the apprentice busies himself with his mincing, and it is unclear whether he simply didn’t hear what she said or is deliberately ignoring her. An uncertain smile moves across her face, and she stands outside the entrance, lifting her hands to straighten the tassels on her sleeves, revealing two golden rings and the bright red polish on her nails.\(^{130}\)

What do these gestures tell us about the woman herself or as Chang as observer? Chang’s choice of linking the woman with prostitution sets a point of view and perhaps explains her awkward treatment in the shop; yet the writer’s power of the observation appears to lie elsewhere. In fact, to the contrary, a kind of vague sympathy circulates as a product of Chang’s neutral description. In the woman’s gestures of uncertainty and in the self-consciousness her actions reveal, readers gain a sense of her humanity. In other words, the woman at the butcher shop is not only an object of our gaze, she exists bearing her own sense of self – mysterious to us. As readers, we want to know what this woman will do next, but Chang has moved on.

\(^{130}\) Ibid.
In these two examples, Chang’s aesthetics of desolation might be better understood as an aesthetics of “letting be,” a way of thinking and interacting with the world marked by curiosity and an openness to difference. While Chang clearly observes these scenes from a safe distance, her narrative eye zooms in on details that engender a feeling of intimacy. The moment, the instance of “intense experience in everyday life,” here also serves as a form of epistemological welcoming. Returning to Luce Irigaray’s *Sharing the World*, welcoming is characterized by “an availability for that which has not yet occurred,” and it is achieved by “an ability and a wanting to open ourselves to the unknown, to that which is still unfamiliar to us and, in a sense, will always remain unfamiliar.”\(^{131}\) Being open to the other was a difficult and often painful subject position for Eileen Chang as the next section will describe.

**Making Progress - The Phenomena of Touch**

Recall Eileen Chang’s philosophical statement on life presented earlier in this discussion: “the placid and static (安稳) aspects of life have eternal significance (永恒).” These stable aspects of life, characterized as feminine, maintain the “numinous essence of humanity (人的神性)” and prevent it from complete destruction.\(^{132}\) My readings have demonstrated that by noticing and responding to the quotidian aspects of life, Chang suggests that the figure of woman keeps humanity grounded in the present, a grounding which makes possible future well-being. In her essay, “Writing of One’s Own,” Chang

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\(^{131}\) Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, 18.

\(^{132}\) Eileen Chang, “Writing of One’s Own,” 16.
repeatedly circles back to this notion of grounding—life is grounded in the organic, messy, routine, and base activities of daily life. This is also an aesthetic formulation, a way of creating meaningful contrasts, as Chang states toward the end of the essay:

I like forthright simplicity, but I must portray the rich duplicity and elaborate designs of modern people in order to set them off against the ground of life’s simplicity . . . nor do I approve of the aesthetes who advocate Beauty above all else. I think that their problem lies not in their beauty but in their failure to provide the figure of Beauty with a ground . . . Beautiful things are not necessarily grand, but grand things are always beautiful. And yet, I do not place truthfulness and hypocrisy in direct and unequivocal contrast; instead, I utilize equivocal contrast as a means of writing the truth beneath the hypocrisy of modern people and the simplicity underneath the frivolity, and this is why I have all too easily been seen as overly indulgent and criticized for lingering over these beguiling surfaces (italics mine).133

The blue cloth tied to wok handles and carried by a young woman, the bright red nail polish on a madam’s hands that self-consciously straighten tassels on her sleeve—a meaningless gesture, certainly a “frivolity.” Now we can interpret these surfaces as standing in for the deeper elements that ground the image to everyday life.

The “simplicity underneath the frivolity” can also be located in the writer’s description of a simple relational exchange. In a rare moment in Written on Water, Chang relates the story of a brief exchange of human touch in a sales transaction. This is not a moment of frivolity, but its opposite: corporeal reality. In the passage below, Lefebvre’s description of the “moment” as rising from sensations of “disgust, of shock, of delight,” vividly comes to life in this scene from the essay, “From the Mouths of Babes”:

. . . I venture into the streets to buy groceries, perhaps with something of the romantic pathos of an aristocratic gentleman fallen on hard times. But recently, as an old vegetable vendor weighed my purchases and helped pack them for me, he

133 Eileen Chang, “Writing of One’s Own,” 18.
held onto the handle of my mesh bag with his mouth to keep it open. As I lifted the now-dampened handle to carry my purchases away, I felt nothing out of the ordinary. And having discovered that something within me was different from before, I was happy: some real progress had been made, although I could not tell how or why.\textsuperscript{134}

Here Chang presents a moment-by-moment description of a scene of relationality that transformed her view of the present and the future. As the old vegetable vendor’s mouth holds onto her shopping bag, and as her hand reaches out to accept the saliva-dampened handle, an intimacy of touch creates a momentary human bond. What should have made her recoil left her feeling strangely “happy.” Chang’s suggestion that she has “made progress” points to underlying emotional and relational energies at work in this scene.

Indeed, Chang’s biography tells us that she became estranged from her family at a young age and lived with an acute sense of social isolation.\textsuperscript{135} In the passage above, Chang narrates a moment when the tables were turned – when she was pulled from her comfortable role of isolated observer into the place of touch and relationality – a movement of “progress.” But progress toward what? Could Chang be commenting on her own ability to be human?

Four years before “From the Mouths of Babes,” Chang wrote a shot essay entitled “A Dream of Genius” 天才梦 that describes both the desire to belong as well as the lonely torture of withdrawal:

As for the artistic side of life, there are only a few parts that I cannot appreciate. I understand how to watch Suzhou-style opera, such as “Clouds of July,” I have listened to an officer play the Scottish bagpipe, I enjoy the light breeze blowing

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{134}Eileen Chang, “From the Mouths of Babes,” 5.
\item \textsuperscript{135}Several good biographical essays are available, including Kam Louie, “Introduction: Eileen Chang: A Life of Conflicting Cultures in China and America,” in \textit{Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres} (2012), and Nicole Huang, “Introduction” to \textit{Written on Water} (2005).
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through a rattan chair, have eaten peanuts boiled in salty water (salted water peanuts), admired the neon lights on a rainy night, and have extended my hand to pluck green tree-top leaves from a double-decker bus. While these situations all lacked a person-to-person connection, I still filled myself up with the joy of living. But someday, I won’t be able to tolerate any longer this gnawing-like annoyance: life is like a magnificent gown, crawling all over with fleas.\textsuperscript{136}

Despite the dramatic shock value of the final sentence, Chang sensitively portrays an image of herself as one who “lets be” and finds beauty in the everyday routines of a bus ride or a breeze. Chang also recognizes that these moments of seeming connection to the life of her city were virtual, and “lacked a person-to-person connection.” According to this vision, the knowing of loneliness will eventually eat away at whatever joy was felt, just like the fleas mentioned above. This marks a depression and fear of irrelevancy that became a constant thread in the writer’s life. This sentiment was eerily echoed in Eileen Chang’s Last Will and Testament, which stated a request to have her ashes “scattered in any desolate spot, over a fairly wide area, if on land.”\textsuperscript{137} These early essays, written in the author’s prime of life, describe the difficulties in negotiating the boundaries of self and of recognizing the fantasy of the other. The vivid images of interconnection speak to a desire for a subjective identity, a desire that would become increasingly radical after 1949.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{136} Eileen Chang, “A Dream of Genius” \textit{天才梦} (1939), \textit{Liuyan 流言} (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2009), 3.

\textsuperscript{137} See David Der-wei Wang, “Foreword,” to \textit{The Rice-Sprout Song: A Novel of Modern China} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), viii. Following her death in 1995, Chang’s ashes were scattered in the Pacific Ocean in a simple ceremony.

\textsuperscript{138} Just a decade later, Chang published \textit{The Rice-Sprout Song}, a novel that continued to develop her interest in relational identities, as noted by David Wang: “At a time when most writers, women and men alike, were eager to exchange individual subjectivity for a collective, national one, Chang’s own brand of selfish and feminine mannerism stood out as a genuinely defiant gesture.” Ibid, xiv.
Eileen Chang’s autobiographical essays ask more questions than they answer. This is reflective of her narrative art. Readers may want to know what really happened, for example, when she decided to take hold of the handle that had been in the vegetable seller’s mouth. But this is where Eileen Chang operates as a poet. She is not interested in supplying these answers; what is crucial is the moment, those “vivid sensations of disgust, of shock, of delight, and so on, which, although fleeting, provide a promise of the possibility . . .” to quote Lefebvre once again. By not supplying an interpretation, she allows the moment to exist for the reader to discover for him or herself. And this is really her gift in these essays – a neutrality in her prose, an aesthetics of “letting be” that allows us to see with her eyes.

Conclusion

More so than their male counterparts, Chinese women writers established an alternative discourse of love as a way of constructing a relational subjectivity, a vision of the self open to the difference of the other. Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, and Eileen Chang all engaged in feminist ways of seeing and imagined fresh possibilities for conceiving the self-other relationship. The lineage begins with Bing Xin, who was the focal point for a discourse of love for the decade of the 1920s and even into the early 1930s. Her “philosophy of love,” evident in her poetry, essays and short fiction, established a vocabulary and a range of love objects that impacted Chinese imaginings of a bigger, “universal” love (博爱). As stated by

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139 Ben Highmore, Everyday Life, 115-116.
Amy Dooling, “. . . narrative constitutes one of the fundamental semiotic practices shaping human perception, knowledge, and desire.” Bing Xin, Xiao Hong and Eileen Chang each utilized the tools of language to reconstruct worlds where love as openness to the other could circulate thereby shaping modes of understanding in the modern era.

The women writers discussed in this chapter all became collectors of impressions that took the form of narrative details in their fiction, essays and poetry. The focus on acts of noticing, of being attentive to smaller details of life, reminds me of a quote from James Wood in his collection of essays, How Fiction Works: “Literature makes us better noticers of life; we get to practice on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life.” Similarly, the circular movement of awareness and noticing gains a cumulative effect in the works of these Chinese woman writers whose art of the detail represents a practicing epistemology of love.

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140 Ibid., 15-16.

Conclusion – Chinese Relational Subjectivity and Social Theory

Within humanity, a man is just like one tree in a forest. If the forest thrives, the single tree in it will also thrive. But if we want the forest to thrive, we have to care for each single tree.\(^1\)

Zhou Zuoren, “Humane Literature”

Relational subjectivity, and the new set of readings it opens up, allows for a different way of imagining emerging sociality and national identity in the May Fourth and post-May Fourth periods. As such, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to re-examine Chinese history and culture of the twentieth-century using interpretive models that make evident the diversity of thought, social practice, and civil identity that arose during that era. As earlier discussions in this thesis have shown, scholars of modern Chinese literature have inherited a limited view of self-other relationality, influenced by Communist literary histories, on the one hand, and the persistence of subject-centered criticism in the West on the other. Scholars are now discovering that Chinese intellectuals, writers and artists of the 1920s through the 1940s, lived lives of much greater diversity of identity, sociality, and subjectivity than was previously acknowledged. Further, this study has shown that their artistic works reveal an interest in non-hierarchical social exchange, the practice of listening as a mode of relational receptivity, and love as a form of epistemological openness.

It was Lu Xun who first presented the conflict between self and other as one of the defining problems of his generation. Nearly every one of this fictional works or essays foreground a seemingly unbridgeable gap between subject and object, framed as either intellectual vs. commoner, older generations vs. youth, traditionalists vs. moderns, or even Chinese national subjects vs. the world. Yet Lu Xun’s concern with the distance separating individuals also revealed his yearning for an alternative (positive) social reality. While his literary tools were those of cultural critique, constantly pointing out the negative in society, his vision included a hope for redemption. The “crooked pen” (曲笔) that apparently led Lu Xun to inscribe hopeful endings to tragic stories, such as “Medicine” (药, 1919), a practice the author felt diminished the literary quality of his work, nonetheless communicated this vision as an important subtext.

Indeed, this study supports the view that Lu Xun’s revolutionary spirit was more humanist than political and held within its bounds a keen interest in the social dimensions of life. This view was also noted by Marston Anderson over a decade ago:

While continuing to acknowledge the importance of individual creative efforts, Lu Xun accords a new priority to social context as the soil from which all individuals must take nourishment. Lu Xun’s change of heart on this subject reflects the general trend toward collectivism among intellectuals in post-May Fourth China. His repudiation of individualism, however, was motivated not simply by political expediency, but by mature recognition of the social construction of the human personality.²

Here Anderson contextualizes the intellectual position underlying Lu Xun’s shift to the Left toward the end of his life. What intrigues me about this statement is the contrast it makes

with Zhou Zuoren’s organic vision of humanity as a forest, whose overall strength relies on the health of each individual member. Hence, the split between Lu Xun and his brother, Zhou Zuoren, long characterized as a difference in political affiliation, can also be seen as one concerning understandings of identity, individualism, and to a large extent, subjectivity. While both argue for the social situatedness of individual identity, Lu Xun privileged the importance of collective social power over that of the individual, while Zhou Zuoren maintained an opposite position, affirming individual human identity as primary: “Actually, humankind and society are the sum total of individuals, without individuals, they are empty concepts.”

Recent scholarship on relational subjectivity provides a paradigm that resolves the seeming conflict between these extreme positions. Most theorists, including Luce Irigaray, contend that in-process, relational subjects have the capacity to be both discrete and connected; they are secure in an individual identity while also open to the differences that the other represents. This “permeable” identity can also be described as “pluralistic.”

As Susan Daravula has argued, Zhou Zuoren stood outside May Fourth-era intellectual imperatives and created his own moral position that allowed for the evolution of a modern identity that was pluralistic in nature and that brought together selected values from different cultures and time periods. A related interest in “openness” has recently

3 Zhou Zuoren, “Women and Literature.” Trans., Michelle Yeh. Modern Chinese Literary Thought, 229. Zhou’s full statement reads: “Ordinarily we think that the individual is opposed to humankind and society, that to benefit the individual we must harm society and to benefit society we must sacrifice the individual. As such individualism and humanism are treated as opposite terms, thus creating many unnecessary arguments. Actually, humankind and society are the sum total of individuals, without individuals, they are empty concepts. Individuals can only live safely within society; without society they would find it hard to survive.”

4 Susan Daravula, Zhou Zuoren and an Alternative Response to Modernity (Cambridge Harvard University Asia Center, 2000).
been voiced from the field of modern Chinese history. In an effort to recognize the diversity of Republican-era Chinese society and culture, Frank Dikötter proposes a re-examination of the era in his book-length essay, *The Age of Openness: China Before Mao*. Dikötter’s work represents a protest against teleological view of history as progress, a discourse that has endured among Chinese and Western scholars for over half a century, leaving major aspects of modern Chinese history relatively unexplored. Dikötter’s discussion of “Open Minds” points to the relatively high number of bilingual and bicultural intellectuals of that time, including scholars, diplomats, scientists, and businessmen. The 1930s and 1940s were also characterized by a remarkably tolerant view toward religious and ideological diversity. In summary, Dikötter suggests that by better examining these early manifestations of political, cultural and economic openness, we gain essential frames of reference through which to better understand China’s current globalized culture and trends toward a widening civil society.

My research on expressions of relational subjectivity in modern Chinese literature speaks to a gap in Dikötter’s historical formulation of “open minds” by probing deeper forms of intellectual openness: the openness of individual subjectivities to constructions of knowledge, to non-hierarchical interpersonal exchange, and to partial, co-created

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5 A few notable cases in point are the democratically elected municipal councils and national assemblies in the early Republican era and the seemingly incidental, but nonetheless influential, massive road-building efforts in the 1930s that fed the rise of a thriving local and long-distance motor coach industry. For the discussion of the rise of the parliamentary process, see pages 18-23 and 93-96 respectively.

6 Dikötter, *The Age of Openness*, 3. His main argument is that: “People, things and ideas moved in and out of the republican era, as global flows fostered an unprecedented degree of diversity which has yet to be appreciated in standard history textbooks: globalization, rather than revolution, appears – with the benefit of hindsight – to have been the driving force of the half-century before the Cold War.”
subjectivities. My discussion has shown that an opening for partiality allows for a more dynamic interaction with others, and recognizes tolerance to difference and integration as aspects of personal and social transformation, even in incomplete states. And not unlike Dikötter’s historical approach, this investigation of subjectivity also provides new tools for interpreting contemporary Chinese culture in an age of globalization. As Kelly Oliver has suggested in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, representations of relational subjectivity may serve as models that could help individuals cope with the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity that so characterizes our interconnected world. A transformation of thinking, identity and community is possible if we shift our view toward the other: “The other is not an object or determined by the subject’s gaze. The other is no longer the other. There is no the other, but a multitude of differences and other people on whom my sense of myself as a subject and an agent depends.”

Relational subjectivity is a new theory of identity formation that grew out of the disciplines of psychology and philosophy. Scholars from Jessica Benjamin and Julia Kristeva to Luce Irigaray have argued for the existence of a new type of subjectivity that is fundamentally in-process, co-created with others, and epistemologically open to receiving from others and the world. Philosophers Noelle McAfee and Kelly Oliver, whose work crosses disciplinary boundaries with political theory, hypothesize the ways in which open identities, in turn, have the potential to socially engage with others in richer and more meaningful ways. These scholars ask: might we create societies that would function on a

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7 Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 223.
different set of assumptions -- and with different outcomes -- if we support relational models of self-identity? The goal for all of these philosophers, writing in the early 21st century, is nothing less than an attempt to locate modes of being that might one day support a new vision for community in an increasingly complex world.

Chinese intellectuals also explored the roles of self and other in the modern era in a multiplicity of ways – beyond the rubric of the individual/collective dichotomy that has dominated the field. The story of the modern self in the Chinese context is not only the story of the rise of an autonomous agent with his or her own personal subjectivity. Relational subjectivity also played a role in modern identity formation and self-expression among modern Chinese writers. Re-readings of works by Lu Xun’s contemporaries, especially those of Bing Xin and Ye Shaojun, have located a keen interest in problems surrounding encounter as well as explorations of relational identities. In Ye Shaojun’s fiction, for example, realistic portrayals of characters navigating complex social worlds introduced a new discourse of sociality and copresence to modern Chinese literature. Ye Shaojun’s relational discourse also opened up horizontal ways of seeing that allowed for a multiplicity of perspective. The author’s self-acknowledged aesthetics of “compassion” (同情, also translated as “sympathy”) generated a texture of relationality through successive momentary alliances.

Shen Congwen infused his literary works with acts of listening. Characters “tuned in” to their environments and remained open to learning from others. More theoretically, listening also functions aesthetically as diffuse third-person narration point to an incomplete,
open and relational identities. This view of listening places the act in non-linear and multi-focal positions, and shows how it can disrupt our cognitive bearings. Listening thus functions as a challenge to hierarchical, structured, and even institutionalized forms of knowledge. By adopting both a thematic discussion and close reading, my analysis investigated the unique ways Shen Congwen utilized narrative structure, styles, and lyrical language to convey relational forms of subjectivity.

Women Writers Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, Eileen Chang each contributed to a social discourse of love that developed outside of the discourse of romantic love. These writers share a fundamental assumption: our capacity to love others is not limited to bonds of obligation or desires of self-fulfillment, but can also be found as a non-dominating mode of horizontal movement of the self toward others and toward understanding. This view has the capacity to fundamentally reshape both the nature of relationships and constructions of knowledge. In place of a deterministic desire to speak for the object of one’s gaze, these woman writers employ an aesthetics of “letting be.” The visual details of their narratives reveal an open epistemological position, making possible a wider, more tolerant view of the other, and a more limited, compassionate, view of the self. As a result, these literary texts present the beginnings of a shift toward new forms of knowledge and new ways of acquiring knowledge about others.

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8 Fiumara suggests that listening can be cultivated as a strength separate from the power of logocentric rhetoric. See Gemma Corradi Fiumara, The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening. Trans., Charles Lambert (London and New York: Routledge 1995), 62-68.
The writers examined in this study, Lu Xun, Ye Shaojun, Shen Congwen, Bing Xin, Xiao Hong, and Eileen Chang, all expressed a concern with humanity as a whole. Their works continually ask the question, what constitutes the value of a human life? This is the question inherent in Shen Congwen’s depiction of the old innkeeper in “Little Scenes of Guizhou” and the question found in characterizations like Mother Wang in Xiao Hong’s *Field of Life and Death*. It is the same question Eileen Chang presents to readers through her detailed depictions of people she observes on the street. It’s not only the fact of one’s otherness that is explored in these texts; it is the question of how to make sense of that otherness. By what means, what values, what discourse, can the other be truly seen and understood – and in what ways does it matter?

While none of the writers examined here present a coherent philosophy of life, moments of quiet beauty in their works seem to communicate at least part of an answer. Inscribed acts of noticing and listening, of one subject to another, provide, as Irigaray suggests, the possibility for the other to exist. The writer’s gift of language and the aesthetic value of that representation increases the rhetorical power of their relation-affirming expression. Eileen Chang, in the way she “sees with the streets,” poetically captures the image of a young Gingko seller singing by the side of the road, the glow from his roasting fire softly illuminating his face. The beauty of this moment, as abstract as it feels, is to Chang, what writers, artists, and musicians have been in search of for millennia. It is the age-old idea of an “essence” of life:

This thing we call reality is unsystematic, like seven or eight talking machines playing all at once in a chaos of sound, each singing its own song. From within that
incomprehensible cacophony, however, there sometimes happens to emerge a moment of sad and luminous clarity, when the musicality of a melody can be heard, just before it is engulfed once more by layer after layer of darkness, snuffing out this unexpected moment of lucidity. Painters, writers, and composers string together these random and accidentally discovered moments of harmony in order to create artistic coherence.9

Eileen Chang takes courage from such moments, despite her overall pessimistic vision of life. “Each of us is alone,” she writes at the end of this essay, and yet writers, artists and composers press forward with creative works that strive to locate moments of clarity and meaning. From this perspective, might we find resistances to modernity’s push to alienate and dislodge, to create transience, to dislocate meaning and cast consciousness into a sea of semantic relativity? The push back can be found in various attempts by modern Chinese writers to set anchors, to build inhabitable structures, whether actual or mental. The ongoing life of people in community happens despite the alienated state, or one could say, within a negotiated state – a state that also includes yearnings for relational bonds and semantic faith as a means to process life’s experience and to find meaning.

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