

# Geographical Space and Cultural Identity: Self in the Age of Globalization

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## ABSTRACT

The conventional way of viewing the self or a place as bound, fixed and unproblematic in its identity comes to be challenged when contemporary writers such as Tie Ning, Xi Xi, Ye Si, and Gao Xingjian examine the impact of globalization on the individual. In their selected texts, these writers show how newly developed space enables their protagonists to develop a new form of consciousness characterized by a better understanding of their selves in relation to the world in general and to their sexual other in particular. They adopt different writing strategies in their portrayal of characters with heightened subjectivity—individuals who attempt to locate themselves in the rapidly changing world. Some seek to redefine their positions amidst the torrents of globalization, while others attempt to create new space for the realization of their selves. Locality ceases to mean just the geographical space or locale where events take place. Instead, geographical space is presented as the site of tension and confrontation, where issues pertaining to the construction or deconstruction of the self and the formation of identity are being discussed, questioned and challenged.

## KEY WORDS

dislocation  
identity formation  
modernization  
space  
technology

globalization  
location  
self  
subjectivity



Many writers recognize that literature, like many other forms of writing, can be covertly subjective and gendered, with embedded ideas about the way people think and live. The burgeoning interest in subjectivity, in the representation of self as well as in the construction of identity, clearly shows contemporary writers' concern about the location or dislocation of the self within or against the world-wide trend of globalization in the economic, cultural, and political spheres. The conventional way of viewing the self or any other "place" as being bound, fixed and unproblematic in its identity comes has come to be challenged by many (Robins 12). Doreen Massey, for example, in her exploration of the notion of place in relation to space, time and identity construction, makes the following observation:

If, however, the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interrelations on all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations. . . . Importantly, it includes relations, which stretch beyond the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that "beyond." Places viewed this way are open and porous (5).

Such a view of space and identity is applicable to one's understanding of the self in the contemporary world, and it is comparable to the conventional demarcation between the local and the global and between self and other. Furthermore, the effect of globalization in many instances inevitably demands a re-examination of prevailing local/regional practices as well as existing cultural/national identities. Very often it also asks for a reconstitution of the self in response to the flux of change. Some seek to redefine their positions amidst the torrents of globalization, while others attempt to create new space for the realization of their selves. Locality ceases to mean just the geographical space or locale where events take place. Instead geographical space is presented as the site of tension and confrontation, where issues pertaining to the construction or deconstruction of the self and the formation of identity are being discussed, questioned and challenged. A close study of selected works by Tie Ning, Xi Xi, Ye Si, and Gao Xingjian clearly elucidates the impact of globalization on the individual, on the formation of identity as well as on the relationship between self and the world. A newly-developed conception of space enables the characters under discussion to develop a new form of consciousness characterized by a better understanding of their selves in relation to the world in general and to their sexual "other" in particular. These writers adopt very different writing strategies in their portrayal of characters with a heightened subjectivity—individuals who attempt to locate themselves in the rapidly changing world.

The celebrated short story "A, Xiangxue!" (Ah, Fragrant Snow, 1982) by Tie Ning (b. 1957), for example, carefully maps out the tension between the native/local and the foreign/global as experienced by a young girl, Fragrant Snow, in a remote village in China. It narrates the physical and spiritual journey of the young girl, who eventually comes to understand her self in relation to her locality. She develops a sense of cultural identity and comes to view her local village with pride after her brief encounter with the sophisticated world. Written at a time when the spirit of modernization was in full swing in the country, Tie Ning's short story presents an alternative view of the interplay between

the local and the global. It highlights the necessity for a reconsideration of one's self and advocates a reaffirmation of local culture in an age of globalization.

Adopting a pseudo-objective mode of narrative, Tie Ning depicts Fragrant Snow's subjective response to changes around her. As the only local inhabitant to enter the commune's middle school in the neighbouring village, Fragrant Snow's conscious quest for self-expansion becomes the focal point of the narrative. She represents those of the younger generation in China who are eager to go beyond their defined territories, be they geographical, social, cultural, or intellectual, to embrace the world outside: "Sometimes she would seize an opportunity to ask passengers things about the outside world. She asked if the universities in Beijing would want students from Terrace Gully, and what 'musical poetry' was (she happened to see the term in a book a classmate brought to school)" (316). For this young girl, her home village is like a "prison-house" isolating her from the rest of the world. Her village denotes a place not only of material poverty but also of cultural and social deprivation. The setting up of a railway station in her village is thus regarded as an important event by all the villagers for it signifies a breakthrough, an important step forward toward modernization and globalization.

Eager to expand beyond the confines of their geographical isolation and cultural marginalization, the villagers welcome the intrusion of the train, which not only disturbs the tranquil life of the local people but also unsettles the minds of the young girls. The daily short visit of the train redefines their entire existence, transforming them from their state of inertia and stasis to a state of exaltation and activity:

It had been the custom in the village for everyone to go to bed right after dinner, as though everyone heard the old mountain's mute order at the same time. The small stretch of stone houses would suddenly become completely noiseless – so quiet that it seemed the village was silently confiding its piety to the old mountain. But now, the girls of Terrace Gully served dinner in a flurry, absent-mindedly

grabbed a quick bite, put down their bowls, and went straight to their dressers. . . . Then they ran to the railway, where the train passed. (312)

The train here represents the dominant power of modernization, and its presence has inevitably affected all aspects of life in the village. The juxtaposition of the aggressive and intimidating train with the timid and passive people of Terrace Gully allows the writer to bring out in vivid images the cultural penetration of the foreign, the global, the dominant/powerful (as embodied physically by the train's force) into the native, the local and the minority/marginal:

The villagers jostled to watch the green dragon whistling past, bringing with it a fresh breeze from the strange world beyond the mountains. It hurried along the back of poor Terrace Gully. It went at such a pace that the sound of the wheels rolling on the tracks was like an eager voice: can't stop, can't stop! It had no reason to stop. . . . (312)

The "intrusion" of the train into the peaceful life of Terrace Gully can thus be understood as the invasion of globalized values, which are forever flowing from one place to another or assuming one form or another, into a local existence characterised by stability, simplicity and tranquillity. In the story the remote village setting turns out to be the site of tension between the self and the other, the native/local and the foreign/global, the rooted and the rootless, the familiar and the unfamiliar, nature and culture, village and city, confinement and freedom.

As John Tomlinson observes, such an encounter between the local and the global may create a site of promise and predicament (107). It can be a predicament because the virgin land in the mountains, which has so far remained uncontaminated and untouched by culture and civilization, fails to save itself from the torrents of change in this age of urbanization and economic-cultural imperialism. As seen in the story, Terrace Gully is swept off her feet by the intimidating train coming

from afar. Its daily “visitation” results in a gradual loss of local/cultural identity for the native people, uprooting them from their cultural/native roots and reshaping their local values and modes of existence.

Viewed in this light, the simple incident of Fragrant Snow’s physical journey on the train and the villagers’ spiritual-cultural journey signifies not only a personal quest for knowledge and self-expansion on Fragrant Snow’s part, but also a gradual awakening to one’s own local/cultural identity. Fragrant Snow’s train-ride, her geographical displacement or physical dislocation from her homeland, allows her for the first time to view her self and her village from a distance as an observer-outsider:

For the first time, she heard clearly their nocturnal singing in the wind. Her fear was gone and she walked forward on the ties with vigorous strides. So this is how the mountains are. This is how the moon is. And the walnut trees. Fragrant Snow seemed to recognise for the first time the mountains and the valleys in which she had been reared. Was this how Terrace Gully had been? Not knowing why, she walked faster. She was eager to see Terrace Gully and she was curious about it as if she had never seen it before. (320)

Fragrant Snow used to regard her hometown as a place characterized by cultural backwardness and economic and material poverty. Her geographical “displacement,” however, allows her to see the beauty and virtues of such simple village life. With a better sense of her self in relation to the world around her, Fragrant Snow reflects at the same time upon the uniqueness of her local community in its geographical space, as opposed to the commonalities and relatively homogenized modern cities of the world beyond the mountains.

Her journey home can thus be seen as a conscious act on the young girl’s part to return to her motherland, as a reaffirmation of her cultural roots and as a recognition of the “local” mode of existence. It further signifies a reconstitution of her cultural identity as a result of her spiritual enlightenment. Instead of blindly yearning for the alternative mode of life suggested by the world beyond the mountains,

Fragrant Snow comes to appreciate the simplicity of village life and celebrates the innocence, sincerity, honesty, vitality and perseverance of the villagers. Such are the qualities of the local people that she would wish to preserve.

In this regard Tie Ning depicts not so much the geographic reality of Terrace Gully, but the cultural meaning of the place. The landscape becomes in this case a metaphor for an alternative mode of life, a developed sense of place, which is closely related to the formation of one's identity at both the socio-cultural and individual levels. Fragrant Snow's heightened subjectivity is emphasised by the author. Tie Ning's treatment of self and place in her narrative supports Mike Featherstone's observation that the contact between the global and the local becomes necessary and inevitable in the contemporary world (47). As reflected in the story, not even the remotest part of China with its strong traditions can stand against such an irrevocable desire for modernization and globalization, a desire now sweeping through the whole country at an incredible pace.

While Tie Ning focuses on the protagonist's self-reflection and personal struggle to position herself in a changing world, Xi Xi (b. 1939) addresses the sense of helplessness and anxiety experienced by an individual in a metropolitan city in her short story "Chouti" [The Drawer, 1981]. Caught in the flux of rapid social, cultural and political changes, the Narrator in the story expresses her frustration and sense of loss in contemporary Hong Kong as characterized by the dislocation or "deterritorialization" of the individual (Tomlinson 107). Xi Xi's story reveals the crisis of identity and captures the tension experienced by many contemporary city-dwellers whose self and private space are threatened by the massive processes of standardization and homogenization in the contemporary world. They often fail to locate themselves in a society where everything, including relationships, is forever changing. Nothing seems stable or constant save people's sense of alienation and disorientation.

The narrative traces the protagonist's conscious attempt to remain sane and keep her self intact in spite of her sense of having a dehumanized existence. It delineates in great detail the mechanical life

of a walking apparition, travelling every day between her small flat and her workplace, not knowing whether she is alive or dead. She eventually develops the habit of looking at her own reflection in the mirror and makes every effort to keep this private “self” protected from public scrutiny by locking it up in a drawer at home:

Each time I open the drawer, I see my mirror lying face-up in the corner, like an unruffled little pool of water. And in the mirror, I see myself. . . . Every day without fail, when I open the drawer I see it. And once I see it, a voice seems to rise from some strange place: Hallelujah, we are alive. (177)

The narrator’s strange action shows her desperate need for reassurance of her self, of her own existence although her self as a reflection in the mirror “looks” so unreal and intangible to her. Through the use of one single image, Xi Xi shows the impact of globalization on humanity, its tendency to cause the loss of (a sense of) individual self and cultural identity in cosmopolitan societies characterized by homogeneity and collectivity.

In a highly commercialized society or globalized city, people’s individual selves are of little interest to anyone save the persons themselves. It is their functional selves, their public selves or their various social identities that matter. The increasing reliance on various kinds of identification documents such as identity cards, staff identity cards, social security cards and the like in contemporary societies testifies to this trend. This explains why the narrator always carries her social identity card with her wherever she goes, for she is not “recognized” by her face but by her social identity. Not only does the government demand that people carry identification documents, but people also depend on this practice in order to maintain a social identity. Anyone who has lived in a metropolitan society will know that one’s identification documents are extremely important. Without such documents, one ceases to exist from the social point of view; one will be reduced to a no-body, to a state of non-existence in the eye of the public. It is apparent that one is no longer defined or recognised by



one's unique individual self but by one's socially assigned identity or identities.

Xi Xi's story shows how the narrator is at first extremely disturbed by her lack of "self" in a sea of city-dwellers and how she pathetically learns to come to terms with her circumstances by creating her personal space, that is, her drawer with a lock. Caught in situations or social relations which prevent the self from surfacing, the narrator resorts to seeking temporary comfort and reassurance by looking at her own image in the mirror, which she keeps locked up in her drawer.

The narrator's unpleasant and shocking experience with the salesman in a shoe shop, who refuses to measure the size of her feet but insists on her producing a size-sample of her feet, allows Xi Xi to show the Kafkaesque absurdity of contemporary big-city life. This climactic incident brings to the forefront the ultimate loss of individuality in a contemporary world where every single human being is reduced to a non-distinct, virtually non-human (or clone-like) objective existence, where every single thing must be made to "standard size" or "standard order," and every kind of relationship must be impersonal and non-committal. The rhetorical questions raised by the narrator at the end of the story clearly denote a general sense of frustration and horror as one comes to see the sacrifice of one's self and one's autonomy in the course of social and economic development:

Who am I? I have only to open my drawer and my ID tells me who I am, in great detail. Where am I? Again, I only have to open the drawer and look into my mirror. . . . Where am I? In my drawer, of course. It hardly needs saying. As for where I come from, from the Immigration Department, of course. And where am I going to? To the Registry of Births and Deaths, of course. (179)

In terse language and vivid images, Xi Xi traces city dwellers' increasing difficulty in constructing their selves and their inability to develop a sense of belonging to their locality in highly developed cities (or countries). Questions of self and identity, the personal and the public, the specific and the universal, the collective and the individual,

as well as the local and the global are all interwoven to create a web of contemporary life characterized by frustration, alienation, loneliness and “deterritorialization.” The narrator’s deterritorialization is reflected not only in the dislocation of the individual, the displacement of the self physically from a person’s geographical locality, but also in the disorientation of the self, the confusion and gradual loss of one’s link to his/her “place.”

Such a general sense of confusion, helplessness, anxiety and fear is developed to the maximum degree in “Transcendence and the Fax Machine” (1990) by Ye Si (the pen name of Liang Bingjun, b. 1949). The story relates a contemporary cosmopolitan man’s desire to transcend the boundaries of his geographical locality *via* technology and his subsequent loss of self and autonomy in the process. It delineates the mentality and experience of an intellectual in Hong Kong, an outcast in his local academic community, who feels at odds with his environment and yearns to free himself from all the shackles that bind him to a particular group or place.

As a scholar, the protagonist “I” yearns to develop a self that is both transnational and transcultural and makes every effort to go beyond the boundaries of space and place. He is fully conscious of the limitations of his immediate world and feels the rejection of the local group of intellectuals as a result of the keen competition within his local academic circle. The irresolvable power struggles and tensions among academics in the same field has left him feeling dejected and unfulfilled. His acquisition of a fax machine, however, opens up a boundless space and limitless opportunities for the young scholar, who comes to depend on this machine for his communication with the world. As the scholar-protagonist observes, the purchase of the fax machine has reshaped his entire life and behavioral patterns as well as his relationship with both people and place:

I no longer had to receive phone calls from my bad-tempered friends and let my ears suffer the shock when they slammed down the receiver. Really, the fax machine allowed me to readjust my position in the world. I could sleep with abandonment, vaguely

hearing her murmuring voice in my dreams; like music which put my heart at peace. I felt carefree at last. (390)

For a short period of time, the protagonist enjoys this spatial construction of identity. Fascinated by the boundless space granted him by the fax machine, the young scholar feels it allows him a kind of “transcendence” of the world and of himself. The machine opens up a space for him beyond his physical location or locality, enabling him to have the entire world of information and communication at his fingertips. He considers this move as his first step toward the construction of a transnational and transcultural self:

I did not have to drift about like a lonely wandering spirit, . . . I did not have to feel sad over the seemingly long-lasting Saturdays or Sundays. Even when the world outside was filled with bullies and deception, when interpersonal communication was full of traps and pitfalls, I was still certain that, on returning home, she would always be there, faithfully receiving and sending out information. She was my reliable link with the faraway. (390)

The fax machine also allows the protagonist to retreat into his own private world of thoughts and feelings. The fact that the machine takes on a feminine identity in the story clearly indicates the intimate relationship between the machine and its owner. It further points to the psychosexual state of the protagonist, who fails to establish any meaningful relationship with a member of the opposite sex in his daily life.

As reflected in his own narration, the fax machine eventually assumes the role of an idealized “lover” and becomes the protagonist’s confidante and trustworthy assistant. Through this reliable “her,” he believes that he can safely reach out and make contact with the rest of the world without the fear of being hurt. This replacement of an intimate human relationship, such as a male-female relationship, with a man-machine relationship epitomizes the potential threat of technology for human life. It seems that the protagonist desires not only a

transcendence of his physical self beyond his geographical locality, but also a displacement of his emotional and sexual self, thus allowing him to free himself from dependence on or interaction with other human beings, especially women. This fear of establishing meaningful relationships with others, especially sexual others, shows not only the protagonist's alienation and disillusionment in life, but also his general fear of losing his autonomy in any relationship. That explains why he refuses to relate himself to anyone but the fax machine. [why not call "the protagonist" "the narrator" sometimes?] [oh, right . . . maybe cannot . . . must choose between the 2 terms I guess.]

It is interesting to note how such a desire to globalize oneself by participating in the transnational academic discourse *via* a fax machine is juxtaposed against a heightened sense of fear and anxiety on the protagonist's part. It is true that the fax machine has opened up a new space for self-realization:

I could actually leave a material record of my communication with the intellectual and spiritual world. It allowed me to secure a facsimile, a true copy, a true record of my spiritual journey. When my memory fails me in future years, I may still be able to recall traces of my heart and my feelings with certainty. (392)

It is, however, equally true that the scholar-protagonist has to pay a high price for such an accomplishment--the loss of touch with one's own humanity. In concrete images, Ye Si charts the growing sense of helplessness and alienation of the protagonist, highlighting the inevitable invasion of technology into late twentieth-century life, a world where human relationships are being totally reshaped, and social, cultural and moral values redefined. Like the intrusion of the train into the mountain people's peaceful life in Tie Ning's story, the fax machine has unsettled the life of the scholar-protagonist and redefined his self in relation to his locality.

Emphasized here, then, are the fascination and repulsion that people feel toward technology which, in its myriad forms and ways, has intruded into the most personal levels of human existence. People like

the scholar-protagonist welcome the promise of a transnational and transcultural self, a new self made possible by the advancements in technology. The new high-tech, info-tech telecommunications systems (including fax machines, mobile phones and, above all, the internet) have greatly “shrunk” time and space, compressed the time-space that used to separate human beings geographically, ethnically, culturally, and nationally; in this sense than the new (info-technologized) “self” is enabled to “transcend” (traditional) time-space. The irony, however, remains that technology fails to improve or strengthen real (human) connections between human beings. Instead, it has created more anxiety and sometimes misunderstanding between and among people, has caused more confusion in life for many:

I was in a terrible fluster. The deadline had passed. Certainly I wanted to catch up, to make a connection with the world of transcendence, which I believed to be good and beautiful, and to share my ideals. On the other hand, I had a strong feeling that the most important thing to do was to take care of this worldly fax machine before me. . . . Being caught between transcendence and the fax machine, I could only do this much. I could only try my best and take care of the most urgent matters within my limits, hoping that that would let me find a way out. (394)

As the protagonist in Ye Si’s story eventually comes to realize, his self is defined by the other (and in this case, a non-human thing or object) and his connection with the world depends entirely on the machine. The protagonist ceases to be his own master for he has no control over what he wants to receive at home or what he wants to send out. He cannot even decide when to make contact with the world. Everything seems to be governed by the machine, which may refuse to work when one most needs it. Using the fax machine as his central symbol, Ye Si depicts the disastrous “effects” of technology on human life in developed societies, the alarming potential threat it poses for mankind.

As presented in the story, the process of globalization has brought

about the emergence of a new social and cultural space, together with (or as a function of) new modes of communication (Robertson & Luhmann 8–9). It is true that the protagonist in Ye Si's story has succeeded in "transcending space"; it is equally true that he has sacrificed his individuality and autonomy in his attempt to become a globalized person. As in the case of Xi Xi's protagonist's cold and detached mirror-identity, the impersonal and dehumanized "voice" of the machine is emphasized in Ye Si's story. The reader is invited to consider the price one pays in the process of globalization and to assess the implications of modernity, with its myriad manifestations and practices, on human relationships and interpersonal communication.

At a time when the world is shrinking at an incredible speed and people are always flowing from one place to another, the relationship between self and other is often scrutinized in the context of the local and the global, the individual and the communal. As David Wu succinctly observes in his article, "Facing the Challenge of Multiple Cultural Identities," a special feature of contemporary life is that people tend to flow from one place to another, to develop from one state of being to another, and to assume various kinds of identities:

The world today is full of people who have crossed ethnic, cultural, or national boundaries, but they are forced to think that they are abnormal or out of place. The people who are crossing the border or boundary are described as travellers, immigrants, mixed-blood, or becoming- diaspora. . . . The reality is, more and more people in the late 20th century have left home permanently as immigrants, expatriates, refugees, (guest) workers, international business persons, exile communities, overseas populations, and ethnic communities of a transnational nature. (142)

The idea of flow is often accompanied by a desire for change either in the form of an attachment to one's familiar "world" as in the case of Tie Ning's and Xi Xi's characters, or a detachment from all human bondage as in the case of Ye Si's protagonist. Such an enhanced subjectivity as a result of an individual's awareness of one's

marginality and alienation is fully explored in Gao Xingjian's plays written in the 1990s. Gao adopts a very different writing strategy in exploring the self in a contemporary world where individuals struggle in vain to become free, transcendental subjects. Gao Xingjian is particularly interested in showing how the self can be understood through processes of objectification, how it can be presented as both the perceiving subject and perceived object. By adopting the method of "self-transcendent observation" [choushen jinguan] borrowed from Chinese Zen Buddhism, Gao shows the self as subject/object, as having a dualistic state of being. His "self" is at the same time "subject-in-object" and "object-in-subject." His play *Ye youshen* [*Nocturnal Wanderer*, 1995], for example, can be read as an experiment with the notions of self, space and subjectivity. [like all other current "theories" of subjectivity, including Lacanian ones, this stuff basically all comes out of Hegel.]

In the play Gao explores the self in a transnational and transcultural state, one in which the distinction between subject and object, or self and other, is minimized if not absent. Employing the conventional journey motif and adopting the technique of a dream within a play, Gao presents the "experience" of a traveller who becomes a sleepwalker in his dream. Through this Traveller-Sleepwalker, who struggles in vain to maintain his self-grounding autonomy, Gao presents a bleak picture of contemporary life characterized by alienation, fear, suspicion, indifference and non-commitment when it comes to human relationships. The protagonist's "encounters" with various types of people during his solitary night-time walk allow Gao to bring into the limelight the general conditions of human existence in a contemporary world where everything, including self, place and social relations, remains dubious, always changing and reshaping itself. The Sleepwalker's encounter with the Tramp confirms the playwright's view of the individual as a wanderer and loner in life:

Sleepwalker: (*Goes to the middle of the road.*) Everybody wants to give you a direction, everybody wants to be God. (*Stops.*) You only

wanted to take a leisurely stroll, without destination. What fun is there if you're told where to go? People like to tell you to do this, to do that and when trouble comes it's you who have to bear the brunt. What is called "destination" is as simple as this: people ask you to chase after a rabbit when it runs away. What about you? (*He turns his head but cannot find Tramp. He shouts.*) You have no destination, no direction. Just walk on and be anywhere. (Gao 59)

The Sleepwalker's subsequent encounter with the Ruffian does not give him any clue as to the worth or purpose of life because the Sleepwalker remains indifferent to other people's sufferings as he "flows" along in life. He only wishes to be left alone. His interaction with the Thug and the Ruffian, however, forces him to examine his moral self closely, and he is forced to recognize another aspect of himself in the process:

Sleepwalker: Thank God you've gotten rid of that swine. You didn't mean to kill anybody, but under the circumstances you were forced to do it, you had no choice. You were driven against the wall, anyone would have done the same if they were in your shoes. (*Grabs Ruffian's feet and drags him in front of the cardboard box.*) That was a real nightmare. . . . You'd rather kill someone first than be killed. Better kill than be killed. Only now did you realize that there's also pleasure in killing. . . . It's amazing, face to face with that vicious brute, you were equally [as] vicious. They say evil for evil and goodness for goodness. Well, who cares if it's true, the point is you actually managed to get away in one piece. (Fong 169–70)

The Sleepwalker's encounter with the Prostitute further allows him to understand himself as a sexual subject. His repression of his self and his anxieties about sex and women are brought to light in his interaction with the Prostitute. Interestingly enough, it is the Prostitute who presents challenges to the Sleepwalker's sense of a masculine self:



Prostitute: She was killed by your imagination. You abused her in your imagination, and then you killed her. It's so typical of men.

Sleepwalker: You say you're not with them, you're entirely different!

Prostitute: But you're a man, all men are the same, they're so egotistical.

Sleepwalker: You say more or less you've got to have a bit of . . . .  
(*Hides the suitcase behind him.*)

Prostitute: A bit of what?

Sleepwalker: A bit of compassion . . . a bit of apprehension . . . a bit of conscience —

Prostitute: Don't talk about conscience!

Sleepwalker: What then?

Prostitute: The bit of conscience you had has already vanished a long time ago. That's right, there's only cowardice left in you, which is the difference between you and them, of course you know what's meant by "them." You don't have the courage to act, to do anything. Only in your imagination or in your fantasy can you let yourself go, being ever so wild and unruly, but you're absolutely a coward when it's real. (Gao 100–01; Fong 174–75)

The Prostitute first serves as a desired object, the sexual other, for the Sleepwalker, and later plays the role of a subject and moral judge of the Sleepwalker's integrity, especially in her comment on the Sleepwalker's relationship with other characters. In his conversation with the Prostitute, the Sleepwalker comes to fully understand his position as both the gazer and "the gazed" (gazed-at) in life.

Furthermore, as the "real" woman in the Sleepwalker's imagination and not just any woman, the Prostitute poses a challenge to the Sleepwalker's notions of courage and masculinity:

Sleepwalker: You say you can admit such difference, but you can't admit that you're a coward —

Prostitute: Don't worry, no one says that you're impotent. It's your

so-called “thinking.” You only talk to yourself, and you’ve been using your brain too much to know how to make love with a woman. That’s why you haven’t been able to get your woman, the kind you’ve been dreaming about.

Sleepwalker: What kind of woman?

Prostitute: Don’t you know? A whore, one who can fulfill your sexual fantasies.

Sleepwalker: (*Hesitates.*) But the question is whether or not she can do it.

Prostitute: There’s no way you’re going to find her.

Sleepwalker: Why not?

Prostitute: Because even hookers are human beings and sex to them is only a way of making a living. Isn’t it the same with you? You’ve got to have an occupation. You’ve got to work whether you like it or not. Aren’t you also putting yourself up for sale?

Sleepwalker: (*Retorts.*) You say you’re talking about her, and you’re asking if she enjoys her work.

Prostitute: Are you talking about her flesh trade? Or the body she makes a living with? All women are the same, they’re not necessarily cold or frigid, nor are they necessarily not wanton. The key is whether you can turn on that special nerve.

Sleepwalker: You ask is she after sensual pleasure?

Prostitute: Maybe it’s just the opposite.

Sleepwalker: You ask is she going after emotional gratification but thinks that you’re in it for pleasure?

Prostitute: You are wrong.

Sleepwalker: You say she also has spiritual needs, and she’s not doing it just for money.

Prostitute: Wrong again.

Sleepwalker: You say then you don’t understand.

Prostitute: You’re a poor guy.

Sleepwalker: Is it money, or is it violence that women consider sexy?

Prostitute: You’re a bore. It’s so tiring talking to you. You don’t know how to listen to a woman, how to listen to her voice, you

never understand a woman. (Gao 101–02)

In this imaginary dialogue, the Sleepwalker projects a woman who serves as his “sexual other” so that he can construct his masculine self. The Prostitute as a wanton female desiring sex is only a revelation, an externalization of the Sleepwalker’s male fantasies, latent wishes and hidden desires. Here Gao presents the Sleepwalker as a coward who is afraid of woman and of sex and whose sexual gratification exists only in his imagination of a woman:

Sleepwalker: You say she covets the devil!

Prostitute: You’re far from being a devil.

Sleepwalker: You say there’s a devil in everyone’s heart. The question is whether or not you set it free.

Prostitute: Your problem is not whether you want to, or whether you’re willing to, it’s that you’re incapable.

Sleepwalker: You say she’s only in it for the pleasure.

Prostitute: Don’t you also want your life to be wild and crazy?

Sleepwalker: You say she is exactly a broken shoe. (Gao 104–05)

In the imaginary dialogue, the devil in the Sleepwalker’s unconsciousness is set free. As an imaginary “other,” the Prostitute is used as a device to deconstruct the Sleepwalker’s imagination of/about women, as he fails to understand the woman whom he has constructed. In the play, Gao deals with the intricate interplay between individual self and socio-cultural identity, conscious desire and unconscious fear, male and female, bondage and freedom, place and space, as well as transcendence and decadence. In doing so, the self is further deconstructed as a linguistic constitution based on memory and fantasy.

The play can thus be read as a journey, a wandering into the Traveller-Sleepwalker’s inner self, showing an individual’s incessant desire to free himself from all forms of domination and exploitation by hegemonic powers. It can also be considered as an inquiry into the Traveller-Sleepwalker’s subjectivity and traits of masculinity. In his

encounter with the Tramp, the Ruffian, the Prostitute and the Thug, the Sleepwalker's self is tested against his wavering conscience between justice and injustice, courage and cowardice, compassion and indifference, as well as sexual temptation and moral integrity. In constructing the male self of the Sleepwalker, Gao does not rely merely on the female as a projection of the male's "sexual other." Instead, the Sleepwalker is placed in a wider web of social relations in order to examine the relationship between power and the self, the finite and the infinite, the bounded and the boundless, as well as the real and the imaginary.

As we see in the above examples, the significance of place in helping to define or redefine a person's identity becomes the focal point of these writers' thinking. In human beings' incessant search for a means to transcend themselves, to constitute their selves within or beyond cultural and geographical boundaries, the question remains as to whether it is possible for one to preserve one's self while also benefiting from the promises of globalization. This is an issue that faces not just individuals but also nations in the contemporary world. As John Tomlinson observes, our contemporary (late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century) world or "age" is one in which human "daily lives become more and more interwoven with, and penetrated by, influences and experiences that have their origins far away" (113). It becomes increasingly inevitable that "local" identity, including national and cultural identity, is closely tied to "global" changes. Whether people like the protagonists in our four narratives can battle through the great currents of the times and keep their selves intact depends very much upon their awareness of themselves as subjects.

The protagonists' psychological turmoil in the works discussed reveals individuals' conscious attempts to locate their selves, as in the case of Tie Ning's and Xi Xi's characters. Or individuals may choose to dislocate themselves, as in the case of the scholar-protagonist in Ye Si's story and the Traveller-Sleepwalker in Gao Xingjian's play. Their efforts all point to a romantic quest for self-transcendence, for a departure from established norms or dominating powers and a fervent desire to create their own existential space. It is interesting to note that

these authors have adopted very different writing strategies in exploring various aspects of the self and the community, of the local and the global, for they were informed by very different social, cultural and political circumstances.

The use of dominant images further allows these writers to bring out the crucial contradictions or dichotomies. The small village protected by the womb-like mountains in Tie Ning's story and the subsequent (phallic) "penetration" by the train certainly point to the archetypal image of the land as both feminine and pure. Terrace Gully is presented as the stable, all-embracing and all-loving "home" that one yearns for, while the moving train is seen as a masculine image representing the adventurous spirit necessary for change and progress in a developing society. In a comparable way, one's desire to find an anchor for one's self in a world of flux and mobility is reflected in Xi Xi's mirror in the drawer, which offers comfort, security and tranquillity to the wandering soul in contemporary society.

The romantic dream of many to transcend their physical/bodily existence serves as the focal point in Ye Si's and Gao Xingjian's texts, in which individuals struggle to free themselves from the shackles of human bondage and from a mundane and monotonous life. There is a dream which is quite unsettling for the dreamer. The scholar-protagonist's mundane experience is elevated to a macro-level when he starts to prefer to communicate with his fax machine, itself described in feminine terms. The nightmarish experience he has with it shows the increasing difficulty of preserving one's autonomous self in the contemporary world. While human beings today continue to dream of transcending themselves spatially (and in a sense also temporally), expanding themselves beyond cultural and geographical boundaries, they also find that they have inevitably forsaken their unique individual identity and often lost their direction in life, as in the case of the Traveller-Sleepwalker in Gao Xingjian's play. Psychologically, they may have irrevocably detached themselves from humanity, leading an alienated life of self-imposed exile. The result of this is that they often find themselves "caught" in their own ("existential") situation, their freedom lost, their self drowned in their inability to love, in their

unconscious anxieties about sex and conscious sexual inhibitions. Whether they can eventually find their way out of their social, moral, spiritual and sexual labyrinths depends very much on their courage to face life with its adversities and fluidities as well as on their own self in its various identities, as manifested in the myriad forms of their social and technological relations.

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