

The Male Gaze and the Female Returning Gaze: The Representation of the Female Sexuality in Modern Chinese Literature

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ABSTRACT

This essay develops a feminist perspective called “returning the gaze.” It discusses differences between early pre-May Fourth Movement writers and the “New Sensationalist” writer Mu Shiyong (1912)-1940), Eileen Chang (“the first modern woman writer to represent female sexuality in Chinese literature”), and Li Ang (a post-modernist, feminist, writer from Taiwan). These newer writers examine the space made available for the female in a male dominated culture, and are generally more open-minded about sex than earlier writers.

KEY WORDS

sexual politics
sexual aesthetics
May Fourth Movement
unconscious
“Sensationalist School”

“New Sensationalist School”
marginality
Martin Buber
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feminine sensibility

As Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*¹ has made clear, the question of female sexuality is a highly politicized one. The paradigm of woman's body and sexuality is governed by societal norms and by the verbal constructs which articulate it. If sexuality is, as Jean Laplanche and Michel Foucault put it, "the repressed par excellence,"² and if the very act of speaking of sexuality is an "opportunity to speak out against the powers,"³ then body and sexuality may be considered a valid means to inquire into the formation of the male and female "subject" as revealed in modern literary works.

In Western literature, a "sexual aesthetic"⁴ has been fabricated and adapted as a part of the search for culturally constructed paradigms of female body and sexuality: James Joyce juxtaposes sexuality with religion, Ibsen and Shaw link sexuality to a discussion of modern morality, E.M. Forster depicts the tension between middle-class customs and disruptive sexual passions, D.H. Lawrence investigates erotic self-fulfillment, and T.S. Eliot depicts ironically the hollow sex.⁵ In 20th century China, Chinese literary works addressing issues of women and sexuality began to emerge as part of the May Fourth Movement (1919). This body of literature, provoking reconsideration of traditional Chinese cultural constructs, constituted a part of the modern quest and became the vehicle for the search for individuality. Subsequent to the May Fourth Movement, the theme of women and sexuality was further developed.

Many factors explain this new literary phenomenon. The May Fourth era is one of the most creative and brilliant periods in modern Chinese history. At this time, Chinese intellectuals rejected tradition and sought to create a new order in an age of increasing internal chaos. This period gave birth to the awakening notion of "individuality." After the May Fourth Movement, Chinese writers gradually discovered and appropriated western discourses⁶ on "individuality" using them as a means of opposing traditional Confucian conventions.⁷ Accordingly, a noncommittal and introspective style of writing appeared, wherein the modern hero or heroine struggled with the conflict between allegiance to collective consciousness inculcated through Chinese societal norms and the emancipation of self (i.e. discovery of individuality).

If it is possible to argue for an "unconscious" that molds the cultural quest, in this case a quest for a modern "subject," sexuality is obviously one of the "symptoms" of this unconscious revealed in modern Chinese literature.⁸ Along with the growth of this "New Literature" of the May Fourth era, interest in the subject of body and sexuality reflected an intense

desire to resolve the conflict between culturally institutionalized morality and the yearning for self expression. The representation of body and sexuality has, in fact, become a fundamental quest — a quest to discover and make peace with the “modern self.”

However, despite the awakening sense of “self,” the predominantly realistic focus of May Fourth literature viewed the psychological description of self as decadent, advocating instead a nationalistic, pragmatic treatment which emphasized social engagement. Indifferent to the May Fourth agenda, the “Sensationalist School” (Xinganjue pai), appearing in the 1930’s, employed a psychological description of self imbedded in a nationalistic ethos. The works of Mu Shiyong (1912-1940), a writer of the New Sensationalist School, disclose new perspectives on the female body. His works depict the conflict of the modern intellectual in a rapidly changing urban milieu and explore male psychology by focusing upon the female body as seen from a male perspective. Prior to Mu Shiyong, Chinese writers, like Chinese society itself, prompted by fear of uncontrolled, untempered individual desire, refused to confront and accept the reality of the female body and female sexuality. In Mu Shiyong’s stories, however, this fear of the female body is transformed into a daring and direct fixation. As sex is a particular type of interaction between Self and Other, the direct fixation of the male gaze on the female body as revealed in Mu Shiyong’s stories signifies also recognition of the female as Other, although females are ironically objectified in these stories as exotic surreal abstractions.

Women, whose social significance had been primarily as objects of male representation, male desires, and male fears, began at the same time to search for a sense of self and to reclaim their bodies. This effort led to the invention of both a new poetics and new politics based on the recovery by women of what had always been theirs but had been usurped: control over their bodies and the means thereby to express it.

Eileen Chang (1921-), a post May Fourth writer, exemplifies such a female invention. Refusing to adapt to the May Fourth literary agenda, Chang openly rejects the national dedication to promote democracy and science, along with the use of literature for reformist purposes. While Mu Shiyong pursues the self and the nation simultaneously, she remains fully engaged with private life and the autonomous “self,” committing herself to depictions of debauched semi-traditional Chinese life. As a result, her works integrate boudoir qualities with overtones from traditional Chinese stories, masking an obsession with sexuality and the female body. With her

meticulous attention to style and her innovative use of imagery and symbolism, Eileen Chang probes female sexuality as a construct of the male-dominant culture, and presents the female response as a parody of male representations.

Reclaiming the female body and "returning the female gaze to the observing male," Eileen Chang may, in fact, be considered the first modern woman writer to represent female sexuality in Chinese literature. Because of her unique style, Chang has been imitated by many younger Taiwan writers, both male and female, over the past twenty years. Her impact is so far-reaching that her readers often call themselves "Fans of Chang" (Zhang mi), and have termed Chang's followers, the "Eileen Chang School of Writers" (Zhangpai zuojia).

Zhong Xiaoyang (1962-), an adherent of the "Eileen Chang School of Writers," parodies the romantic prototype and uses the modernized romance as a means of celebrating female sexual fantasy. She unconsciously ridicules both the mystique of the female body and male fears inspired by it, satirizing as grotesque the biologically "fixed" human body haunted by sexual desire.

At the same time, the issue of the female subject itself has evolved both in cultural formulations and in creative writing. What seems at first unproblematic and uncontroversial — let women speak for themselves, reclaim their own bodies and construct their own subjects — has in fact become problematic and controversial because of such increasingly difficult questions as: What exactly do we mean when we speak of woman as subject? Is there such a thing as subject? Is there such a thing as "women's sexuality"? These questions, as pointed out by Susan Suleiman, did not originate from contemporary feminist thought or from the women's movement. Instead, they are universal concerns which have been appropriated by the feminist movement and infused with a singular urgency and purpose.⁹

A contemporary woman writer whose works reflect this post-modernist revolt against the notion of an autonomous female subject arguing a feminist point of view is Li Ang (1952-), a brilliant young Taiwanese author. Despite her poignant advocacy of feminine sexual autonomy, her stories reveal a pluralistic discourse on the issue of female subjectivity. Her writing represents a trend in Taiwan that, instead of upholding orthodox political and cultural ideologies or catering to commercial escapism, seeks to explore diverse social mentalities from a critical perspective grounded in Western bourgeois values.

This paper regards the discourses on the female body articulated by Mu Shiying and Eileen Chang as a paradigm against which contemporary women writers such as Zhong Xiaoyang and Li Ang evolve their works. These writers are exemplary, not in the sense that they serve as literary models, but because they suggest multiple possibilities in the contemporary endeavor by both male and female writers to rewrite and rethink the sexuality, body and feminine subjectivity, formed inevitably in response to male consciousness. Together, these issues form an inquiry, "bigger" than what can be encompassed by the term "feminism," into modern Chinese literature.¹⁰

The representation of sexuality as revealed in contemporary Chinese literary works has its origins in May Fourth era discourse generally, and in the divergent and counter discourses born from this movement. The conceptual seeds consist of a problematized male gaze seeking to objectify the female body and a counter gaze by the female reflecting, often in parody, the masculine vision of women articulated via the physical body.

Eileen Chang, writing in the 1940's, became the first Chinese woman writer to confront the subject of sexuality. Her works form an artful response to the invitation of male writers such as Mu Shiying who attempted to understand themselves by objectifying the whole problematique of male sexual attraction. By combining shrewd sarcasm with sympathetic undertones, Chang articulated a dialogue between male and female which enlivened the fascinating discourse on the female body advanced by bold and innovative writers in the previous decade.

If "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," then Eileen Chang is certainly the most flattered of modern Chinese women writers.¹¹ Echoes of her use of sensory images, physical embellishment, the blending of psychological subtlety with intricacies of manners, and the fusion she performs between traditional Chinese sensibility and western modernist aesthetics recur again and again in modern Chinese literature. Chang's style, as she herself acknowledges, derives mostly from traditional Chinese fiction. Artistically, she inherits the tradition of Chinese novels, as exemplified by *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng*). Thematically, Chang follows the late Qing "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School" (*yuanyanghudie pai*) of popular romance and was accordingly denounced as bourgeois and decadent by the "Proletarian School" of writers emergent in the 1940's. But most importantly, Chang's exuberant imagery, coupled with her penetrating observation of feminine psychology, marks the beginning of a feminist sensibility in modern Chinese literature.

But this beginning is grounded also in themes articulated by writers of the New Sensationalist School, young Shanghai intellectuals¹² who came together in the 1930's in opposition to the mainstream. Moving away from a realist depiction of the external world, these writers attempted to reconstruct reality by projecting their subjective impressions of the external world onto objective existence.¹³ Their aim was to capture the modern sensibility molded by the transformation of the urban environment in the 1930's. Through their conscious evocation of sensations and the deliberate "defamiliarization" of the external object, the New Sensationalist writers focused not only upon psychological detail, but also experimented with time, space and language and, in so doing produced works which are "modernist" in tone and closely identified with the Western psychological novel.

Because of their preoccupation with the urban experience projected from an interior vision, the writings of this group are characterized by a daring description of sexual psychology and fantasy. The female body emerges as the locus of new literary exploration while the city becomes the stage for a detailed examination of the modern sensibility. Schizophrenic personality traits often appear in the characters portrayed as moral codes clash with desperate erotic drives.¹⁴

In Mu Shiyong's stories, the city of Shanghai is seen as a place of friction and change. In response to the cultural value crisis, a product of the times and of the desire to explore and experience the novel and the extreme, we witness a transformation of consciousness. This situation which is particularly amenable to literary and artistic exploitation forms the background of Mu Shiyong's work.

Mu Shiyong's protagonists, modern intellectuals with an acute urban sensitivity are often depicted as heroes who, while rooted in a Chinese locality, view the world from an "expatriate perspective." This self-imposed marginalization contrasts conspicuously with the May Fourth realist hero, immersed as he is in the mainstream performing feats of social reform in accordance with the tenets of orthodox Chinese nationalism. While still intellectual and elitist, the new modernist hero has a distinct empathy for the social exile, disenfranchised and uprooted in the urban environment. He is a member of a wandering, culturally inquisitive group, both by design and desire.

With the wanderer's cynical indulgence in sensual pleasure and his sympathy toward those crushed by the "trackless train"¹⁵ running through the ruthless mire of urban life, the modern protagonist frequents nightclubs

where he forms casual relationships with glamorous women. The affair is usually a "one-night stand," a brief union with an alluring lady from whose body the hero captures a moment of epiphany. In such a narrative, the female body, situated as it is in the urban mind, is constructed as a "space" upon which is projected the protagonist's covert desires and problematized "self."

Mu Shiying's short story, "Craven 'A'" (1934), for example, focuses on a brief relationship between an intellectual in pursuit of exotic inspiration and a girl seeking pleasure — and true love — in the hedonistic atmosphere of Shanghai's nightlife. Because of her atypical foreign look and markedly immoral conduct, the girl is ostracized by those around her, especially by her own sex. The protagonist, however, finds this girl charming and exotic and pities her extreme vulnerability. Watching her smoke "Craven 'A'" brand cigarettes night after night in a cabaret, he falls in love with her, certain that he understands the young woman's loneliness. Both consider themselves as socially and intellectually "marginal," and consequently become intimate friends.

The notions of marginality and "other" are usually associated with what is alien, strange, and unfamiliar, and may also have connotations implying "evil."¹⁶ The protagonist's voluntary association with this girl who is ostracized by her peers, is therefore indicative of his sense of displacement. By re-evaluating the marginal feminine figure's amoral stance, the protagonist asserts a symbolic challenge to the cultural authority upon which his "self" is grounded. Moreover, this modernist attempt at self-reformation is carried out by fabricating the illusion of an exotic female body, a passive open space, a cultural "other" as a symbolic displacement of China.

In this story, the protagonist would stare at the object of his desire, watching her either associating with other men or smoking by herself. Under his gaze, her glamorous female body is playfully transformed into a surrealist landscape or a "national map," inviting exploration. Beginning with the face, the narrator gives a lengthy and exquisitely detailed analysis, comparing the female body to a geographical space analogous to China, likening her contours to lakes, mountains, plains and ending with a highly erotic description of a ship coming into harbor at night.¹⁷ The reader, therefore, is led in a semi-ironic way to view the horizontal, submissive, penetrable body as a metaphor of the "nation," a primary concern of Chinese intellectuals.

In this transformation, the longing for a strong "country," an obsession

of Chinese intelligentsia, and the cryptic yearning for the female "body" are intriguingly intertwined. While the narrator's subjectivity is influenced by his self-image as an exile and by his identification with the cultural "other," his "self" is stimulated by an untempered imagination. The fusion of the orthodox "nation" theme with the abstraction of an exotic woman places the modern subject, the narrator, in a new symbolic context. From the dual perspective of marginalized modernist and conventional nationalist, he can neither embrace the "foreign" wholeheartedly nor can he adhere to orthodox authority. He, therefore, situates himself in a new space, the female body, and makes it his locus of reality, the place where he is in possession of psychological "truth."

Access to this psychological truth is made via a first person narrator, the "I", who in a detached and faintly self-mocking manner, watches himself watching. While apparently indulging in a form of sexual abandon, he, in fact, subjects himself to a coldly clinical assessment of his own psyche. The narrator becomes simultaneously self and other and the end result unveils a process of self-disclosure in which the writer challenges both his own and the reader's sense of reality. The ironic effect of this passage thus poses for the reader both a question and a challenge. The suggestion of uncertainty – uncertainty, that is, of what exactly constitutes "objective reality" – unleashes the impulse to dramatically revise the perceived reality, not so much an alteration of the outer world, but a reconstruction of one's inner reality, a remaking of the self. In this way, Mu Shiyong's story signals a radical departure from the May Fourth ethic, directed as it was toward a militant engagement with a clearly defined and universally acknowledged external world. Moreover, Mu Shiyong's erotically-inspired expose, revealing as it does to the reader and to himself the duplicity of the male psyche, conflicts markedly with the controlled stoicism characteristic of the traditional Chinese male.

Another of Mu Shiyong's stories in which the male psyche is cynically scrutinized is "The Platinum Statue of the Female Body" (*Baijin de nuti suxiang*) (1934). In this tale we are introduced to a bachelor doctor who nearly loses his professional composure while examining a young female patient. In an attempt to control sexual desires stimulated by exposure to the patient's body, he orders an ultraviolet light treatment which, while of dubious medical necessity, requires that the woman undress. This apparently stanches his erotic drives.

The patient exits because she, like the "heroine" of "Craven 'A'", is

merely the vehicle for the author's own intensely-focused self-examination. The upshot of this episode which exposes the doctor to his own primordial needs and to his own vulnerability, is marriage. Very soon, we find him in a different living space, transformed from a virtuous ascetic into a down-to-earth married man. Here, the surrealistic gaze, by fixing upon the other, induces the doctor, who by nature of his profession is particularly attached to outer reality, if only subconsciously, to acknowledge his own interior needs. This acknowledgement in turn acts as an inducement to alter his outer reality.

The process of the doctor's internal transformation is articulated in this superficially simple story through the doctor's mental reconstruction of the patient's body which, to protect himself from his own biological needs, is abstracted into an object, a western-style "platinum statue." The reconstruction process reaches a high point when the doctor asks the patient to remove her dress to receive the light treatment. At that moment, the protagonist's fixation is made explicit for what he sees in front of him is not a naked body, but:

[a] platinum statue of a female body, supported by tiny little ankles, with one leg posing straight and the other slanting; an inorganic human body, with no sense of shame or human desire. It appears to be of metal and somewhat streamlined, as if the line of sight will slip on the bodily curves. This statue, absent of feeling an emotion, waits there for his command.¹⁸

Having sent the woman off, the doctor's reflections revert to the exotic property, the foreign and inhuman quality which he has assigned to this woman and which further distances him from the object of his gaze. He sees her as a

. . . platinum statue of a female body! A female body, the blood without color, with no human touch, how exotic! Its feelings are not understandable, its biological structure is not perceivable. An object with human shape but no human quality and flavor, it is a new object of sexual desire in 1933.¹⁹

This imaginative transformation, by objectifying the patient's body, anesthetizes the doctor's desire, effectively "freezing" it. The whole process is analogous to the act of "freezing" an object in a painting or in sculpture.

The female nude, for example, as a painting genre, objectifies, dehumanizes and depersonalizes the female body, stripping it of its beauty and of its meaning so that it becomes a mere object, devoid of life. N.J. Girardot, in *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism*, similarly critiques writing, the other primary mode of artistic expression when he states:

Writing clears up the confusion of verbal expression only by sacrificing the mutuality and nuance of speech to the precision and power of abstract conceptualization. Writing, like all civilizational technologies, speaks and controls but does not listen: it suppresses dialogue.²⁰

Suppression of dialogue in these two stories by Mu Shiying is accomplished in the "Craven 'A'" by using the first-person voice which inevitably neutralizes mutuality since everything is filtered through one person's perspective. In "Platinum Statue," narrated in the third-person voice, very little use is made of the option in this narrative voice to introduce other points of view. Except for a very short monologue by the patient in which she recounts her symptoms, the entire story unfolds from the doctor's point of view. Since an interpersonal relationship might be distracting in this man's abstemious lifestyle, he conveniently converts his relationship with this alluring female patient to an "I and It" affiliation. Martin Buber, in his book, *I and Thou*, explores the spiritual ramifications to perceiver and perceived of this desacralization of the other. What enables man, he writes, to "perceive an ordered and detached world. . . , a reliable world. . . of density and duration" is exactly this kind of objectification where "what exists round about" is perceived

simply [as] things, and being as things; and what happens round about. . . — simply events, and actions as events . . . things and events bounded by other things and events, measured by them, comparable with them.²¹

The woman patient appears potentially in the doctor's world. This potential, which Buber describes as "mutual giving: you say Thou to it and give yourself to it, it says Thou to you and gives itself to you,"²² is, however, never realized. The appearance of the female patient poses for the doctor both a challenge and an invitation — a challenge to his "past" old order and

an invitation to a new "present" existence. The old order is the objectified world of his current perceptions as well as the world of culturally conditioned conventions. In this world of object and past, only by turning "thou" into "it," can the doctor's structure of order function. He is unable to accept the invitation to a new "present" existence because that requires that "nothing is present for him except this one being."²³ He, however, totally suppresses the "Thou" of this patient; in other words, everything about her that is vital, individual and sacred.

The doctor is initially presented to us by means of a calendar which neatly and efficiently compartmentalizes the events of his life. The threads of his story are tied together again at the end by another calendar, this one differing only slightly from the one which introduced him. The juxtaposition of the doctor's pre and post-nuptial timetables, together with the caricature-style depiction of his marital life — apparently so ordinary the author does not even bother to describe it — make of his married life an ironic parody of his previous asceticism: both are grotesque.

The doctor's failure to become creatively engaged with the present — signaled by his dehumanization of the female patient who threatened his rigidly structured world — condemns him to an endlessly recurrent and ridiculously monotonous past. Tong Zhenbao, the protagonist in Eileen Chang's work, "Red Rose and White Rose" (Hong meigui yu bai meigui) (1944) is similarly prevented from adapting creatively to the present by his rigid adherence to a neatly formulaic vision of the world.

A well-educated and diligent Shanghai businessman, Zhenbao classifies women into two categories reminiscent of Freud's "virgin/whore syndrome." The "White Rose" is his college lover, an English girl, for whom he feels a pure and affectionate love and the "Red Rose," his friend's wife, toward whom he is passionate. The dichotomy of affectionate love, on the one hand, and sexual love on the other, is laden with the complex emotions of fear and guilt and Zhenbao manages these difficult and dangerous feelings by projecting them onto the women about him. Through this process of projection, he perceives the world as a place inhabited by two kinds of women: "good" women who are idealized and who have no sensual desires; and "bad" women who are sexual by nature, and with whom it is permissible to have sexual relations. Zhenbao thereby views the world as a world of "order" and thoroughly enjoys his dual role of being a "gentleman" when he is with his "White Rose" and a skillful lover to his "Red Rose."

However, when Zhenbao realizes that this formulaic dichotomy fails

to explain his relationship with women, the "ordered" world, which has protected and supported him, collapses. His naive and disjunctive thought patterns are challenged when the "Red Rose," Jiaorui, becomes serious about their relationship and confesses her love for Zhenbao to her husband, his good friend. Tong Zhenbao is shocked:

Jiaorui has set a trap for him as if she had put a wet cotton T-shirt on him. She has made him take full responsibility, but what if "Society" did not accept it? It is his whole career that is at stake.²⁴

In order to secure his career and avoid social censorship, Tong Zhenbao simply ignores Jiaorui's bitter entreaties and ruthlessly abandons her. In Zhenbao's thinking, a whore could only be a whore.

The significance of Jiaorui's action, to refer back to Buber's thesis, is the initiation of an "I/Thou" relationship with Zhenbao. However, Zhenbao's sense of order and security is threatened by such a proposition and he flees. Like the doctor, he is apparently unable to sustain anything more than an "I/It" affiliation.

Later, through family arrangements, Zhenbao marries a college graduate, who in a sense replaces his "White Rose." However, his new wife cannot gratify his sexual needs because "her immature breasts feel like little birds in sound sleep." Many years later, while engaged in the continuing struggle to maintain his fixed view of the world, Zhenbao encounters Jiaorui and finds that she has divorced, remarried and become a woman fully appreciative of the essence of "love."

At the same time, Zhenbao learns that his wife is committing adultery with her tailor. He is devastated. His formulaic categorization of women and sexuality has proven completely invalid and he begins to desperately indulge himself with visits to brothels. "If he could not destroy his home, his wife, his children, he could at least destroy himself."²⁵ Destructive self-indulgence is the means by which Zhenbao reacts against familial burdens and projects the profound disillusionment he feels faced with the disintegration of his cherished beliefs. One day, however, after rudely abusing his wife and having tired of his life of dissipation, he quietly reassumes the role of a good and faithful husband.

While there are significant parallels in this story to Mu Shiyong's tale of the doctor — both protagonists, for example, adopt a fixed view of the

world as a means of avoiding meaningful engagement – the world depicted by Eileen Chang is multifaceted, and by comparison presents to the reader a seemingly infinite variety of perspectives. While the doctor simply continues his morbidly mundane existence, we are led to believe by Chang that Zhenbao, having been forced to discard the carefully contrived edifice that undergirds his world, submits to an order greater than that of his own devising. This is the traditionally-sanctioned Confucian world order wherein the man assumes the roles of husband, father and provider. While on the surface, Zhenbao's sudden reformation may appear as defeat, the author suggests a relatively more sympathetic interpretation. Zhenbao has weathered, for better or worse, a series of crises which effectively destroyed his personal world view. The implication is that perfection is an ideal not of this world and although Zhenbao seems not to have significantly ameliorated his life circumstances, he has made peace with his situation. Perhaps one should not ask more.

What is exciting in Chang's work and this story, in particular, is her deft fabrication of a male discourse into a reflective pattern adapted to a female point of view. This is the phenomenon referred to as "returning the gaze." Having introduced Zhenbao and his basically shortsighted and self-serving views of women and sexuality, Chang recreates this image through Jiaorui who provocatively taunts Zhenbao, suggesting to him that her body is a "building":

"... my heart is like an apartment," to which Zhenbao responds with a smile, "In that case, do you have vacancy for another tenant?" Jiaorui did not answer and Zhenbao continued, "But I don't like apartments. I want a single house." With a challenging puff from her nose, Jiaorui replied, "Let's see if you can tear it down and rebuild a new one."²⁶

As the embodiment of female sexuality in this story, Jiaorui is fully aware of her own physical glamour. She provocatively returns the gaze Zhenbao directs at her body, effectively challenging the male "observer." Zhenbao does not miss the message and soon enters her apartment. When, however, Jiaorui determines that she wants to be seen as more than an artificial structure and informs her husband of this affair, hoping, as we have seen to establish a more meaningful relationship, Zhenbao realizes that playing in this "apartment" is no longer an obligation-free game. Chang

artfully describes the fear inspired by the suggestion of anything more than a superficially-satisfying affiliation:

. . . a "HA" involuntarily escaped from Zhenbao's throat and he immediately rushed from the room. Coming to the street, he turned around to look at the lofty apartment building. This dark red mansion in modern design appeared like an incredibly huge locomotive that was about to run over him with a thundering clamor. It blocked his light and darkened his sky.²⁷

The glamour of the female body which has been compared to a cozy "space" has now become a dark red mansion, threatening to crush him.

By casting the female body as a locomotive, Chang simultaneously suggests the transformative power of feminine sexuality, while describing the dilemma of the male, perplexed and terrified by the potential power inherent in this inviting, but unpredictable, female entity. In this way, for the first time in Chinese literature, we are introduced to a counter-discourse on the female body and sexuality.

However, Eileen Chang's ironic but sympathetic portrayal of Zhenbao as a wavering selfish man, lost in the search for a satisfying relationship with women, goes beyond a monologic attack on the male. In this story, irony is embedded within the third-person voice impartially critical of both the male and the female. Jiaorui is obsessed with her female fetishism. She is engaged in an equally amoral pursuit of physical gratification and Zhenbao conveniently and selfishly takes advantage of this. Through Chang's sympathetic depiction, both Zhenbao and Jiaorui become the embodiments of ordinary men and women bearing all the human weaknesses of what Chang called "the urban nobody" (*shijing xiaomin*). They are flawed characters, untrustworthy, capricious and vain, but more importantly, they are "us."

Alienation, initially a physical and cultural alienation, provides the background out of which these stories emerge. Mu Shiyang takes up the issue of marginality and deftly projects it into the arena of psychic life. In essence he explores his own inability to become actively engaged in the mainstream ideas of the times, that is, the May Fourth movement imperatives of dedication and service to the nation. For Mu Shiyang feminine sexuality is the locus by which he examines alienation — an ironic thesis to begin with since superficially sexuality implies the opposing idea of strong attraction. However, he converts this issue into the vehicle whereby he discloses himself to himself,

a process which involves the objectification of sexuality and sexual attraction. In the "Craven 'A,'" sexuality and nationalism are intertwined and the basic issue of attraction remains relatively intact. However, the doctor in the "Platinum Statue," is a man divorced from any real self-understanding. The objectification of sexuality or desire which Mu Shiying uses initially as an instrument of self-analysis becomes for the doctor and for Zhenbao an end in itself. Both use sexuality as a means to avoid self-engagement and self-understanding. Sexuality becomes a barrier between self and world. By objectifying their own desires, transforming them into physical objects like pieces of furniture in a room which they cannot or will not enter, we are confronted with schizoid individuals whose integral self is lost and with it any real meaning in life is hard to achieve.

The issue raised by Mu Shiying of questioning and challenging received tradition and shared goals founders in the twin realms of fact and fantasy when energy normally directed outward is refocused on the self. In "Platinum Statue," the doctor is effectively stopped from any meaningful engagement with life precisely because his heightened sense of self-awareness prevents him from any kind of spontaneous interaction with the world. Having restructured the world of fact to conform to his fears and fantasies, he remains locked in an imaginative landscape from which he himself is excluded. Similarly, Zhenbao, having structured the world to accommodate his fantasies, replays this essentially self-defeating process of objectifying desire. Chang's implication that this compulsion is challenged by women is revealed through Jiaorui's reflexive retort to Zhenbao, the idea of "returning the gaze." Shui Jing, the leading critic of Eileen Chang's works asserts that the center of "Red Rose" is male rather than female.²⁸ However, this story reveals also a feminine counter-gaze which parodies the male representation. This constitutes a powerful undertone evident in Chang's works.

Mu Shiying shaped a modernist discourse on male perceptions of female sexuality to which Eileen Chang responded with a counter-discourse. Together, they have created a foundation upon which modern Chinese feminist writers are building. Mu Shiying created that geometrical space in the urban landscape which opened the way for men to create new visions of women which, in turn, had a reflexive effect — no matter how they resolve this effect. But the real inheritors of the transformative potential engendered by this newly created space have been women who, following the lead of Eileen Chang, are using literature to explore and create alternative "scripts" for the man and woman relationship in the concluding decades of the 20th

century. These threads have been taken up by contemporary writers, such as Zhong Xiaoyang and Li Ang, who using a postmodern approach, have suggested directions for feminist fiction – and the development of feminine consciousness – through the multiplication of narrative possibilities.

If buildings symbolize the female body, then the clear message, again from these stories, is sector to create a space for themselves. Furthermore, if female sexuality can be interpreted, to mean, not merely physical “sex” but those areas of “psychical truth” that are repressed as a result of the boundaries imposed by cultural conventions, it becomes possible to explore the notion of subjectivity, as it is revealed in modern Chinese literature, in much more illuminating ways.²⁹

This paper and the following part of this project will lead to a suggestion that the representation of the female sexuality is a clear reflection of masculine representations and that it will probably never go without embracing the male perspective. Besides, it is also clear, especially from Li Ang’s work, that the role played by other women is equally inimical to the interests of female subjectivity. From this perspective, we can say that the “return of the gaze” is more than a literary device and suggests that creative identities, relationships and answers to the issue of the modern male and female “subject” will be revealed only by going beyond presumed and narrowly conceived male/female dichotomies.

Notes

1. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970).
2. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. and intro. by Jeffrey Mehler (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 29.
3. Michel Foucault, “We ‘Other Victorians,’” *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 7.
4. See Richard Brown, “Sexual reality,” *James Joyce and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 126.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. Following Michel Foucault’s definition, I use “discourse” in this paper to refer to the ready-made concepts and politically or culturally approved terms from which people form opinions and construct their mentality. See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *Truth and Method*, pp. 76-100.
7. See Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Robert E. Hegel and Richard C. Hessney, eds., *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), and Lydia H. Liu, “The Autobiographical Self Problematic: Self-narration in the Fiction of Lu Xun and Yu Dafu,” conference paper presented at UCLA, January 12, 1991.

8. See also Rey Chow, "Loving Women: Masochism, Fantasy, and the Idealization of the Mother," *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 121-122.
9. Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., "(Re) writing the Body: the Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 8.
10. Representation of the female body in contemporary mainland Chinese literature, using a combination of mythical-poetic and magical narrative, is an extremely significant literary phenomenon, deserving of separate treatment. In mainland China, along with the economic and ideological liberation policies launched after the Cultural Revolution, a so-called "Sex Revolution" ("xing geming") or "Sex Emancipation" ("xing jiefang") movement burst forth as part of the revolt against the Maoist legacy of political and ideological suppression. In response to this movement, social and moral codes imposed on the cultural construct of "body" are once again challenged. Both male and female writers have begun enthusiastically to explore the issues of body and sex for the purposes of reconstructing the moral subject and relocating the "self" in these times of turbulent cultural and political upheaval. Aimed at such a quest for moral subjectivation and "self" formation, are novellas such as "Woman, woman, woman" ("nu-nu-nu") and "Fuxifuxi" written by male writers, Han Shaogong in 1986 and Liu Heng in 1988 respectively, and which adapt folklore as a repository for deep-seated trans-generational yearnings, exploring the social construct of the female and male bodies through an experiment with the use of "magical narrative." Marking the climax of this quest for liberation of the female body is the mainland female writer Wang Anyi's (1957-) "Love in a Little Town" ("Xiaocheng zhi lian") (1986). As a surrealist examination of the female body and sexuality in a milieu of socialist constraint and grotesque physical repression, Wang Anyi's *Trilogy of Love* (Sanlian) (1986) including "Love in a Barren Mountain" ("Huangshan zhi lian"), "Love in a Little Town" and "Love in the Jingxiu Valley" ("Jingxiugu zhi lian"), is significant for the symbolic sexual and cultural escape it articulates through the fabrication of female body and sexuality. Her surrealist works reveal an unprecedented female fixation, directed at both the male and female body, and represent an innovative deviation from the Gothic style of feminine sexuality, as presented by bourgeois women writers, such as Eileen Chang and contemporary feminist writers in Taiwan.
11. Chang has many imitators from young female writers, such as Zhong Xiaoyang, Zhu Tianwen (1956-), Zhu Tianxin (1958-), and Yuan Qiongqiong (1950) to middle-aged male writers such as Shui Jing (1935-), Zhu Xining (1927-), as well as younger male writers such as Lu Feiyi and Lin Junyin. In one form or another, these authors have adopted her fastidious attention to sensuous detail, and readers familiar with her writings can easily discern the inspiration which is the source of these later works.
12. Called the New Sensationalist School, this group was composed of urban Shanghai writers such as Shi Zhicun (1905-), Liu Naou (1900-1939), Mu Shiyong (1912-1940), Ye Lingfeng (1905-1975), Dai Wangshu' (1905-1950), Tu Heng, and Lu Yishi. They were so named because they practiced a style of fiction influenced by the Japanese "Xin kan-kaku ha" ("New Sensationalist Trend") from which they took their name, as well as the western "modernist" trend. (See Yan Jiayan, "Xin ganjue pai he xinli fenxi xiaoshuo," *Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo liupai shi*, Beijing:

- Renmin wenzue Publishing, 1989, p. 126)
13. Yan Jiayan, "Xin kanjue pai he xinli fenxi xiaoshuo," *Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo liupai shi* (Beijing: Reming wenzue Publishing, 1989), p. 126.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
 15. Mu Shiyong, "Preface," *Baijin de nuti suxiang* (Shanghai: Fuxing Bookstore, 1934), p. 1.
 16. For further analysis of the notion of "other," see Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 114-115.
 17. Mu Shiyong, "Craven 'A'," *Baijin de nuti suxiang* (Shanghai: Xiandai Bookstore, 1933), pp. 108-110.
 18. Mu Shiyong, "Baijin de nuti suxiang," *Baijin de nuti suxiang* (Shanghai: Fuxing Bookstore, 1934), p. 13.
 19. Mu Shiyong, *Baijin*, p. 17.
 20. N.J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 4.
 21. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 31.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
 28. Shui Jing, "Qianwangjing xia yi nanxing," *Zhang Ailing de xiaoshuo yishu* (Taipei: Dadi Publishing, 1973), pp. 108-110.
 29. See also Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p. 123.