The Labyrinth of Meaning: A Reading of Li Ang's (李昂) Fiction*

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In Li Ang's "The Wedding" (婚禮), the hero goes through a Kakfesque maze of passages in search of a woman who holds the meaning to his forced journey. The encounter, however, only reveals to him a world of absurdities resisting interpretation in a conventional light.

The labyrinthine search for meaning is a conspicuous theme in several pieces of Li Ang's earlier writing. The heroine in "The Flowering Season" (花季) undertakes a roundabout journey to discover the essence of romance. The hero in "A Journey To The Sea" (海之旅) makes a detour to retrieve the self in the Unconscious. The labyrinthine quest is nevertheless a leitmotif that threads through Li Ang's writings. The "ecriture labyrinthe"[1] which Shih Shu (施淑) uses to designate "The Long-distance Runner" (長跑者) is an apt expression to describe not only the earlier pieces exhibiting strong modernist influence but also later works of social and feminist concerns. Immanent in all her works is a challenge to the reader to decipher a certain meaning or a particular reading out of a maze of contradictory implications. The contradictions in the works result from a complex interplay between two dominant influences in Li Ang's writings, namely, modernism and feminism.

Criticism of Li Ang's works has generally centered around one of the following aspects: modernist influence in her earlier works and social and feminist concerns in her later works. Commentaries in each area have no doubt shed much light on the understanding of Li Ang's fiction. I, nonetheless, feel that to discover the depths and complexities in her writing, it is important not to treat Li Ang separately as a former modernist and a present

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feminist but to recognize the paradoxical relations of the two influences. What I attempt to do in this paper is to find a thread for exploring the labyrinthine relations between the modernist influence and the feminist concern in Li Ang's works.

In tracing the two influences in her works, I will adhere to Li Ang's own division of her writing into three periods.[2] The first period consists of works written mainly around 1968-9 in Lucheng. The second period comprises those written during her university study in Taipei, of which a large part was composed in 1974-5. The last period includes works finished during her stay in Canada and America, and in particular those written from 1978 to 1985 after her return to Taiwan. I will concentrate on discussing Li Ang's more recent works as they exemplify most clearly the interweaving and conflicting relations of modernism and feminism.

The short stories in the first period no doubt demonstrate the most conspicuous and immediate impact of modernism as a western literary and philosophical concept. Li Ang herself acknowledges debts to several western writers such as Camus, Kierkegaard and Kafka (Lin, 208-9). The extent of these writers' influence is easily seen in the nihilism and existential agony displayed in "The Wedding," "A Journey To The Sea" and "The Long-distance Runner"; the overwhelming atmosphere of nightmare and sense of absurdity in "Choral Singing" (混聲合唱) and "The Curvaceous Doll" (有曲線的娃娃). Li Ang's fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis is also displayed in "A Journey To The Sea," "The Long-distance Runner" and "The Curvaceous Doll."

Common to all the seven stories written in this period is the heavy reliance on symbols and imagery to create meaningful connections in the text. "The Curvaceous Doll," for instance, is constructed upon the symbol of a pair of woman's breasts. The reader's interpretation of the story is contingent upon his reading of this vital symbol. In "A Journey To The Sea," the central image of the sea provides the text with a pivot around which minor images of primitivism revolve. The scattered images of savagery such as "tribal princess," "tribal chief," "totem," "spell," "sacrifice," "bird-like language" and "skull" all gravitate towards the central image of the sea, creating an overall atmosphere of fear, mystery and sensuousness as well as a sense of life and purity. Again, the reader's responses to the imagery determine his understanding of the text. More often than not, the responses are far from being simple and homogenous due to the wide range of sometimes conflicting meanings suggested by the imagery. It has

been suggested that "the development of the structuring power of the image through its associative range" is one of the techniques exemplified in modernist writing.[3] Li Ang's use of imagery is obviously moving in this direction.

The seven stories also demonstrate an innovative spirit through experimentation with formal techniques borrowed from foreign literature and other forms of art. An explicit example is the use of montage in "Look Back At Zero" (零點的回顧). Montage is literally the technique used by the heroine in film-making. It gradually becomes the flux of her consciousness. The inner and outer worlds, the real and imaginary scenes, the past and the present are all welded together through the juxtaposition of images in different times and places. In the following paragraphs, for example, the external world merges with the internal world and cinematic representation is fused with remembrances.

> The rain was getting heavier. Raindrops hit the windshield and gathered themselves into falling streamlets. The screen immediately blurred. She started the wipers. The two scrawny iron rods began to swing regularly up and down, drawing a semi-circle. The glass gradually became clearer but was still hazy with moisture.
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> Another shot instantly came up. A screen with falling droplets misty as in a dream filled the whole space. The droplets kept flowing downwards to somewhere unknown. Afterwards, a child's hand started to wipe the glass. Some moisture was wiped off and an eye and half of the face of a girl appeared staring ahead at the camera or something beyond the glass.[4]

The glass of the windshield becomes the glass the little girl wipes and the windshield is transformed into a cinema screen. The little girl appearing in the film is a creation of the woman script-writer for the film. The girl however reappears in the mind of her creator as both an external image that enters into her consciousness and a re-assertion of the past self that haunts the woman's present. The use of montage thus creates a multi-dimensional effect in the reader's perception.

The experimentation with formal techniques and the heavy reliance on imagery very often create ambiguities in the text itself, resulting in indeterminancy of multiple explanation that may be baffling to some readers. In reading such a text, the reader has to experiment with various kinds of

possibilities just as the writer has. Although Li Ang's experimentation with form and technique has never stretched to the point of mere absurdity, the difficulties which a reader may experience in trying to arrive at a definite or single interpretation of her works have aroused some hostile responses.[5] Since modernism is a concept from the West, the difficulties posed by a work exhibiting modernist influence may be easily discarded as a failure of mere westernization. In dealing with writers who are familiar with the literature of the West, it is essential that the process of their negotiation with foreign culture be examined before deeming their innovation and efforts to search for new artistic forms as only unsuccessful imitation of western works.[6] Li Ang's writing constitutes an interesting example of a writer's attempt to select, appropriate or reject various elements in the western model for her own use on the ground of her own cultural context and social situation.

In her second period of writing Li Ang seems to swing to the reverse side of the pendulum. With the exceptions of "Song of Ospreys" (關雎) and "Moon Chase" (逐月), the stories in this period extend the solitary context of the former works to a social context. Extending her view of sex as a form of revolt against social conventions and the writing of sex as a tool to investigate the human psyche in the former period,[7] the stories in this period begin to examine the questions of sexual oppression and social taboos from the point of view of women. In the four stories known for their open discussion and bold description of sex, "The Human World" (人間世), "Last Night" (昨夜), "Late Spring" (莫春) and "The Message" (訊息), a nascent feminist consciousness which questions the social conventions and sexual attitudes of a patriarchal society emerges. As one critic keenly observes, "Li Ang has examined the frustration and harm experienced by a woman in her emotional and sexual development under the circumstances of present Taiwan society."[8] The series of Stories of Lucheng (鹿城故事) on the other hand investigate the role and position of women in the Taiwan society experiencing the changes brought by modernization.

Technically the stories of the second period are less innovative and experimental than those of the former and later periods. On the surface it even seems that Li Ang is turning her back against the influence of modernism and celebrating a return to the realistic tradition of her indigenous roots.[9] The change in form, style and content is, nevertheless, a manifestation of the same kind of creative spirit as in her former works. Li Ang has admitted that the form of writing experimented with in the earlier stories had reached "a point of saturation" and that she needed "to create

a new form and direction, to find a new language to speak" (Lin, 212). She has also expressed her belief that "a writer should only raise questions and not solve them" (Lin, 221). Similar to her earlier writings, these works are essentially quests for meanings. The heroine trapped in the maze of heterosexual and homosexual relationships in "Late Spring" experiences a sense of loss, powerlessness and helplessness not unlike the kind of anguish felt by the characters in the earlier works. The individual quest is, however, juxtaposed with a collective quest. The form of writing which formerly concentrated on the human psyche now expands to admit more elements of the external world that interplays with the working of the inner world. Li Ang's conscious search for a new voice coupled with her interest in the exploration of psychological depths leads to more experimentation in her later works.

The third period may be subdivided into two phases: 1975 to 1981 and 1982 to 1985. Li Ang was less productive in the first phase. She wrote only one story in 1975 and did not produce anything in the next two years. In 1978 she published four short stories, three of which are about the lives of Chinese women in the United States. In the three years that followed, Li Ang published another six stories which are socially-oriented. "The Last Wedding" (最後一場婚禮) is a piece of anti-war writing; "Their Tears" (她們的眼淚) is about rehabilitating juvenile prostitutes; "New and Old" (新舊) focuses on the change of social values brought about by modernization; "The Test of Life: Love" (生活試驗：愛情) questions the essence of romance and adultery; "The Turning Point" (轉折) and "Misunderstanding" (誤解) raise the issue of the confrontation between traditional and changing attitudes towards sex.

The stories in this last phase generally demonstrate a clearer stance on the part of the author with regard to feminist commitment. For instance, "Misunderstanding" denounces the sexual oppression of women in a society that practises a double standard. "The Turning Point" and "The Test of Life: Love" reveal the victimization of women by romantic illusions upheld in a society which is "a male chauvinistic phallocracy" in feminist terms.

Li Ang's best known feminist writing is the novella, *The Butcher's Wife* (殺夫), which she began writing in 1981 and published in the following year.[10] Li Ang has designated 1981 as a landmark in the development of her feminist consciousness.[11] It was around this year that she embarked on writing articles for the column "A Woman's Opinions" (婦人之見). She says in the preface of *The Butcher's Wife,* "Only until I started to write for

the column and had further consideration of women's questions then was I able to find a new and definite focus for 'A Woman Killed Her Husband,' that is, to write a 'feminist' works."[12]

She aims "to show the tragic fate that awaited the economically dependent Taiwanese women living under the rules of traditional Chinese society" through the story of Lin Shih (林市).[13] Lin Shih is traded off by her uncle in marriage with Chen Chiang-shui (陳江水). Constantly brutalized by her husband, she is finally forced to kill him to escape his abuse. Since in traditional society any woman who kills her husband is presumed to have done so because of adultery, Lin Shih is executed even though the prosecution has no proof of an extramarital affair.

The Butcher's Wife marks the height of the convergence of artistic and feminist concerns. In this work the artistic attempt to explore the human psyche is deftly welded with the feminist concern to expose the social oppression of women. In the several feminist pieces that follow, however, there frequently appears a tension between the author as artist, so intent in recreating feelings and sensations in their greatest power and the author as feminist, suggesting, and even dictating to the reader a certain perspective from which to approach the text. Li Ang's experimentation with the letter form and point of view in the four stories, "An Unsent Love Letter" (一封未寄的情書), "We Once Had" (曾經有過), "Persona" (假面) and "A Sweet Life" (甜美生活) clearly indicate the contradictory dimensions in her work which she strives to resolve.[14]

In the four epistolary stories, Li Ang faces a dual problem of how to sustain the fictional reality on the one hand and how to foreground the fictionality of this "reality" on the other. Each of the four stories consists of a letter written by a woman to her beloved. In "An Unsent Love Letter," a married woman writes to a married man for whom she has nursed an unrequited love since her younger days. At the time of her writing she has been separated from her husband and fallen in love with another man whom she feels resemble the man in her adolescent love. The letter is interpolated by an editorial voice which does not comment on the events and actions narrated in the letter but instead digresses on observations of general truths and social conditions. The main body of "Persona" is a letter written by a married woman to her lover who has ceased to love her and who is going to leave her. The letter plot is superimposed by passages about an anonymous woman writer and parts of two other letters related to her. The relationship between the letter plot and the woman writer is vaguely

suggested by a stone leopard paperweight which appears in both the superimposed letter and the passages. The other two stories are simpler in plot. "We Once Had" is composed of a letter by a woman to her lover, assuring him of her love but declaring she will not have any sexual relationship with him. "A Sweet Life" consists of a letter written by a girl to her fiance whom she will marry on the following day, expressing her doubt and fear of the emptiness behind the sweet style of bourgeois life they are going to lead together.

The narrator of each story is the letter-writer and the heroine. On the surface, all of the letters seem to be anchored in the convention of a first-person narrative, which "by its very nature purports to be genuine."[15] The deviation of these letters from the convention becomes, however, immediately apparent to the eye when they are set against each other as a collection.[16] As characters of conspicuously different identities, the addressor and addressee of each letter bear the same initials as those of another story: C. T. being the addressor and G. L. the addressee. The illusion of the letter-writer and the recipient as "real" personalities can thus no longer be sustained. The reader will therefore re-read the characters as representatives of certain classes or as types embodying certain values rather than as unique individuals. The problems encountered by the heroines in these stories thus cease to be individual problems and become representative of problems confronting women in general.

The illusion of "authenticity" is being tested and the omniscient point of view being experimented with in "An Unsent Love Letter" and "Persona." The letter in "An Unsent Love Letter" is placed within an editorial frame. The anonymous editor frequently intrudes to impose arbitrary interpolations in the narrative of the letter. Although the interspersing commentaries may seem to be detachable, the editorial omniscience is part and parcel of the mechanism of the narrative. Since Li Ang does not explicitly assign an identity to the editorial voice in "An Unsent Love Letter," the reader will tend to identify the editorial voice with the authorial voice. As no distinct difference is suggested, the editorial voice directly assumes the authority of the author in its commentary to dictate to the reader a particular reading of the letter. Abandoning the conventional panoramic and retrospective view in its privilege, this editorial voice furthermore chooses to move its vantage point alongside the letter narrative. It deviates from the conventional editorial omniscience in its refusal to make commentaries, cross-references or hints that have any bearing on the development of events.

It refrains from direct commentaries on the individual's action but instead generates impersonal and quasi-scientific generalizations based upon individual bahaviour. For instance, in between the paragraph in which C. T. reflects on the influence of romantic love stories over her adolescent mind and the following paragraph in which she recalls her initial acquaintance with G. L., the editorial voice cuts in with the following line in parentheses, "The direct, natural, necessary relation of human creatures is the relation of man to woman. The case could not be better stated" (*Love Letter*, 7). Paragraphs later when C. T. reflects on the change in her attitude towards love and marriage over the years, the editorial voice intrudes to say, "The infinite degradation in which man exists for himself is expressed in this relation to "the woman" .... The direct, natural, necessary relationship of man to man is the relationship of man to woman" (*Love Letter*, 35).

The two quotations appear bilingually in the text in both English and Chinese with an effect of presuming truths. In other places, the editor quotes sayings by Montaigne and Kierkegaard and a study by Margaret Mead. It also generalizes on the conditions of the Taiwanese society in the 80s and comments on matters such as double standards, sexual stereotypes and love. Compared with "We Once Had" in which the narrator often shifts to generalizations in the middle of her discourse, didacticism here makes less intrusion upon the natural flow of the main narrative but is made all the more dominant by formal interpolations. The device of formal interruptions succeeds in distancing the reader, making him reflect upon the author's purpose in writing and the social and sexual issues raised in the story.

In "Persona," the letter narrative is superimposed by an omniscient consciousness. The omniscient voice, however, does not directly intrude into the main narrative. In the interposed scenes, it even disguises itself as "impersonal" and "objective." These scenes are rendered in such a way as if objects were seen by a pair of coldly scrutinizing eyes. For instance, the following paragraph not only describes the surface of a table but in fact suggests the psychological state of the woman writer sitting at the table: "The rings of the wood nearly crawl over the entire surface of the table, one vein spining another, one grain leading another, endlessly tangling and winding in the dark color of the paint" (*Love Letter*, 56-7).

The descriptions of objects are strongly colored by subjective feelings. Another example is the description of tears falling on the aerogram which begins on an apparently impersonal note of "streaming tears fell on the blue

aerogram." However, it gradually takes on emotional overtones, ending suggestively with "the tears, mixed with the ink, continued to spread out like stormy water until the few words were drowned" (*Love Letter*, 57).

Although the relationship between the letter and the interposing scenes is ambiguous and indefinite, it procures a paradoxical effect on the illusion of the letter as "real." By suggesting that the letter is a fictional piece of writing created by a woman writer, Li Ang undermines the illusion of its authenticity. Yet ironically, this suggestion also makes the sentiments expressed in the letter seem more "genuine" in the sense that the reader can assume the woman writer is channeling her emotions through writing. It is at such a point that the concept of persona comes into play. The reader is prone to take C. T. as the literary persona of the woman writer. The illusion of the woman writer as a "real" character is thus preserved.

The use of point of view is more thoroughly experimented in Li Ang's second novella, *Dark Nights* (暗夜), which exposes the hypocrisy and the double standard towards sex in contemporary Taiwan society.[17] The novella depicts the complex social and sexual relationship of a group of upper middle class men and women within the commercial and academic circles of Taipei. Li Ang criticizes patriarchal values, the inequality between men and women, and the sexual oppression of women through the mouth of Chen T'ien-jui (陳天瑞). Yet this character is himself a typical product of the "false consciousness" of the patriarchal culture which he denounces. The didacticism in the novella is thus undercut by the ironic exposure of the motives of this man. Like "An Unsent Love Letter" and "Persona," "Dark Nights" is far from being just a moralistic or feminist propaganda. In the same vein as her early works, Li Ang creates a maze of contradictions out of which the reader has to construct his/her own reading.

Li Ang's more recent works may at first glance strike the reader as didactic and propagandist, yet they display the same innovative spirit as that of her earlier writing. The propensity of the feminist to moralize is balanced by the artist's belief in the autonomy of art. The foregrounding of literariness and the drive toward novelty still display the influence of modernism despite the overt feminist concerns of the later works.

In her feminist as well as non-feminist works, Li Ang challenges the conventional belief that women's writing is sentimental and trivial. Her constant quest for novelty and exploration of psychological truths creates an exciting "ecriture labyrinthine" for adventurous readers.

Notes

1. Shih Shu, "The Salt House"鹽屋, *The Flowering Season* (Hung Fan, 1985), p. 16.
2. See Yi-ji Lin 林依潔, "Rebellion and Salvation"叛逆與救贖, an interview recorded as an appendix to *Their Tears* 她們的眼淚. Li Ang expressed her agreement with the interviewer's division of her creative career into 3 phases. See *Their Tears* (Hung Fan, 1984), p. 208.
3. Margaret Davies, "Modernity and Its Techniques," *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*, edited by Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones and Albert Wachtel (Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1986), p. 158.
4. Li Ang, "Look Back At Zero," *The Flowering Season* (Hung Fan, 1985), p. 49.
5. Critics such as Ch'en Ying-hsiang 陳應湘 has criticized Li Ang as "poisoned by modernism." See "First Criticism on Li Ang" 初論李昂, *Chung-wai wen-hsueh* 中外文學 5.8 (Jan. 1977), pp. 80-1..
6. See Leung Ping-kwan, 梁秉鈞 *Aesthetics of Opposition: A Study of the Modernist Generation of Chinese Poets, 1936-1949,* Ph. D. Dissertation 1984, p. 13.
7. In "The Salt House," Shih Shu quotes Li Ang's belief of sex as "the keenest means to break through the conventional society" and her view of sex as a tool to "dig" into the human psyche. See *The Flowering Season* (Hung Fan, 1985), p. 12.
8. Wu Kang-fa 吳錦發, "A Brief Discussion on the Sexual Rebellion in Li Ang's Fiction," *The Test of Love* 愛情試驗 (Hung Fan, 1982), p. 209.
9. Some critics have denounced *The Stories of Lucheng* as a failure of Li Ang's attempt at indigenous literature. See for instance Peng Jui-chin 彭瑞金, " 'The Stories of Lucheng' under the shadow of Modernism" 現代主義陰影下的鹿城故事, *Shu-ping shu-mu* 書評書目 1977. 10, No. 54.
10. The story is based on a sensational case from Shanghai in the 1930s. In 1977 Li Ang attempted to develop the story but later abandoned the plan until she picked the idea up again in 1981, transferring the setting from Shanghai to her hometown Lugang. See "Author's Preface" in *The Butcher's Wife*, translated by Howard Goldblatt and Ellen Young (North Point Press, 1986).
11. See Li Ang, "New Explanation on Narcissism" 新納蕤思解說 incorporated as an appendix in *Dark Nights* 暗夜 (Bo Yi 1985), pp. 164-5.
12. Li Ang, *The Butcher's Wife* 殺夫 (Wen Hsüeh), p. viii.
13. Li Ang, "Author's Preface" to Goldblatt & Young's translation.
14. For a detailed discussion of the four epistolary stories, see Daisy S. Y. Ng, "Li Ang's Experiments with the Epistolary Form" to appear in the forthcoming issue of *Modern Chinese Literature.*
15. Natascha Würzbach, "Introduction," *The Novel in Letters: Epistolary Fiction in the Early English Novel 1678-1740* (University of Miami Press, 1969), p. ix.
16. All the four stories are sequentially collected in *An Unsent Love Letter* (Hung Fan, 1986), hereafter quoted parenthetically as *Love Letter* in the text.
17. The promotional blurb on the cover of the Hong Kong edition of *Dark Nights* (1985) calls the work "A feminist novel which is certain to spark controversy." Yet at the Novelists Panel at the Fifth International Conference on Literary Theory: Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature, Hong Kong, Dec. 10-16, 1987, Li Ang denied that *Dark Nights* was a feminist novel.