Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948

Yan Haiping
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Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905–1948 provides a compelling study of leading women writers in modern China, charting their literary works and life journeys to examine the politics and poetics of Chinese transcultural feminism that exceed the boundaries of bourgeois feminist selfhood.

Unlike recent literary studies that focus on the discursive formation of the modern Chinese nation state and its gendering effects, Yan explores the radical degrees to which Chinese women writers re-invented their lives alongside their writings in distinctly conditioned and fundamentally revolutionary ways.

The book draws on these women’s voluminous works and dramatic lives to illuminate the range of Chinese women’s literary and artistic achievements and offers vital sources for exploring the history and legacy of twentieth-century Chinese feminist consciousness and its centrality in the Chinese Revolution. It will be of great interest to scholars of gender studies, literary and cultural studies and performance studies.

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Yan Haiping
To Mother
and
all those whose presence has made
this book possible.
Contents

Preface                                    xii

Introduction: On Empowerment              1

1 Unseen Rhythms, Sea Changes            12

2 Qiu Jin and Her Imaginary              33

3 The Stars of Night                      69

4 Other Life                              100

5 War, Death, and the Art of Existence    135

6 Rhythms of the Unreal (I)              168

7 Rhythms of the Unreal (II)             200

Afterword: Then and Now                   241

Notes                                     243

Index                                     290
I was working through my old notebooks where passages taken from aleatory readings transcribed there looked like the wreckage of a vanished ship, or a world. Glancing over some pages, I encountered a passage that has become intelligible over the years:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Walter Benjamin, *Illumination*, pp. 257–258)

Then I saw a large question mark, next to this passage, that I myself had drawn. I paused.

YHP, 2006
Introduction
On Empowerment

“I am weak and therefore I am strong.”

Bing Xin, 1919

This book revisits a Chinese revolutionary feminist legacy through an encounter with a group of seminal twentieth century Chinese women writers at the point of intersection of their print works and life passages. Informed by, but unlike works in recent literary studies that focus on the discursive formation of modern Chinese nation state and its gendering effects, I am centrally interested in the radical degrees to which Chinese women writers re-invented their lives along with their writings, each in her distinctly conditioned and fundamentally revolutionary way. I trace their literary scenes and lived trajectories as intertwining loci of their innovative struggles to navigate the force fields of a violent history while aspiring to women’s empowerment. As my discussion develops, I inquire how such struggles by women in print and in life may invite us to re-think aspects of twentieth century China and the Chinese revolution.

In the Debris of History

Scholars and historians have long discussed how the specter of Chinese revolution had its rise from a time of chaos in the decades following the British Opium War of 1840 and subsequent imperialist incursions. It is indicative that, by 1900, Western powers including czarist Russia and Japan, had established claims on thirteen out of eighteen Chinese provinces. For the Chinese, the imperatives of “becoming modern” emerged out of a state of emergency. The 1911 revolution made visible the magnitude of the challenges but produced no viable solutions. As the land was being physically torn asunder, early twentieth century writers portrayed a traumatized China on the world stage and inscribed it with the bodily image of the defeated, humiliated, and the possibly doomed. Walter Benjamin’s figuration of modern history as “a field of wreckages” and modern humanity as “a pile of debris” can be taken in this context as literally accurate as it is socio-psychically evocative.

It is then not incidental that the bodies of the dying and the dead inhabit the pages of modern Chinese women’s writings with a disturbing frequency. They
designate a material condition of Chinese society as much as a horizon of those women’s critical imagination. Qiu Jin’s evocation of women warriors who died in battle, Lu Yin’s delineation of mass refugees drowned in river flood, Xiao Hong’s rendition of peasants who starved to death and whose bodies scattered across rural China are only a few most obvious examples. Bing Xin, long standardized by literary historians into a “feminine” author specializing in transcendental “motherly love,” brings into her writing a world of premature deaths of children, particularly female children, in the midst of quiet daily trials and tribulations as much as open crossfires of spreading wars. Such fictional figures or journalist scenes are accompanied by remembrances of actual persons that those women knew as personal friends, literary fellow-travelers, political comrades, and life companions. Ding Ling’s “Songs of Death” (Sizhige), an autobiographical prose work, can be read as figuring a tumultuous world that she and her contemporary women inhabited. After describing in detail her earliest memory that registers the disintegration of the Chinese gentry-household, that of her father’s funeral, she concludes: “It was the beginning of my nebulous consciousness about life, where I knew death. How fearful death was! My entire childhood was spent from then on in following my mother and her struggle, each day on the edge of death.”

As discussed in the last two chapters of this book, Ding Ling spent not only her childhood but also the subsequent decades “on the edge of death,” as did other women gathered in this book, each through her respective passage, literally and figuratively. Many women writers and artists died young in the period studied here. Qiu Jin died in Shaoxing at age thirty-two in the last years of the rule of the Qing court; her poem “On the Eve of My Death” (Zhi xü xiaoshu jiëming ci) is an anticipatory mourning of her own demise. Shi Pingmei died in Beiping of encephalitis at age twenty-six and abruptly ended the influential journal that she was editing, The Wilde Rose (Qiangwei zhoukan). Lu Yin died in labor at the age of thirty-four in the city of Shanghai then under Japanese military attack. Amid Blood and Fire (Xüe yü huo), her final, major novel about the resistance against the Japanese invasion, was left half done. And Xiao Hong, after giving birth to a dead baby amid war refugees, managed to go on living for only eighteen more months. While writing Tales of Hulan River (Hulan he zhuan), a major novella, recalling her birthplace, she died of medical mal-surgery at age thirty-one in British Hong Kong under Japanese military occupation. If social disruption affected those and other women in different ways and to different degrees over the first three decades of the twentieth century, the 1937–1945 Sino-Japanese War ripped each of them from their precarious arrangements of life and rendered them all refugees on Chinese soil. “Time is being wrecked,” Zhang Ailing wrote in occupied Shanghai, “wreckages of larger magnitude are coming.” A cursory look at those women’s lives cut-short or displaced repeatedly over the decades, leaving so many stories half-written and book projects unfinished, should caution us to pause and compel us to ponder the defining conditions of their lives and works, or their lifeworks. Only when we situate those lifeworks in their pertinent context – a time and place where death and particularly female death became daily routine – can we even begin to approach their
lifeworks embodying human struggle for survival in the midst of the debris of history, one of “blood and tears” as Qiu Jin puts it.

The Gender of “the Weak”

An exploration into such terrain is not only cognitively but emotionally challenging, for the explorer must confront barely concealed extreme brutality. This time has another expression frequently found in modern Chinese writings: an age of “ruorou qiangshi,” which can be roughly translated as “the weak (ruo) become prey (rou); the strong (qiang) devour the weak (shi).”12 For contemporary feminist scholars in a wide range of literary studies and critical theory, the categories of “the weak” and “the strong” are evocative. Writing from the context of European history, Joan Scott, Margaret Ferguson and Sidonie Smith, for instance, have in their respective ways articulated how, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a newly sexualized female soul gradually displaced the theologically unsexed soul of the Medieval Period and Renaissance.13 Anne Fausto-Sterling, Sandra Harding, and Denise Riley among others have delineated how such “theological revision” crowded out the “autonomous soul” while developing a feminized conception of Nature in her place, with which the “lack” of the human cognition or thinking faculty is made out to be “the natural” attribute of “the sexualized female soul.” As embodiment of this “lack,” the female sex is then marked as the bioevidence of “the bottom of a subject,” the “naturally weaker,” against which the male subject is established as the “stronger.”14 Indeed, “the strong man” in European languages, particularly English, has become since the seventeenth century a frequent designation for one whose physical strength is emblematic of mental and moral faculties, which entitles him to possession of social, political, financial, military, and other institutional powers.15 Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous (or infamous) mapping of the inherent rhythms of “the stronger” and “weaker” registers the implied power relations between the male and female sexes so designated, as a “beyond good and evil” inevitability: “Is it virtuous when a cell transforms itself into a function of a stronger cell? It has to do so [Sie muss es]. Is it evil when the stronger cell assimilates the weaker? . . . Joy and desire appear together in the stronger that wants to transform something into its function; joy and the wish to be desired appear together in the weaker that wants to become a function.”16

This characterization of the weaker-stronger binary as the natural condition of the modern subject formation reveals a social structure that is also a biopolitical economy of desire and sexuality. The “stronger” is the force of active masculinity whose “essence” lies in his assimilating others into functions that serve to promote his desired expansion as the subject. The “weaker” is the body of passive femininity whose “nature” lies in her “wish” to be desired and assimilated into functions of the “stronger.”

Such biopolitical ideas were brought into China when the modern European canon was translated into Chinese in a period of compressed time in the early twentieth century.17 My study pays specific attention to the term “ruozhe” (“the
weak”) and the ways in which it appears and recurs with figurative variations in modern Chinese women’s literature while becoming a component of modern Chinese vocabulary. As late as in the year 2000, the inaugural issue of a women’s publication in Beijing entitled Chinese Women’s Culture (Zhongguo nüxing wenhua) carries a range of articles that tackle the question of “ruozhe” as female-bodied, an indicative phenomenon which I revisit in my Conclusion.18 Twentieth century scholars in China, the U.S., and around the globe have long been engaged in critically unpacking the “natural binary” between the “weaker” and “stronger” sexes along with its implementation in codes of law, social policies, cultural norms, and organizing principles of institutions in relation to the historical operation of the modern nation state.19 For some the categories of gender and sexuality are central to a politics that takes the “biology” of the “weaker sex” as “destiny,” while others explore the various dimensions of such “bio-destiny” in ways that at once deploy and exceed the categories of gender and sexuality. Chandra Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander, Lisa Lowe and many more work through the gendered and sexed effects of socially arranged power relations to connect them with other seemingly discrete scenes of human pain across old and new geopolitical and biopolitical boundaries. Their “third-fourth world feminist projects,” so conceived, argue for engagements and confrontations with the conditions of “multiply oppressed women” not only due to their gender and sex but their race, ethnicity, class, and nationality.20

Some theorists have questioned the efficacy of the adjective “feminist” for such projects since they seem to de-center the category of gender and sexuality by enlisting so many problems at once without a coherent analytical perspective and pertinent “feminist” focus.21 Others, including a number of leading twentieth century Chinese women writers, have questioned the designation “feminist” itself for the reason that it does not apply to what they consider central to their works and lives, such as anti-colonial struggles or multi-forms of resistance to the perpetuation of global inequality.22 While a mountain of works has been produced in response to such questioning, what has been questioned remains in need of further theoretical reckoning.23 Such reckonings are beyond the scope of this book, while it is hoped that this book may be of use for them. Suffice it to say here that those “third-fourth world feminist projects” evoke a profound concern that is also an analytical center of gravity, pulling otherwise empirically disparate works and scattered issues into a significant constellation. The concern extends to all forms of human oppression in modern history. When those projects situate “the question of the weaker sex” at the intersection of the national, ethnic, racial, class, and colonial questions, they implicitly gesture toward what I call “the question of the weak” (ruozhe) that is central to the Chinese women’s imaginative writings and their actual lives examined in this book: the lifeworks where the predilections of the “weaker sex” are so figured that they are not only inextricably linked with but also paradigmatically evocative of the “destiny” assigned to the variously marginalized, exploited, displaced or dispossessed as “prey of the strong” in modern history, regardless of their actual sex. As specified throughout this book, such figurations in their irreducible variations and resilient fecundity
are not simply metaphorizations of the gender-specific problem into what has been called an “unhappy marriage” between feminism and Marxism or the leftist politics of the twentieth century in general. Rather, they point to and in effect amount to a revolutionary feminist impetus that moved and motivated the struggles of the “multiply oppressed” in a multiply inscribed semicolonial Chinese context to shift and alter their conditions as imaginative embodiments of potential alternatives for human existence, in print as in life.

Bioethnic Politics and Feminist Empowerment

Those Chinese women aspired to no less than a transformation of their destiny, in a volatile historical conjuncture where the imperial regime was disintegrating while its codes were still operative in society, and the “modern forces” were ascending while their implications were by no means clear or clearly women-friendly. This book probes how, without knowing any methods to open up social spaces for themselves, women at the turn of the century stepped out of the known boundaries of their “natural place” in the geographies of social arrangements. They established, publicly, women’s societies, women’s academies, and women’s newspapers and journals, while traveling in and beyond China, some extensively, in Japan, the U.S., Russia, and Europe. As a woman writer observed in 1909: “Since the Wuxu Reform Movement . . . [brave women] have left their parents, crossed the oceans, and traveled through Europe and America, often in groups!” Chen Xiefen, the founder of the second earliest Chinese women’s journal, published an article in *Shanghai Women’s Paper* (*Shanghai nüxüebao*) in 1903 where she took such boundary-crossing activity as the passage in the making for “modern Chinese women.” Arguing against “waiting” for social change, Chen writes: “The wonderfully rich Chinese phrase ‘jinli’ [making efforts to the best of one’s ability] is in contrast with the concept of ‘dengdai’ [waiting] . . . and ‘yongxin’ [putting one’s heart into such efforts] is the core of ‘jinli’.”

With such efforts, those women of mostly gentry backgrounds left their cloistered inner chambers and turned into traveling writers, publishers, activists, agitators, organizers of public events and social movements for women. Qiu Jin, the towering figure of modern Chinese women’s literary and social revolution was among those early women whose boundary-crossing activity formed a female-bodied social matrix for an emergent Chinese feminist imagination. The next two chapters explore those barely discernible patterns of such emergent imagination as forming dynamics and features of writing Chinese women in relation to the Chinese revolution. The other chapters trace such dynamic features in a body of literary scenes and life scenarios by working through their immense variety to converge in a designation of how those women in the first half of the twentieth century made the differential force fields of their given conditions visible in the midst of their crossings of the given social boundaries. More importantly, they not only mapped those force fields that defined their “places” in culture and society but also unmasked the workings of the logic of such definition itself. While Qiu Jin famously pointed out such “places” as that of
“lifelong prisoners” and “slaves on earth,” and aired her anger at the “weakness” of women who seemed to accept such arrangements of their life and humanity without “any sense of being insulted,” others probed the often hidden workings of those social forces that coerced women’s “weakness” in a specific way. Zhang Zhujun, another woman activist since the 1910s, for instance, concludes as follows after she detailed “dangers” that “women face under their present condition” in one of her well-known essays on issues about women’s learning and security:

Some have asked whether it is due to their born fate that women are fixed in such a dangerous situation; or is it due to humanly composed forces that they so suffer? My reasoning shows that the latter is more accurate; half of our problems result from those who maintain their power in domination and the other half result from women themselves giving up on making efforts to make changes happen. . . . Not knowing how to learn and how to organize, women remain uninformed about the world and appear to be indifferent to others who share the same dangers, sufferings, and struggles. Our way of moving beyond such ignorance and disconnection [which have been regarded as women’s particular weakness] is to learn and learn to organize ourselves.

An open call to arms for women’s mobilization at one level, Zhang Zhujun here also touched on a feature of those “humanly composed forces” that involves something more than material oppression. A double operation through which “humanly composed forces” “fixed” women in a social place marked out for the dominated, and inscribed them as the “born” inferior cognitively, morally, and socio-politically—in other words, as “the naturally weak.”

Several years later, Lu Yin, a leading woman writer of the May Fourth era, also touched on this double operation when she observes the social workings of Darwinian logic of “natural selection” and the production of “the inferior-superior” or “weak-strong” binary:

Since Darwin’s theory on the origins of the species has appeared in this world, “victory to the superior and defeat to the inferior” (yousheng liebai) has come to be claimed as a natural theorem; and “the weak are the prey of the strong” (ruorou qiangshi) has come to be regarded as the necessary tendency of history. Competition among human beings has escalated as such theorems and necessities are promoted. The intensity of such promotion seems to say that, if the elimination of the inferior through competitive selection were not achieved, the human species could never be improved. . . . Human lives, from then on, have been made as instrumentalized puppets on stage and passive pieces of a machine!

In Lu Yin’s rendition, the natural theorem of “victory to the superior and defeat to the inferior” (“yousheng liebai”) or the historical necessity of “the weak are the
prey of the strong” (“ruorou qiangshi”) has nothing humanly “natural” or “necessary” about it. What is at work therein is a retrospective logic, human-made and socially promoted or enforced, that functions to fixate the defeated as the inherently inferior and define the prevailing aggressors as the naturally superior. Searching into the richness of Chinese women’s written and life stories since the 1890s, this book shows how those women confront, each in her complex ways, such retrospective logic at work in the thick of the arranged human hierarchy as a deployment of double violence. In the terms of such deployment, the living bodies that are variably violated, appropriated, or destroyed must bear their second sentence announced with the category of “the weak,” standing as witnesses to the naturalness of their coerced “inherent” identity and imposed “inevitable” destiny. I call such social operation of double violence bioethnic politics, a regime of intelligibility that renders lived histories of Chinese women as those of “life-prisoners” and “slaves on earth” into the very evidence of their state of natural being and imminent becoming, a material body and signifying trope of the socially weakened or destroyed as bioethnically destined “weak species.”

The ways in which the category and problem of “the weaker sex-cum-weak species” are figured in those Chinese women’s writings as an unflinching measure of such double sentencing are taken hereby as the focus of this book. So are the ways in which those women writers contest and foil such double violence, which amounts to a register of a feminist empowerment of the “weak species” central to the making of modern Chinese cultural consciousness. One of the emblematic examples can be found in Ding Ling’s novella “New Faith” (Xing xinnian), which is discussed in the last chapter of this book. Suffice to say here that, written in 1939, this novella is about the revolutionary energy and/or anticipatory powerfulness of an old village woman, “Granny,” who was gang-raped by Japanese soldiers. To survive, Granny must dislodge herself and her world of the Chinese villagers from the double violence that inscribes her as the “dirtied-broken-weak” human foil for the modern “strong” to stage their claimed status. She must confront a regime of intelligibility that fixates her as a living sight of horrid shame. Such a dislodging process for survival requires much more than “writing back,” namely, inscribing the “shame” onto the “strong” that proclaim their rape of peoples, countries, continents as humanly natural and historically necessary. She must bring about a transformation of herself to undo her internalization of the logic of bioethnic politics that coerces painful acceptance of the rapist forces as “the strong” and fixates her “wretched body” as a material document of “the weak” even in her own eyes. The disavowed sense of shame about “her misfortune” that is festering and suppurating in those closest to her, namely her sons, families, fellow villagers, really the human fabrics of her lifeworld including herself, indicates the scope and depth of such transformation. My final chapter probes how, in Ding Ling’s novella, Granny brings about this transformation in such a disturbingly powerful way that it far exceeds familiar vocabularies about war-time rape, women as embodiment of victimhood, or figurative trope of catastrophe calling for vengeance or redemption.
The power of Granny recurs in women’s works and their life stories gathered here with intricate variations. Centrally featured and leveraged by the bodies of the “weaker sex,” it evokes a paradigmatic empowerment of the “weak species” whose paradoxical resilience is the heart of modern Chinese women’s literature and the center of gravity of its imagination.34 Bing Xin’s epigram of this profound paradox comes to my aid as it speaks to their lifeworks with penetrating acumen: “I am weak and therefore I am strong.”35

Rhythms of the Unreal: Sites of Living Legacy

Imagination as such is usually understood as an active energy that does not constitute material reality. Yet considering the human bodies that breathe with it, imagination does not have to and indeed should not be conflated with the purely imaginary. Fictional writings are after all not simply productions of falsehood. Ding Ling’s fictional works for instance evoke the actual existences of human ruin and social wreckage including in particular multiply ravished women in the history of the war, with such an imagination that empowers them to become sites of possible transformative relations as potential agencies. Such empowerment of the otherwise “naturally” powerless that move and motivate the lines of writings, as scholars of Chinese history have traced, did occur in the lives of actual women throughout different moments of twentieth century China, over and again, as evinced in part in the life passages paved by the women writers studied here. The following chapters explore how those women confronted their personal crises that were also registers of structural changes in China as in the world. By various ways, they refused to take social stipulations for “the weaker sex” and scripts for the “weak species” as their bioethnic destiny, survived the force fields of double violence, and stayed on in the tumultuous social movements while working through the yearnings of their times: in print or in the streets, on theater stages and cinema screens, at university lecture halls, public forums or conferences, as well as in prison cells, popular rallies, and armed uprisings.36 As social individuals and as a group in society, their struggles for survival amount to no less than acts of charting unknown waters and opening up passages of “normally” impossible possibilities.

Appearing in this book with the literary figures who are “weak and therefore strong,” specifically, are the unprecedented public expressions of writing women. Active throughout the first half of the twentieth century, these women range from the activists of the 1890s in the Constitutional Reform, Qiu Jin and her female comrades in the 1911 revolution, Bing Xin, Lu Yin, and others of the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s, Bai Wei and women soldiers in the Northern Expedition of the late 1920s, Yuan Changying, Xiao Hong, and Wang Ying in the War of Resistance against the Japanese Invasion in the 1930s and the 1940s, and Ding Ling in the literary movements of the 1920s and the Chinese revolution since the 1930s. The imaginative empowerment of the prescribed powerless and their counterparts in actual life dialogically inform, engender, and underlie one another throughout the history of the modern Chinese women’s
social movement and their literary writings, amid protracted socioeconomic crises and disintegration, civilizational collapse, and endless eruptions of globally interlocked violences. The potency of Ding Ling’s fictional figures such as the gang-raped “Granny” and her gained agency, like other female-bodied figures occurred in women’s works discussed here, is explored as the key to the modern tales of Chinese women and their feminist imagination. This points to an immense legacy of a ravished humanity struggling for survival that inherently challenges and finally bursts her bioethnic “destiny.”

This empowerment of a powerless humanity seems un-measurable in the bioethnic terms of modern classification, and hence often appears to be one of modernity’s “best kept secrets.” It tends to be simultaneously enlisted and elided in the chronicles of modern times as well as its commentaries. A growing range of scholars in the arts and humanities, such as those that specialize in theater and performance studies, have been reprising critical legacies such as those of Merleau-Ponty and others, while proposing the notion of “embodiment” as a key term for critical inquiry into culture and politics, as well as history. Foregrounding the concept not as a term for “clothing a spirit with body or giving concrete forms or expressions to ideas,” theater scholar and theorist Erika Fisher-Lichte, for instance, posits embodiment in such a way that it “means the very process of bringing these two worlds [i.e. the spirit and body] together.” Prominent materialist feminist scholars in performance studies foreground the idea of the female body in relation to her live vibrations on the theater stage and everyday arenas, thereby unpacking the material forces and symbolic implications inscribed, re-functioned, or re-enacted therein. What is important to my book is the fact that such prepositions enable one to raise questions, within the specific context of scholarly discussion in the English language about twentieth century Chinese women writers, pertinent to the actual life passages that those women paved or the actions taken in relation to their imaginative writings. If one begins with the methodological argument that “whatever cultural activity or product we have... whether it is a spirit, or an idea, [it] cannot be conceived of independent of the body. It is always embodied” as Fisher-Lichte puts it, one can and must trace the scenes and occurrence of those women’s real life acts and bring them into a constellation with their literary writings.

This constellation designates the terrain of a methodological distinction, as a dialectic motion at work. On the one hand, what is unreal in the form of the imaginative writings appears here to be form-giving traces evocative of the real dynamics of their writers’ female bodies as lived passages in life. On the other hand, what is real in terms of those writers’ life passages appears here to be imaginative configurations of the vanishable mortals central to the active energies of their fictional works that remain physically in the actual world after the mortals have vanished. An unreal and yet undeniable presence located in the connection or intersection between their fictional writings that continue to exist into the twenty-first century and their actual bodies that have all disappeared into the past, in other words, engenders and inherits such a terrain. As if rhythms of the unreal, such a presence designates the site for my exploration into the specific
ways in which those women’s writing and living are shaped up as mutually consti-
tutive and transforming processes, giving rise to an imaginative making of a real
humanity. Such rhythms of the unreal cannot be adequately traced through word-
centered and linguistic-leveraged terms bound up with the vocabulary of Western
metaphysics and its many self-consciously “revolving” critiques. Conditioned by if
not following the word-centered paradigms of postmodern theory, a range of
contemporary studies of Chinese women writers also posits its operation on the
linguistic dimension of all historical materials that marginalize the living bodies of
those women and their writings, incapable of addressing the question of how
those living bodies in motion actualize different social impetus and enable
scenarios of cultural traditions that are irreducible and incommensurable to –
while persistently haunting – textual-cum-discursive evidences. The emphasis on
the semiotic itself demarks its limit, either in the version of semiotics that claims
the inclusion of the problem of embodiments or in the version of semiology as
operating on the terrain above the body only; the former marginalize and the
latter bypass the body actual. In the context of this study, it is not so much being
mistaken as it is limiting to center-stage the play of the linguistics. The creativity
and creation of modern Chinese women writers cannot be adequately
approached without bringing into the center of analytical focus the actual
changes they made in and with their lived life to survive and inhabit an otherwise
uninhabitable time. The lifework of Qiu Jin, as discussed in Chapter 2 in detail,
is a case in point. Qiu Jin is often skirted in linguistic-leveraged studies for her
work in print form is “thin” in terms of quantity compared with other women
authors. Yet any study of writing Chinese feminists is inadequate if Qiu Jin is
marginalized let alone excluded. Her significance begins to show when her
writing, an innovative force in the formation of twentieth century Chinese
women’s literature, is traced as inseparable from her radical reconfigurations of
her physical body. As a battlefield for re-imagining and re-making modern
Chinese womanhood and femaleness, such a body in reconfiguration is both
evocative of and central to women’s struggles to reposition themselves in the world of
the modern at the turn of the century. Her act of unbinding her feet and literally
restoring their deformed bones to their irrecoverable former shape is one of
those non-textual details that caution us to take what she said about her poems
seriously if not literally. The words in her poems about women’s radical re-
formation, she wrote in 1904, “are stains of blood and tears.”43 Indeed, “blood
and tears” are insisted upon and evoked as the resources or really the physical
sources for imaginative writings by all the women writers encountered here. The
recurrence of such evocation makes one pause and ponder how to feel, touch,
see, and dialogue with what stirs therein, not only as an instrumental intimation
of the limit of our discursive articulations with printed words, but more as a
reverberation from the past through the present as if moving and rising in our
own human constitutions. Such real blood and tears cannot be seen just as their
actual various bodies cannot be in those women’s writings at the time or in their
many reprints over the decades. Yet their painful potency haunt the written
words just as the centrally felt impulses at work in such words evoke those once
lived bodies and their life passages, at once present to and invisible in any representational schematizations of life scenes or history scenarios.

The intersections between such present invisibles and invisible presences are the sites that configure the subject and demarcate the body of my study. Or more accurately put, they are the energies with which my book is engendered, not as a positivist record of their unmediated existence in an authentic past, but as an act in itself to trace, feel, as well as inhabit those recurrent rhythms of the unreal, defying of the bioethnically posited rubrics and categories of modern intelligibility. What I revisit here is incommensurable with the more general post-modern attempt, in Nietzschean or Heideggerian fashions, to collapse the Hegelian binary between the “real” and the “unreal” by positing a doubling of the “two sides” on the terrain of the metaphysical absence of “the real” itself. Rather, the “unreal” is based on a specific historical phenomenon charged with human rhythms instead of a key problematic of Western metaphysics. It refers to what does humanly exist (hence is not “absent”) but is denied of recognition (hence is closer to the notion of “lack”) at material and symbolic levels involving, fundamentally, the question of power relations operating through modern regimes of intelligibility.

Hannah Arendt once defined “the unclassifiable ones” as “those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.” I would recast the gist of her line in a more enabling turn. The unclassifiable ones that do not seem to fit the existing rubrics and mechanisms of cognition or to introduce other regimes of recognition also do many things. They issue imperatives to find ways to allow potential actuality and transformative appearances of the denied lives, as sources for opening alternative horizons of seeing and being. They work through our minds and invite us to open ourselves to their undeniable rhythms of their unreal presence. This book is my way to open myself up as a dialogical witness to and an active receiver of such unintelligible-cum-unclassifiable rhythms. It is hoped that this attempt may indicate how much such rhythms inform and transform our assumptions about what it meant then and could mean today to be “modern,” “women,” “Chinese,” and “feminist” in one of the most embattled theaters of the twentieth century and beyond.

Such a witnessing of the rhythms of the unreal presumes the role of the scholar-historian as a reflectively participatory agency in the process, the implication of which is revisited briefly in the Afterword.
1 Unseen Rhythms, Sea Changes

What is it? What is it? It is the life and death turning point for us women as for China.

Chen Xiefen, 1904

You are so fortunate to have found yourselves in such a moment; you are so unfortunate to have only such a moment to find!

Ya Lu (Liu Yazi), 1904

In her narrative script for a southern-style performance (tanci) written in 1904, Qiu Jin arranges a scene in a gentry household wherein the father is engaged in a conversation with an elder cousin who tutors his son. The teacher first reports on the scholarly merits of his pupil and then proposes to offer his pupil’s younger sister the same schooling: “She is highly intelligent and has been learning to read and write remarkably well.” The father replies with questions: “What’s the use of such study to a girl, since it’s impossible for her to bring glory to the family like a man? Even if she were endowed with eight bushels of talent, when did the government ever establish official exams for women?” Those questions implicitly confirm recent feminist historiography that explicates how elite Chinese women gained high level of literary cultivation in “the high Qing period” (1683–1839) with a developed female writing tradition behind them that can be traced as early as Tang Dynasty. The Confucian teaching that “virtuous women are those who do not have literary talent” in this sense ironically invalidates any assumption that women by their bioethnic definition lack the thinking and writing faculty. The father’s objection is not based on any notion that marks “femaleness” as such inherent lack. Rather, he points to the unavailability of institutions whereby women’s learning may gain social values. The problem about women’s reading and writing, then, is a problem about the structures of institutional recognition, mechanisms of regulatory rewards, and arrangements of social worth.

Qiu Jin was then an emerging woman writer, revolutionary activist, and a member of the numerically small group of women students in Tokyo. She witnessed how militant elite women partook in social upheavals across the
country since the 1898 Constitutional Reform, precipitating hostility from the hard core of the gentry. Schools for girls set up by European and Euro-American missionaries in China since 1844 had been growing, their impact on society though was as uncertain as it was unsettling. Those Chinese who took the idea of women’s public education seriously, meanwhile, found themselves in predicaments. The first Chinese school for women founded by reformers in Shanghai in 1898, Shanghai Women’s Public Academy (Shanghai nüzi gongxüe), for instance, was closed down in 1900 under political pressures and financial difficulty.

Women who dared to found and head schools were besieged. The tragedy of Ms. Huixing is a case in point. A Manchu from Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, Ms. Huixing attracted public notice when she sold her property and jewelry to found a women’s school. She committed suicide on November 25, 1905, leaving a letter explaining that when the funds promised by official and private patrons were inexplicably discontinued, her efforts to find support were met with not only refusal but gendered slander. Since “this is the first women’s school in the city of Hangzhou, no woman would dare again to found and run schools for women if I let it fail,” she wrote, “I exchange my life for public opinion to help it survive.”

Such scenes indicate the magnitude of the challenge that those women must confront in their attempt to find social space and institutional articulation for women, and how such challenge gave a distinctive definition to their acts of reading and writing. Indeed, those women distinguished themselves from their literary predecessors. They were no longer “talented women” (cainü) housed in the cloistered inner chambers (guifang) of the gentry family with however extensive a reach over literary venues. Rather, they had become “learned” and “learning” women whose effort amounted to a revolutionary program to remake themselves and their social relations. This status, which was highly fluid or precisely because of its fluidity, asserted their cultural and political presence beyond the structure of gentry family which was foundational to the imperial system while the system was itself in total crisis. The destruction of the first Chinese navy in the war with Japan in 1895, the failure of the Constitutional Reform of 1898, and the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion Movement by Eight-Allied-Forces in 1900 were all catastrophic events for China. The effect of these events was to place the country on the brink of becoming another Poland, Burma, or India in colonial subjugation, where “native women” were re-made only to be the “slaves next to the [native male] slaves” to the colonial masters. The imperial decree issued by the precarious Manchu court in August 1905, that abolished the centuries-long system of civil examination, not only resulted in the formal loss of Chinese male gentry’s privilege and the institutional foundation upon which they built their career, livelihood, and authority. It was also constitutive of the fundamental disintegration of a civilization. Such civilizational disintegration did not automatically give rise to women’s gain in terms of institutional articulation. Rather, Chinese women found themselves in a double state of emergency where they were suffering the retaliation from the hard core of the gentry and caught up in a historical confluence of violent fluidity.
Bioethnic Convicts: An Anatomy

Without ready-made maps for navigating such historical rupture, those Chinese women seized the moment and made it into a social opening by reflecting upon their own lives through public writing. Imagining an institutional space for women’s appearance amid a civilizational collapsing, they gestured toward a reading public as the human dynamics of such space in the making. Women’s publications appeared in waves from 1897 to 1919. A total of fifty-four women’s journals were published during these years; forty-seven of which appeared between 1905 and 1912. Half of those had their base in Shanghai and others had headquarters in Guangzhou, Tokyo, Beijing, Chengdu, and Hong Kong, quickly gathering a group of women authors largely from the gentry-class background. That most of those women’s public journals appeared in China’s coastal areas or treaty ports and many were initiated overseas right after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and throughout the Reform Movement (1897–1898) may interest scholars specializing in the problem of the “West-East” encounters or the dialectic of modernity. What centrally concerns me here is how those publications afford us some of the earliest materials produced by Chinese women when they articulated themselves with distinctive feminist impulses. Women’s Paper for Learning (Nüxüebao), one of the earliest, was founded by Chen Xiefen in 1902. Women authors Du Qingchi, Jiang Suixing, Wang Heqing, and more made themselves known by writing, theoretical essays (lunshuo), public speeches (yanshuo), women’s history (nüjie jinshi), literary writings and poetry (cihan), and personalized correspondence with readers (chisu), where their imaginations for a “modern China” were engendered with an impetus to alter women’s social status and forms of being. In her article On independence (“Duli pian”), one of the earliest documents in Chinese women’s feminist thought, for example, Chen Xiefen evoked the issue of “traditional” women’s formation as the bodily site where her envisioning of a “modern China” was shaped up through a critical analysis of the lives of women and a call for radical change of such lives:

Practices such as piercing the female ears for inserting metal earrings, and binding the female feet for marking the crippled sex, are manifestations of the elementary phase of the social law of corporal punishment (chuji xingfa). Those who refuse to be punished will be forced into submission, with cries of pain and tears of agony going unheard and unseen. The second phase of the social law of corporal punishment (ciji xingfa) is matchmaking that regards women’s own feelings as irrelevant. Wedded to strangers without any consideration for their feelings and wishes. When the promised husband dies before the marriage, the woman is forced to remain “widowed.” Let us not even talk about the servant girls, whose labor is enslaved and whose bodies are bought and sold like cows, horses, pigs, and chickens! (my italics)

The class-differential forms of social injustice are rendered here as a gender-specific problem of women’s oppression. In Chen Xiefen’s eyes, while the “servant girls”
are openly dehumanized, the gentry women are penalized in culturally naturalized ways. When her social value is marked with her bound feet and pierced ears, she turns into a gender-specific “beauty” which is an effect of male-gendered masochistic desire and a signifier of the status of the gentry family in Chen’s critical examination.17 Unpacking such effect and signifier, Chen focuses on how the female body is crippled literally for life and confined to a life of social un-freedom as the naturally given form of existence for the crippled, an in effect “social punishment in two phases.” Her “own feelings and wishes,” along with the possibility of her being a subject, are written off by the way of her bodily deformation as a designation of her given function. Chen Xiefen regards such an operation performed on women as “particularly against human feeling and reason (qingli)” as it renders their body into a witness to their own being as emptied of self-defining humanity and in need of a lifelong arrangement of dependency. While unpacking the double violence at work here that cripples the woman and marks her into a sign of proper and desirable womanhood, Chen discloses the pain of such “beauty” as the “crippled sex,” a painful scene of the gendered arrangement of human relations operative in and emblematic of the power structures of the imperial Chinese regime.

Che Xiefen’s indictment of this double violence as “against human feeling and reason” is discernibly evocative of the humanist discourse of the Enlightenment and its concept of reason. Such citations were common in the works by leading Chinese reformers and modernizers at the time; yet irreducible differentiations internal to the citational acts are noteworthy. It is striking that a wide range of writings by women including Chen Xiefen foregrounded the bodily suffering of “the crippled sex,” whereas volumes written by most male leaders enlisted such “crippled” body as an expression of the mental or cognitive state of the “traditional Chinese woman.” Chinese women were rendered into social tropes of the “most unenlightened,” “idiotic,” and “useless Chinese females who only know how to use up wealth and have no idea about how to produce wealth for their family as for their nation” (zhizhi yongli, buzhi shengli).19 A regime of modern intelligibility was ushered therein, in the light of which the value of humanity was now hinged on her re-assigned function harnessed to the acquisition of “the wealth” of “nations” as “enlarged families.”20 Such a regime turned women’s bodies, once packaged for the reproduction of the male-centered genealogy of kinship and traditional hierarchy, into evidences of their incapability of being functionally “modern” or their culpability of being the “origins of troubles” and sights of a “backward” nation in danger of being annihilated by the “modern world of competitive nations” and justly so according to its protocols of human normality.21

Breaking away from the gender rubrics of the ancient regime, Chen Xiefen’s unpacking of the female-bodied effect of its “law of corporal punishment” at the same time resists modernizing discourses that convicted the bodies of “the crippled sex” as newly found examples of “useless humanity.” Such an anatomy recurs in women authors’ writings, haunted by and precipitating often an unspoken sense of anxiety. Chen Chao writes in her noted essay titled “To Mr. Meipo and My Friend Chen Xiefen” as follows:
Our two million women are made unable to produce wealth and earn their own living. Women of rich households only know luxury and air of arrogance; women of poor family or low social status are viewed and treated as slaves and mindless servants by their masters and mistresses. [We are taught that] the woman must follow her husband and care for her children; but how many of us can live in this way or make our life into something outstanding? This is why we should create women’s journals, using our gentle hands to work with powerful pens; this is why we should sell our jewels and offer our bridal money to publish newspapers, and light the lamps by which we can produce books and ideas. *I suggest that we all begin to acquire skills . . . we have our share to do in confronting and overcoming the crisis of our times* (my italics).

Chen Chao was more aware than Chen Xifen of the class difference among women as a problem irreducible to the category of gender. Like Chen Xifen, she leveraged on the gender-specific links among women in their pressing need to gain economic means and socio-cultural resources for independent living in the midst of a civilizational crisis. This advocacy for women to “acquire skills” involves an overt rejection of the old arrangement of the gender economy and an implicit recognition of the new stakes for women to learn the “skills of living” in a changing world full of uncertainty. It would be fatal if “crippled” women remain chained to a ruling power mechanism that crippled them but was also collapsing itself; and those who refused to sink with the mechanism must simultaneously seek ways to re-form their existences and inhabit a time when the gender roles were shifting and yet the gendered power relations were reinventing themselves. The anxiety inherent in such unchaining-cum-remaking project is in other words a felt cognizance of the modern predicament of Chinese women. As “traditionally” deformed, they are likely to be re-nailed as the “useless” and logically disposable body parts in a “fast-forward” moving time-regime.

Gender-specific, such cognitive anxiety is yet not gender-confined. Rather, it kindles a feeling cognizant of the links between the operations of gendering and other modalities of power relations in China’s shifting social geography. As early as in 1903, Chen Xifen noted with overt anger and hidden anxiety how, in the past, “Chinese high officials were subordinated to the court, lower-ranking officials to the high officials, common people to the lower-ranking officials, and women to men. But as of 1903, all of them – the royal court, high officialdom, lower officials, commoners, men, and women – are subordinated to the foreigners! They all become the ignorant subordinate!” Chen apparently did not have a critical category to designate the historical contents of those “foreigners.” She was nonetheless in tune with the meanings of the fact that such “foreigners” came from the major powers of the modern West, encroached on China and other countries to claim their extraterritoriality, and regarded those countries they encroached upon as “backward” elements of modern humanity in need of their civilizing leadership and redemptive authority. Other Chinese women went further (as did Chen Xifen herself a few years later). They traveled
to and studied in those places from where “the foreigners” came, came to grips with the power relations implemented in a range of institutions including that of juridical classification there, and reflected upon such encounters with poignant acumen. Xù Jinqin, one of the earliest Chinese women students traveling to the U.S. for an education, for instance, left on print record an incident that occurred at the moment she and her fellow students reached the land of “the new world” and, more interesting to my discussion here, her own reflection. In an interview in San Francisco for Women’s paper for learning (Nüxüe bao) in 1903, Xù Jinqin told the reporter how, when the steamer reached the harbor, “passengers of all nationalities went ashore except the Chinese. We were interrogated over and over again. Why were we so interrogated if the modern law stipulates that only those who have committed crimes be detained and interrogated? I began to realize that we were regarded as convicts without any evidence of criminal offense other than our being and being so regarded – We are convicted by our given ‘Chinese nationality.’”

With similar anger and anxiety, Xù Jinqin articulated how the apparatus of juridical classification at the metropolitan centers of world modernity hailed her and her male Chinese fellow travelers. In such a hailing, they were not only “subordinated” in a generalized political sense as Chen Xiefen noted but also in specific ways that find converging descriptions in Chen’s anatomy of Chinese women’s specific predicament: They were disempowered in a specific bodily way, twice. First they were rendered into bodies whose features had been classified as that of social liability, and then they were convicted as species of such social liability by the evidence of their corporal features. They were walking human deficiency. Without the aid of theoretical notions such as bioethnic politics and its retrospective logic, Xù Jinqin revealed the double violence of the bioethnically posited body politic and its ethno-rationality she encountered in the U.S. and made it disturbingly palpable. At work in “conviction of the convict,” such bioethnic politics evokes what was performed and inscribed on the body of woman in “old China” and doubles it into a modern mechanism with a tyrannical logic that claims variable casualties worldwide. You are being convicted, therefore you are the convicts; you are being crippled, therefore you are the cripples; you are being othered, therefore you are the other; you are being dirtied, therefore you are dirt. Categorized as “the Chinese,” which is a bioethnically constituted trope deployed as the very definition of the “weak-kneed,” the “diseased-ridden,” the “sick,” or the “yellow peril” in the modern book of natural science and the law of genetics, Xù Jinqin and her fellow travelers “are [already] convicts by our [convicted] nationality” as the humanly crippled, regardless “our” actual sex.

The double violence registered in those bioethnic convicts in this specific bodily ways may have been psychically shattering for some Chinese male writers and politically eye-opening for others in their encounters with the force fields of those metropolitan centers. Its effects, strikingly enough, afforded most early Chinese women writers some of their vital insights central to the development of Chinese feminist thought and practice. While dissecting the female-specific corporal deformation that seemed peculiar to the Chinese cultural tradition,
they also engendered and inhabited ways in which their gender-specific predicament illuminates otherwise differentiated agonies of “crippled humanity” that are bioethnically naturalized in the ascending new world across national boundaries. The implications of such insights for Chinese women were challenging. As the crippled-cum-disposable, their state of emergency not only marks a China-specific violence that must be foiled but also unmasks a globalizing bioethnic politics that must be confronted, for their immediate survival as for their future possibilities. Their anatomy of “the crippled sex” as “crippled humanity” enables various ways of mapping specific and different “bioethnic convicts”, providing a female-leveraged paradigm that activates the internal link among their assigned destinies.

Such an anatomy-cum-mapping differs from a variety of rhetoric heavily drawn on by other more noted discourses at the turn of the centuries that impetuously embraced European models of modernity including their liberal feminist variations. It can hardly be overstressed that such an anatomy inherently opposes campaigns at the time that promoted “Chinese essence” against feminist and other social movements aiming to revolutionize Chinese culture and society. They were neither governed by nostalgia for a lost Golden Age nor consumed by an impulsive drive to embrace the protocols of Western modernity, however much they were also affected and conditioned by such attitudes and impulses as part of the emergent and chaotic public domain of culture and politics in a crisis-ridden society. In their most astute moments, those Chinese women writers cast their predicament as a constellation of connective pains to be worked through in their specifically pertinent and variably specific context, with an impetus at fundamental odds with the double violence of gendering in the Chinese ancient regime and the bioethnically posited and enforced classifications of modern humanity. Chen Xiefen’s reflection upon such a double task also offers acumen into a time of double urgency: “What is it? What is it? It is the life and death turning point for us women as for China.”

Unseen Rhythms, Sea Changes: The Nature of the Chinese National Question

Women writing early in the century urged themselves and their fellow women to undo their double predicament as the socially “crippled” and the humanly “useless.” Giving literary forms to different thematic scenes and re-making their actual lives through diverse passages, those women probed and rendered the nature of bioethnic politics as a chameleon operation of power that resulted in a field of variable human casualties, where “the weak” (ruozhe) features as a node of sensorium, locus of telescoping, and site of dialectic agency. “Weak” as an adjective and noun exists in Chinese vocabulary since the ancient times. “Ruo (the weak) rou (being eaten up) qiang (the strong) shi (eat the weak)” is a classical phrase and occurs in writing as early as in the Warring States (475BC–221BC). Poet Liu Ji of the State of Qin once wrote of those being “born with an unfortunate fate in a time of chaos, [where] the strong that eat up the weak (ruorou qiangshi) are not punished by officialdom.” While being employed over the centuries in classical
Chinese literature to designate periodically erupting social chaos, the phrase began to accrue additional meanings since the mid-nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, it “is often used to comment that strong nations attack, dispossess, take possession of, and assimilate weak nations” in the established Chinese lexicon. The weak” in other words gradually became a category in human classification intertwined with “nation,” resulting in implications and connotations distinct from albeit related to their ancient definitions. Such mutual imbrications between the “weak” and “Chinese nation” imbues ancient words with a modern dynamic, and crystallizes a double consciousness in twentieth century Chinese culture, society, and history. It is cognizant of an once proud China as a “poor and weak nation” (pinruo minzu) placed low in the order of the “modern world of nations;” it is also charged with often latent yet acute anxiety and indignation towards not only such placement but the international power relations that enforced the placement. The intensity with which so many male Chinese literati-turned-intellectuals since the turn of the centuries fixed their attention on the project to “strengthen China” registers the degree to which they rationally recognized the reign of “ruorou qiangshi” as the logic of the realpolitik of the modern world on the one hand and emotionally pained by such recognition on the other hand.

This double consciousness hunts the formation of modern Chinese culture with such relentless recurrence that the adjective “weak” seemed not only to be interlocked with the emergent Chinese nation but also fixated on anything deemed “Chinese” throughout the subsequent decades. This ranged from the body of the Chinese as “sick” and/or “diseased” (dongya bingfu) to the body politic of Chinese society as “a state with accumulated poverty and weakness” (jipin jiruo). “Chinese nation” (zhonghua minzu) as a modern term, in this sense, was inextricably woven with and is still evocative of the feelings being forced into and caught up in the structurally arranged predicament of the “weak” in the modern world. When Fei Xiaotong, the noted sociologist, articulates the shaping of China as a “nation” in modern history, for instance, his lines quiver as it were with such pain and indignation: “It was in a century-long resistance to the major Western powers that the Chinese nation appears as a self-aware national entity.” The implications of such pain and indignation in and between the lines caution us not to easily assume that Chinese nationalist revolutionaries including the Chinese Communists who addressed the issues of social crises primarily in terms of “the nation” did nothing more than reifying and perpetuating their power over women. The most revolutionary of them, as discussed in the chapters on Ding Ling, certainly unsettle if not invalidate such assumptions. Yet a more complex point remains: recognition of the logic of the realpolitik as the real way of the world, by definition, implies cognitive acceptance, however coerced and ambivalent such acceptance may very well be.

Central to my discussion here are the layered renditions of the pain of the “poor and weak Chinese nation” by writing women that at once resonate with and far exceed the indignation in their male counterparts’ “cogito of the real.” In fact they question the very human intelligibility of such cogito itself. Indeed,
advocacies for “nation building” in their writings are charged with a sense of urgency, particularly in the works produced in the context of the “anti-Manchu” agitations from 1890s to 1910s. The components of social thoughts and political passions with which those advocacies are mobilized in women’s writings, however, are not commensurable with nationalist rubrics as it first emerged in European history. At the empirical level, those women actively engaged the thoughts and practices of French revolutionary women, czarist Russia’s populist women, and Meiji Japan’s women radicals that cannot be simply confined to European nationalism and its colonial or semicolonial variations. When they emphatically invoked protocols of the Anglo-American model of nation-formation and liberal feminisms, meanwhile, the ways in which such invocations occur and acquire significations are by no means transparent. Women’s paper for learning (Nüxuebao), China’s earliest women’s quarterly founded in Shanghai on July 24, 1898 by activists such as Xue Shaohui, Kang Tongwei, Qiu Meilu, Pan Xuan, Zhang Yunhua, Liu Wanfang, and Liu Keqing is one of the earliest examples. With a heading in English on its cover page, “Chinese Girl’s Progress,” its authors looked mainly to Europe and the Anglo-American world for their resources. In all seven extant issues of this paper, reports on women’s social activities and political movements from various parts of the world are continuous and extensive but with primary attention still paid to liberal feminisms in Europe and the U.S. Such was basically the case in the second women’s paper founded in 1902 by Chen Xiefen as well, and in many of the publications that followed. Yet a closer look at those publications brings about pause and invites careful reflection. An article titled On women’s equal rights (Nüqüan pingyi) by Lian Shi (real name Yan Bin) is as a good case in point as others. The founder and chief editor of The world of new Chinese women (Zhongguo xinnüjie), founded in 1907 in Tokyo, she was also the Secretary of the Chinese Women Students Association in Japan. She took a measure of the “temporal distance” between the “Chinese situation” and “the American situation” in this influential article, and characterized the former as where “women’s rights are least developed” and the latter as where “women’s rights are most advanced”:

Women’s rights have been advanced most in America, and least in our China. . . Since their religion prioritizes the principles of equality and fraternity, their society is not poisoned so deeply by its male powers and still preserves its human integrity. When men cannot monopolize freedom in marriage, in learning and scholarship, and in professional fields, it is not too difficult for women to gradually move toward the plane of equality through efforts made in all those arenas . . . We Chinese women are women just like those women in America. Although we are of different races and nationalities, as women we are the same in the eyes of the divine force. If they have already regained women’s rights in those past years, why cannot we regain women’s rights in the days to come, particularly since women’s rights are not fruits forbidden by the divine force but are naturally our own to begin with? It was said “liberty or death;” I would say “restoration of women’s rights or death,” this is the principle of [our movement for] women’s rights (my italics).
Lian Shi here borrowed liberal feminist discourses posited on European natural rights theory along with its metaphysical foundation, namely, the idea of divine origins that underlies the secularization of the notion of sovereignty manifest in the codified relation between the nation state and its citizenry. She did not probe how and why, seventy-two years from the start of the women’s suffrage movement in 1848, at the time she wrote American women were still far from having won their political rights, hardly a “most advanced” record compared with “least advanced China.” More importantly, when they did get their voting rights, the “colored females” were excluded and the exclusion would last for long and harsh years. Lian Shi’s argument seems to conflate the rhetoric with the politics of “feminist advances” in U.S. history and, retrospectively observed, is not only socially uninformed but also racially and ethnically blind. The categories of “race” and “ethnicity” upon which nationality is posited in effect do not even enter Lian Shi’s horizon of cognition and writing lexicon.

Lian Shi was not a singular case among the writing Chinese women. Such “blindness” to “race” is an uncannily recurrent pattern in those writings by women, which begs more consideration rather than quick dismissal. In modern Chinese, “nation” comprises two words, namely, “min” and “zu.” In their classical usage, “min” refers to “ordinary people” in particular and “human beings” in general, and “zu” refers to specific “clansmen” or “a (patriarchal) clan.” The Japanese coined a kanji term by using “min” and “zu” together to translate “nation” and “race” from English and other European languages, which was imported into China. Minzu (nation) in Chinese was hence a loanword from modern Japanese (minzoku) adapted to the concepts of ethnicity and race foundational to the European model of nation along with institutional implications born of its history, namely, those relating to the nation state and capitalist world system. Yet as this discussion shows and the book as a whole also traces in its following chapters, the inherent link between the notion of “nation” and the category of “ethnicity” posited on the idea of “race” has never been adequately captured in the Chinese term “minzu” (nation); “race” in effect has a separate rendition in Chinese (zhongzu). Such “deficiency” in Chinese translation of “nation” however may turn out to be an invitation for fecund imagination. If “too much history is poisonous” as Nietzsche puts it, too much “coloring in cognition” may injure human vision. A century and half later the Ghanaian woman writer Ama Ata Aidoo registers precisely such a poisonous moment when she narrates how a Ghanaian woman was made to see herself as a “black girl” and how “for the rest of her life, she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human coloring. No matter where she went, what anyone said, what they did, she knew that it never mattered. But what she also came to know was that someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference, an excuse to be mean.” A barely discernable and yet profound reverberation exists between Aidoo’s insights about the importance of not noticing and Lian Shi’s way of embracing the idea of “women’s rights” phrased in “the rights theory.” The latter is charged with an unseeing rhythm that missed the caveat – the foundational force field – of what she so embraced, namely, the metaphysics
of “modern sovereignty” that inscribes the social accessibility to the membership of modern citizenry as manifest of racialized “origins” and ethnic destiny.51

This unseeing rhythm is defining in Lian Shi’s discussion of and approach to women’s struggles around the world for social justice and the status of human subject, where the “regrettable moment” that traumatized and poisoned Aidoo’s Ghanaian young woman is missed with peculiar persistence. What is involved in such a “missing,” one may argue, is more intricate than mere misinformation, misjudgment, or cognitive blindness. And what works in its place in the Chinese term of “nü qüan” also designates more than its English translation, namely, “women’s rights.” The Chinese ideograph for “rights” – qüan – connotes not only “rights” but “power.”52 Breaking the records in the chronicles of Chinese imperial history where “qüan” has never been used in connection with “women,” here women’s “qüan” in effective Chinese also exceeds the legalism of the rights theory foundational to the Western nation state and its construction of the citizenship through institutional articulations. To the extent that Western rights theory assumes the a priori condition of the “natural” via the route of a reinscription of the original divinity, the idea of “power” in the Chinese connotation evokes a world of the socially made. To the extent that such “divine origins” of the natural rights theory is secularized into identity claims of ethnocentric nationalism via the route of nation building intrinsic to capitalist modernity, the socially made world evoked by Chinese “women’s rights” indicates a configuration of body politic without such ethnocentricism and exceeds its institutional articulations. The organizing categories that cast the nature of the nation as a bioethnically posited identity and the nation state as the agent for unfolding its bioethnic destiny, simply put, appear unintelligible to those early Chinese women writers. Lian Shi significantly un-sees the categories of “race” and “ethnicity” internal to the human modulation of such nation state. She insistently turns blind to or really refuses to be cognizant of how humanity can be marked into different races and ethnicities, and thereby be differentially placed in a hierarchically arranged order while claiming to be naturally endowed. This is not to say that she does not have concepts of “race” and “ethnicity;” rather, she does not regard ethnicity or ethnic dimension of nationality as central, important or even relevant to her conception of “advanced feminist rights” as the center of her envisioning of a “modern Chinese nation.” “Race,” upon which “ethnicity” is posited, makes no sense let alone “scientific” sense to her should it claim any place in the production of social life and its organization of human relations. For Lian Shi, “we Chinese women are women just like women in America” and “everywhere else” in the world, hence “if they have already regained women’s rights, why cannot we?”

Most if not all early women writers resonated with Lian Shi in their otherwise different articulations of women’s issues, repeatedly “missing,” “overlooking,” and/or “unseeing” the key to the making of human geography of the modern nation state: A bioethnically posited reason or racist science that grounds the definition of “the question of the nation” and its function in the time of modern capitalism. It is useful to compare the conceptions about women’s learning and
writing by those Chinese women and their “more advanced” counterparts in “advanced countries” here in relation to the national question so defined. Shimoda Utako, the head of the women’s school in Tokyo where many Chinese women including Qiu Jin studied, is a case in point. She discussed the importance of women’s learning and writing with a Chinese woman journalist in a 1903 interview printed in *Hunan youxüe yibian* (*Hunan overseas learning experience* in edited translation), which begins as follows:

The Westernization Movement in your country has been ongoing for about thirty years; it started no later than Japan’s reform. Yet those who promoted the movement did not know that it was education that shapes the foundation of a nation-state, not the building of ships and canons. Women’s learning – reading and writing – as a result has not been developed and even men’s learning has not progressed, so China does not have the talents and knowledge of citizens with which to compete with the other great powers. Therefore the Chinese *became the failed and the weak, who cannot escape the natural law of evolution* . . . When women have no knowledge and are useless, they overburden men; and they make such a citizenry that, in today’s competitive world, can only be defeated . . . 53 (my italics).

The advancement of women’s learning is stressed as the index of the competitiveness of a citizenry vital to the survival of its nation in “today’s world” dictated by “the natural law of evolution” that abandons “the defeated” as “the weak.” Like Shimoda Utako, early Chinese women writers were concerned about the issue of learning and writing, were intensely interested in women’s education programs around the world, and made great efforts to trace and document how such education was organized and how it helped women in different countries including Japan to attain their “modern status.” Many of these documentaries named England, Germany, France, and the U.S. as “advanced cultures” where learned women turned “creative sources,” and cited Japan, India, and Russia as cultures that were “comparatively backward,” but often noted Japan’s great developments.54 Ai Yüese’s *Taixi funü beikao* (*Documentary reference on Western women*), published in 1878, is one of the earliest and detailed of such documentations.55 Many interviews of and reports on “foreign experts” in women’s education, of which the 1903 Shimoda Utako interview is one of the noted, appeared in Chinese publications in the following years. In those documentations, Chinese women authors are “pro-Western” in their overt rhetoric, and ardent about “national preservation” in their announced goals. Those writings and many more, however, often if not almost always lack any cognitive acceptance of the relational hierarchy between the “weak” and “strong” species as the sign or manifest of the natural law of inevitability, which though is the point of departure in the narratives of Shimoda Utako and a range of “foreign experts.” Shimoda Utako defined Chinese women’s learning in reading and writing as the way of *proving* that “the Chinese” are on the side of the “natural law of evolution,” which conflates the socially “defeated” with the
humanly “weak.” Chinese women writers on the other hand seemed to have never comprehended such “law” let alone accepting its natural inevitability. Rather, reading and writing for them were passages through which they were re-making their bodily forms of social existence as “crippled sex” under the ancient regimes and “sexualized cripples” in modernizing times. Lian Shi’s treatment of the binary between male and female quoted earlier, for instance, not only denaturalizes the category of gender and sex, but demystifies the relational hierarchy between the “superior strong” and the “inferior weak” persons, groups, peoples, or nations. The terms of “strong” and “weak” themselves are therein refuted: “The marvelous difference between male and female works to engender lives; such difference does not connote let alone verify any polarity or hierarchy between the ‘superior’ and the ‘inferior’ ([zun bei]) or the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’ ([qiang ruo]) lives.”

The categories of “the strong” and “the weak” are constitutive of Shimoda Utako’s cognition of the “modern world” and its “natural law” that stipulates the doom of “the weak” under the supremacy of the “strong,” all defined in the terms of race, racialized science, and racist eugenics. She continues in her 1903 interview:

*Today’s world is a world of racial competition; the superior breed wins and the inferior breed loses; the stronger win and the weaker lose. The five continents do make a vast space, but they cannot accommodate the nations of the poorly bred and the weakly built . . . A country where the females have strong bodies must also have strong males – [For] mothers give their sons good seeds of breeding. Today’s white race in Europe and America is strong because its females are strong . . .* (my italics).

“Women’s learning” in Shimoda Utako then is part of the process that produces women into the function of “motherhood,” whose essence lies in breeding “strong species” of “superior nations” on the winning side of the world race wars. The bioethnic impetus that identifies womanhood with nationhood in Shimoda Utako’s analysis is evidently intrinsic to the Meiji project, as a part and parcel of Japan’s nation building in global competition and its particular lexicon of bioethnic nationalism. Many male Chinese reformers similarly promoted the image of “good wives and mothers;” they used in a range of contexts the same terms as “good breeders” of “strong nation” as the Japanese modernizers did at the turn of the century, in tune with the waves of eugenics in Europe and America. Yet these terms did not gain coherent or consequential ascendancy among early Chinese women writers despite their domed aura of progress and modern status. Over and over again, these women missed the rubrics of eugenics and bioethnic nationalism that governed Shimoda Utako’s idea of motherhood and nationhood. An article “On Equal Rights for Women’s Education” published in 1909 in *Shuntian ribao* (Shuntian daily), for instance, indicts both dynastic arrangements and modern technologies of “womanhood” as the ruin of Chinese women: “Those ‘feminine entities’ with their [enforced] functions are ghosts made out of living women . . . Those who say that they love women [for their womanhood] are mutilating them through such ‘love;’ those who perform ‘intimacy’ with women render women...
into dead people who masquerade as the living.” The battling tone in this passage is not uncommon among expressions against the social engineering that enlist women’s “biology” to make their “destiny” as a mere instrumental function of “breeders.” This is not to say that racist science and its concomitant ideology did not affect the writing of Chinese women at the time. Rather, it is to suggest that those women engaged the advocacy for “a strong Chinese nation” in such a way that was profoundly undoing the protocols of bioethnic nationalism and the rationality of its eugenics, namely, the naturalized hierarchy between the “strong” and “weak” and its inevitability working as the law of the real world.

An article titled *On conducting oneself with self-respect and human dignity* (Lun zizhong), written by a woman named Qian Ren and published in *Women’s journal* (Nü bao) in 1909, is noteworthy here on two accounts. The first is discernable in a large range of women’s writings of that time. The “natural law” of the hierarchical relation between “the weak” and “the strong” is conceived as socially made phenomenon that hence is socially alterable; if Chinese women “conduct themselves with dignity... as the spirits of China,” they may alter their “destiny” as the crippled sex, the sexualized cripples, or the “weak species.” The second is more significant for it strikes out on a new path. The article implies a certain possibility for making a different humanity of “true strength:”

Truly strong people are led by those lively spirits who refuse to follow [what is defined as] naturally self-preserving instincts that lead them to adapt to the demands of predatory forces. Instead, they are determined to be useful for [a doomed] country, its inhabitants, and its society [against domination].

The proposed or envisioned “lively spirits” of the “truly strong people” do not require or compel the existence of the “weak” as the material foundation and symbolic evidence of their strength. Rather, they actualize their lives and transpire significations by refusing the relational hierarchy itself and its modern monopoly on the laws of human nature, the nature of the modern world, and the nature of its “national question.” Chinese women in the 1890s and over the course of the twentieth century, while struggling to undo their “destiny” through their public writing and social activity, were in effect navigating toward changes that are not premised upon a reversal of “the weak” and “the strong,” and which constituted a reply to the relational hierarchy itself. Rhythms of such navigation, often unseen in moments of sea change, pulsate between the lines in early Chinese women’s publications on varied dimensions of “the women’s question” as the question for the “weak China” to not only rediscover her strength but also recast the very definition of “being strong.” Women’s learning, substantiated by those women with their female-bodied figurations invented in writing and female-leveraged relations attempted in life, amounts to the process where such rediscovery and redefinition are mutually engendered. In short, rather than positing their lifeworks on a generic notion of “female oppression,” those women writers inhabited their historical moments in ways that not only disclosed the
double violence of bioethnic politics involved therein but also refused the human intelligibility of its operative power relations.

Such unseen rhythms amid sea changes are at fundamental odds with Shimoda Utako’s cognition of the “modern world” of “racial competition,” where “the superior breed wins and the inferior breed loses.” In the midst of Meiji Japan’s maneuvers to disassociate itself from “weak Asia” and re-associate itself with “strong Europe”, Utako’s articulation of the unity of the “yellow race” in her 1903 interview in effect comprises two narratives. Ostensibly about the imperative for Chinese women to become learned, it has a latent movement or undercurrent that posits Japan’s positional superiority among the members of “yellow race.” “I hope that all of you, when you finish your study in Japan and return to China, will take women’s learning as a resource for men’s education. This will not only be the making of your country’s fortune, but allow our yellow race in Asia to compete with the white race for leading the world” (my italics). Japan is leading such a world scale competition in Shimoda Utako’s rendition, as it is evoked to be the definition of the “strong race” for the Chinese and other “Asians” to measure themselves with and find their “weakness.” While lecturing Chinese women to be “strong mothers” just like “the Japanese women,” Shimoda Utako overlooked the historical processes through which Japan gained its positional superiority to China. Her race-based “strong motherhood” not only glassed over Japan’s role in the international imperialist encroachments upon China since the 1890s. As a breeding ground for “strong nation,” her “motherhood” functions as an operation of bioethnic politics that naturalizes the “doom” of “the nations of the poorly bred and the weakly built.” It is in the name of strengthening “the yellow race” to compete with “the white race” that the Meiji elite solidified their ambition to join the club of the white great powers and attain “world leadership.” This was expressed in its political program of the “Greater East Asian Co-Prospertity Sphere” and implemented through series of expansionist wars on other Asian countries that were “too weak” to carry out such program, culminating by the 1930s with the fifteen year China War (1931–1945). That Qiu Jin clashed with Shimoda Utako who was her teacher in Girls’ Practicing School in Tokyo, as discussed in the next chapter, is indicative of the often unseen rhythms constitutive of Chinese women’s writing and their social activity early in the century as well as throughout the subsequent decades. So are the various ways in which women writers approach the categories of “the weak” and the “strong” that each chapter in this book traces. Indeed, “learned women,” as a yet emergent mode of existence advocated by those Chinese women in print and in life, is paradigmatically incommensurable with “breeding mothers” that Shimoda Utako discerned in and borrowed from the models of the modern West. The contribution of those “mothers” to “the world of racial wars,” required by and in the light of such models, putatively determines the nature of national identity as bioethnic destiny. Rather, those Chinese women captured the condition of China’s “national crisis” (Minzu weiji) and defined its meanings with their struggles to transform their coerced corporeality as “the crippled sex” and “deformed humanity” that refuted, inherently,
the logic of bioethnic politics as the law of inevitability and the destiny of its “bioethnic convicts.”

**Mourning as Mobilizing: Sources of “We-Chinese-Women”**

It would be helpful to recall here the point made at the opening of this chapter about the historical moment those women were navigating. It was the time when the old imperial institutions were collapsing and new crises were multiplying. To be “modern” “Chinese” “women” here meant to survive the temporal abyss and inhabit the uninhabitable time, which amounts to an unprecedented tradition that needed to be invented. The intensity of those women’s writings suggests the severity of such imperatives for survival amid old problems and new threats that constitute no less than a radical rupture in Chinese culture and society.

Rupture, by definition, is a breakage and opening that stir up not only the repressed but also the imaginative energies beyond established social boundaries. In the Chinese context at the turns of the centuries, it allowed, enabled or precipitated an eruption of mournful lamentations that are also expressions of intense longings, signaling “a rich and obscure message” amid a confluence of violence. Unlike the Freudian paradigm of mourning with which the category “mourning” would likely be associated for the English speaking readership, the mourning here is not about working through the feeling of loss of a loved object. Rather, it is more like a working through of what one has endured, charged with an anticipatory impetus toward something that one loves but does not know, has never known, may not be ever fully knowable, and yet can and is engendered in the process of mourning itself.

Female-embodied or leveraged, such mourning features early Chinese women’s writings in poetry, drama, prose, folk story, correspondence, public speeches on political occasions and innovative performances in social rituals. Qiu Jin, radicalized through her public activity since 1904, titled her seminal essay published in the second issue of *Vernacular* (Baihuа, one of the earliest overseas Chinese students’ newspapers founded in Tokyo in 1904) “Respectfully Speaking to My Two Hundred Million Chinese Sisters,” and begins it with a lamentation:

> Alas! We, the two hundred million fellow sisters of China, are most unfairly treated on this earth. If we have a decent father, then we will be all right at the time of our birth; but if he is crude by temper, or an unreasonable man, he will start spewing phrases like “Oh what an ill-omened day; here’s another useless one” . . . Before many years have passed, without anyone’s bothering to ask if it’s right or wrong, they take out a pair of snow-white bands and bind them around our feet, tightening them with strips of white cotton; even when we go to bed at night we are not allowed to loosen them, with the result that the flesh peels away and the bones buckle under. The sole purpose of all this is to ensure that our relatives, friends, and neighbors will say, “At the so-and-so’s the girls have small feet.” Not only that, when it comes time to pick a son-in-law, they rely on the advice of a couple of
shameless matchmakers, caring only that the man’s family have money or influence; they don’t bother to find out if his family background is murky or good, or what his character is like, or whether he’s bright or stupid – they just go along with the arrangements. When it’s time for the bride to get married and move to the new house, they hire a sedan chair all decked out with multicolored embroidery; but sitting shut up inside it you can barely breathe. And once you get there, whatever your husband is like, as long as he is a family man they say you were blessed in a previous existence and are being rewarded in this one. If he turns out no good, they say it’s “retribution for that earlier existence” or “the aura was all wrong.” If you utter a few complaints or reason with the man but end up crossing him, he insults or even hits you, and others say that you “lack female virtue.” Is not this injustice? Moreover, if the man dies, the woman must be in full mourning for three years and never re-marry. And yet if the woman dies, the man only needs wear a few blue threads and if he does not feel like it he simply refuses and starts visiting courtesans no sooner than the woman dies, or brings a new bride in already. Heaven gives life to humans without any division between male and female; and all humans come into this world because of women’s labor; how and why the roles are so unjust?68

Let it be said here right away that Qiu Jin is not singularly way out in front of others at the time in this critique of the lamentable treatment of women; rather, she is one of the earliest, and a most effective one, who prefigure a large and growing stream of social critics, male and female, that approached the problem with varying perspectives and propositions. Set in a mourning tone, Qiu Jin in the above-quoted renowned speech begins her narrative to open as it were a floodgate for a river of sorrow or feelings of injustice to flow, with a heightened sense of the presence of an audience as anticipated listeners and potential co-mourners. Two features in such mourning summons specific attention. First, domestic details of the female-specific corners are rendered with an unprecedented paradigmatic lens in the tradition of Chinese writing, in the light of which those details are no longer the female-gendered trivialities of the everyday versus the male-gendered grand affairs of the state. They gained an unprecedented significance as sources or resources for public knowledge production, and thereby placing women, who live those daily tribulations, in the position of a knowing subject and cognitive agency.69 When those “trivialities” are so lamented as evidences of structural illnesses of society and organizational problematics of history, they turn into crucial sites of cognition where previously hidden pains of the “crippled sex” appear in the open as life matrix for social and historical transformation. Second, this is one of the earliest pieces of vernacular Chinese that constituted the beginning of the “movement of vernacular writing” (Baihua wen yùndong), earlier than the writings published by male intellectuals that established them as the founding figures of modern Chinese vernacular literature.70 Specifically, its spoken dynamics is distinctly suitable for public presentation and performance while also making a lively reading, which is supremely important for
Chinese women since female illiteracy is the cultural mark of “the crippled sex” and “deficient humanity” within and beyond the world of Chinese gentry. Its built-in oral fluidity and musical rhythms open up a process for the listeners – who may or may not be able to read – to feel and be pulled into its rhythmic flow and movement, fueling its dynamics as a mobilizing momentum for growing participation.71 Mourning, in short, is also mobilizing. It is not incidental that “We fellow sisters of China” (women niutongbao) appeared for the first time in the history of Chinese language as a phrase in both spoken and written form in such a mourning and mobilizing movement at the turn of the century.

Qiu Jin was a strong force among the early Chinese women in their attempts to activate such mourning-cum-mobilizing process. Many of those women’s writings similarly touch off memories that otherwise remain nebulous, gather energies that otherwise scatter, and articulate unspoken feelings into felt imperatives for change or really as rhythms of change themselves. Such activated feelings as felt-imperatives for social change or rhythmic changes recur in volumes of women’s journals founded at the time and in the decade or so that followed. These included: Women’s paper for learning (Nüxüe bao) run by Shen Jinying in 1898; Women’s paper for learning (Nüxüe bao) founded by Chen Xiefen in 1902, and The vernacular (Baihuabao), Women’s journal of the divine land (Shenzhou nübao), China women’s journal (Zhongguo nübao), Women students (Nüxuesheng), Journal of women students in Japan (Liu niuxuesheng bao), Nüzi baihua bao (Women’s vernacular journal), and many more.72 The phrase “we fellow sisters of China” operates in those mourning-cum-mobilizing processes as a connective tissue rather than a fixed concept and constitutive impetus more than an instrumental stratagem, designating the workings of a Chinese feminist imagination and its cultural legacy in the making. With their build-in orality and mobilizing musicality, specifically, such processes are evocative of a Chinese folk tradition that allows if not requires women to grieve on ritual occasions. These range from that of the wedding, beginning with the bride’s departure from her parents’ house, to all kinship-related funerals on the one hand,73 and draw upon a long-standing repertoire of women-specific ways of articulating sorrows in Chinese classic poetry and literary canon on the other hand.74

Chinese feminist deployments of the writing genre of women-specific sorrows in classic poetry and the rhythmic orality of female mourning in folk culture are explicated in the next chapter with the paradigmatic case of Qiu Jin. Suffice it to say here that such modern deployments by early Chinese women writers exhibit discontinuity and continuity with both traditions, while making the protest for sufferings of “the crippled sex” cloistered therein socially visible and humanly connective.75 In a range of women’s publications at the time, indeed, mournings over the pain inflicted upon women by the double violence of Chinese gendering and bioethnic politics of modernity were often cross-written and cross-mobilized with lamentations over “the field of debris” constitutive of world history and specified in the conditions of China and its traumatized inhabitants. In the 1910s, more women joined and fueled such mourning-cum-mobilizing momentum. A group of women writers wrote for Women’s world (Nüzi shijie), a
major journal founded in 1904, afford us a good an example as many and any others. In her article “Lion’s Cry,” editor of the journal Ding Chuwo, a major woman activist and writer, takes the year 1900 as a time for mourning that turns into a connective mobilization:

The year 1900 was such a disaster... The Eight-Power-Allied-Forces charged into the city of Beijing and killed so many residents. Broken bodies, torn flesh, buckled bones lay across the field, as blood made rivers thick and red. . . . Whenever I turn to look at that site of tragedy, I cannot speak even though I still have my tongue not yet cut . . . Today three provinces in Northeast China are being taken away, amputated; the remaining provinces are parcelled out spheres of various foreign powers. . . . We must turn around quickly and look for another way of living, and leave the terror and hell behind us as fast as we can. I cannot help but mourn, and let our mourning be our songs – please, my fellow sisters and fellow people, please, listen to our songs with careful reflection.76 (my italics)

Addressing China’s “national crisis” that loomed large as a sign of bioethnic doom, Ding Chuwo here evokes a sensorium specific to Chinese women’s struggles as the “crippled sex” and “deformed humanity” to “look for another way of living” an acute feeling of pain imbricates broken bodies, torn flesh, buckled bones. Such pain also enters the literary map of Chinese men writers but there it is often more mediated by or geared toward metaphoric signification. A physical sense of the literal pain of being “amputated” in Ding Chuwo’s “songs” reverberates with Qiu Jin’s figure of speech that laments women’s destiny as “the disfigured” soaked in “blood and tears.” The implication of “traditional” women’s struggles with their bodily deformation and social disempowerment turns not only sharply visible but palpable in a “parceled out China,” as a connective tissue and connecting impetus where the variously displaced and dispossessed inhabitants of the land find their resonating sphere of feelings and converging terrain for possible action. Like Qiu Jin’s lamentation, Ding Chuwo’s “songs” bear the imprints of classical Chinese female poetry on “sorrows:” they are written with a measure of musicality inherent in Chinese classic poetry. Also like Qiu Jin, Ding Chuwo’s “sorrowful songs” cite the oral rhythms of the folk tradition of female mourning, which call out to her listeners and pre-assume, anticipate and invite the listeners’ participation. Ding’s songs as Qiu Jin’s lamentation, furthermore, exceed both cited traditions to a revolutionary degree in that the feelings expressed therein are so intensified and radicalized that they burst the limits that the protocols of Chinese classic poetry and the ritual rubrics of female mourning set for “proper” expressions of female sorrows. Rather than mediating pains and sorrows within given social arrangements, they turn into activating processes to not only survive but remake given conditions of the “crippled sex” and the “humanly crippled.” “We fellow sisters of China” serve hereby as the specific lever in a critical reprocessing of a violent place and time for its humanity to find, as Ding Chuwo astoundingly puts it, “another way of living.”77
Qiu Jin paid with her life for paving “another way of living;” so were her fellow women writers before, during, and after the 1911 Revolution. Complex and different in so many ways, those women echo one another across established social divides in their calls for such “another way of living,” with variably female-figured mournings and female-leveraged mobilizations. On grand souls (Dahun pian), an article published in The Chinese Women’s Newspaper in 1906 (Zhongguo nübao) by a woman named Huang Gong, is another instance of such mourning-cum-mobilizing process for imagining and indeed summoning alternatives. As Qiu Jin, Ding Chuwo, and others did in their writings, she begins with a lamentation:

Sitting in the corner of a small room near the dead fire in the stove, hearing a vast silence outside, I gaze at the lamp’s dim light as it fades away . . . . The land of China is dying, while I have no place to offer my libation and call for its souls . . . . I have burning blood that I cannot shed, I have tears that I cannot let go; all I can do is writing with my blood and tears, and let writing be my mourning, leading me to . . . the Grand Souls . . . .

Souls and spirits! Where are you? . . . I search for you with my heart, my body, my entire existence. If we stir up the dying hearts of our people, we are stirring up the souls of our land. The stirrings in people’s hearts that can create the souls of our ravished country are the Grand Souls (dahun). Where do such Grand Souls exist? They exist in we Chinese, we Chinese women (my italics).

The mourning process here is over the “dying hearts of a people,” yet its energy stirs up people’s hearts and brings forth their life and live forces again. Bearing out the “multiple authored violence” inscribed on the torn body of the land and the bodies of its human inhabitants, the mourning woman calls out to and stir up those “grand souls” amid social and institutional wreckages, thereby gathering a human constellation of differently ruined as sources and resources for re-engendering life. If Qiu Jin’s above-quoted lamentation concentrates the pain of “we fellow sisters of China” into critical forces for an alternative body politic, Ding Chuwo’s “sorrowful songs” evoke such a body politic with the longings of a broken humanity of “fellow people” across broader social ranges for “another way of living.” Huang Gong offers an impassioned dirge, wherein she calls out to and partakes in the spirits and stirrings of the land of the ruined, while leveraging “We Chinese” and “We Chinese women” as an embodied horizon for envisioning possibilities of “grand souls.”

The connotations of such “grand souls,” as is discussed in each chapter of this book with different cases, would recur throughout twentieth century Chinese women’s writings, lives, and imagination in so many variable ways that are persistently denoted by wounded and wronged women in their mobilizing mourning. Chen Xiefen’s famed article “The Dangers of Women’s World,” written in 1904, intimates as much as anticipates the development of their suggestive and expandable connotations through female mourning as feminist mobilizing:
Icy wind is closing all around, and I am sitting alone under the lamp, agonizing. Suddenly there is a blast that sounds like a ringing bell and thunderous drumming, like waves of the sea welling up and moving through me. My hands are numb and my feet are shaking; my soul trembles like an unraveling thread! What is it? What is it? It is the life-and-death threshold, for us women as it is for our China... Lamentations! A people can be enslaved overnight as an ancient country is torn asunder. We Chinese women must clear our cloudy minds in order to see our yet unseen destination, we must warn, arouse, rebuild, and encourage ourselves... We are all responsible for this lifeworld; and we cannot stand still and watch the unfolding workings of our own catastrophe!81

In this evocative passage, the waves and sounds of wind, bell, drum, and sea conjure up the stirrings of “grand souls,” the forces that “warn, arouse, rebuild, and encourage” a torn humanity poised at the life-and-death threshold of history in transit. It is in this sense that Liu Yazi, one of the earliest republican revolutionaries and sympathizers of women’s revolution says in his article (“Mourning over women’s situation”): “You [women] are so fortunate to have found yourselves in such a moment; and you are so unfortunate to only have such a moment to find!”82 Anchored in “we Chinese” and “we Chinese women” with all their specificity, such stirrings intimate a trope if not carry a yet unseen form of humanity in the making or in the imperative need of being made. To the extent that such stirrings of unseen “grand souls” constitute a center of gravity in those early women’s lifeworks, they give a defining horizon to twentieth century Chinese women’s imaginative landscapes and the actual but shifting world of their struggles. How such a horizon figures in various dimensions and styles of Chinese women’s writings and what it may stir up in their life journeys are among the organizing questions for the chapters that follow.
2 Qiu Jin and Her Imaginary

We sisters must learn to put aside everything we have preoccupied ourselves with before and focus on what we must do for our future – as if our former selves are dead and we have returned to this world in other forms of humanity.

_Qiu Jin, 1904, Tokyo_¹

Autumn wind, autumn rain – they make one die of sorrow.

_Qiu Jin, 1907, Shaoxing before her execution_²

Qiu Jin, is a name that evokes a constellation of topoi, imageries, modes of memories, patterns of feelings, and genres of lives in the textures of modern Chinese history and historiography. The tragedy of a talented woman; an unlikely monument of an epochal and abortive modern revolution; a female with a gentle figure and bound feet who made dynamite and used swords; a born member of the gentry elite beheaded by the elite powers; a physically absent mother remembered into textual immortality by her daughter and other young women; a traveler amid uncharted waters at the turn of the twentieth century whose life story became part of modern Chinese vocabulary and gave rise to endless occasions for social commemorations and literary envisionings. Writing and remembering Qiu Jin, it feels, is a passage that stirs and never settles.

Her life was short; she lived only for thirty-two years. Born in 1875 into a gentry family of Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, in 1895 she moved to Hunan Province where her father received another official post.³ A year later she was married into a merchant household of considerable wealth. A “boudoir poet” _（guixii shiren）_, she wrote classical poetry in addition to being a Confucian wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. She accompanied her husband to Beijing in 1902 as his wealth paved his way to an official title there.⁴ Then on one of those normal days, Qiu Jin pawned her jewelry and not long afterwards, in June of 1904, left her speechless family behind and boarded a ship for Japan, joining the first group of Chinese women who went abroad to “study the world.”⁵ Two years later, Qiu Jin returned a prominent member of the Chinese republican movement. In the year that followed, she was executed by the Manchu court on the grounds of political treason.
To Do or Not to Do: The Question

For scholars of modern China, Qiu Jin is primarily a political figure, one of the defining figures of the 1911 Revolution. Her literary writing is relatively small in terms of quantity and has been largely treated as textual evidence of her politics given the fact that her noted pieces are often written for social agitation. Yet Qiu Jin wrote throughout her life, beginning in girlhood, and many of her works are composed in the form of classical poetry. On the eve of her execution by the Manchu government, Qiu Jin wrote one more poem on “sorrows” (see the second quote at the beginning of this chapter) in classical poetic style. Her actions in social revolution and her acts of literary writing mutually shape, and indicate, a link internal to her life. This link, much missed in scholarly discussion of Qiu Jin, is the terrain whereby I begin my revisiting of her and her lifework. Her poetry on “sorrows” may be a good point of entry.

Qiu Jin loved writing poetry, a predilection apparently at odds with the neo-Confucian decree that “a virtuous woman is a woman with no talent” as it had often been reiterated in gentry-households since the Song Dynasty (960–1279). In the late imperial period of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1644, 1644–1911), however, writing gentry women were not only growing in number but publishing via family venues, especially in Jiangnan – areas south of the Yangtze River. Zhejiang Province where Qiu Jin’s parents came from was the heartland of the Jiangnan region. Her grandparents, as the historical records register, seemed to have encouraged her to read and write, as well as ride horses and fence. And as one of those elite “writing women” in late imperial China, her literary writings seemed to have been implicitly welcomed as an asset as well in her husband’s merchant-family, for “literature of cloistered chambers” or “boudoir literature” (guixiou wenxüe) brought to the rising merchant wealth a refined cultural mark of the Confucian gentry (shuxiang mendi). This is also to say that Qiu Jin’s early writings in classic forms of poetry appear to belong to the category of “boudoir literature,” judging by her use of its range of inherited topoi and patterns of emotions, a long established category in the canon of Chinese classical culture.

One of the signature genres of “boudoir literature” features the motif of “boudoir sorrow” (guiyüan). The topics of sorrow fills volumes of classical poetry by gentry-women, mostly if not always a woman’s longing for her long absent husband or lover. Confucian aesthetic protocols stipulate that such a motif of sorrow work with grievance but forestalls anger (yüan re bunu) and sorrowfulness be subtly measured, lest coarse excessiveness turns the sorrowful into the critical, thereby exceeding the Confucian codes for womanly behavior and styles of sentiments. There are, of course, poems of “excessive sorrows” in “literature of the cloistered chambers” where grievance dangerously borders on anger, threatening to evoke more than what is deemed appropriate in terms of content and proportional in terms of form. Scholars regard those poems as “surprising moments” in Chinese women’s classical literary history. Qiu Jin wrote “poems of sorrows” as well. Of her approximately one hundred and seventy seven poems, two-thirds
written prior to 1903 have “boudoir sorrows” as their motif. Going through the day after Pure Brightness the 5th solar term, rhyming alone (Dudui ci qingmin yun) is one example:

Alone in springtime, sitting in silent thought, / the fine grass bathing in the setting sun / breaks my heart. / The wall of sorrows is miles high, / so let crisp wine send me to unknown spheres. / Giving away dowry-property with the pleasure of a hermit, / while lost in poetry and writing volumes. / [I am] Deep in the filthy water and yet still crystal, / must have been a water lotus in a former existence (My italics).12

At first glance, this is a poem on a woman’s “sorrow” induced by experiencing spring (chunchou) in the absence of a male figure as the origin of her meaningful happiness. Noted or anonymous authors of the Chinese “cloistered chambers” afford us a long range of nuanced figurations of such sorrows, from their earliest sporadic pieces in the era of Book of Songs to their more sustained appearances in the Tang and the Ming and Qing dynasties.13 Qiu Jin’s poem seems to continue this tradition in terms of her choice and execution of the inherited topoi. At dusk on a fine spring day, a woman sits alone, mirroring nature’s youthful but fleeting moment and figuring a passing life without fulfillment and recognition, longing sorrowfully. This “sitting woman,” so configured, could also evoke the traditionally gendered rubrics of a generic gentry woman, expectedly lacks and hence longs for the presence of a man, husband or lover, real or fantasized, to fill her with life, actualize her womanhood, and define the essence of her humanity. Her longing and sorrow are properly measured, as the male-gendered presence that she lacks serves as the structural premise for her feelings to be articulated with organized and hence appropriate significations. Grief without anger, sorrow without critique, and longing without unrestful or disturbing desire.14

The observable continuity of such a structural heritage in Qiu Jin’s poem, however, is complicated by the tensions engendered in its shifting images and jarring tonality. The opening lines evoke common enough female “sorrows.” Yet the sorrowful feelings in the next two lines reach the disproportionate and solidified magnitude of a “wall miles high” rather than, as they usually should, flowing or subsiding like “drifting flowers on waters” or “the shade of the moon shifts in the inner chambers.”15 The potency of sorrow here is excessive by the aesthetic measurement of “boudoir literature.” The tone also sharpens as the act of drinking and getting drunk is openly embraced in the next line, unwomanly behavior in the book of Confucian protocols. Such behavior has of course prominently figured in the Chinese male literati’s poetry or occurred famously as legends would have it in many moments of their lives, as exemplified by the crown poet of the Tang Dynasty Li Bai with his many renowned lines about drinking and drunkenness as enactments of transcendence, ecstasy, or protest.16 As it is usually expected and understood, this behavior marks frustrated or failed moments in those male literati’s political careers or pursuit of officialdom, as well as their ways of coping with or overcoming such frustration and failure, at
least in discursive gestures. In Qiu Jin’s poem, it is a woman who adopts this behavior, causing a structural shift in the signification of both the behavior and its poetic rendition. Such shifting is furthered in the next two lines as the “sorrowful woman” continues to venture into male-exclusive forms of social and cultural activity: “Giving away dowry-property with the pleasure of the chivalrous, / lost in poetry and writing volumes.” As a social genre of being, “the chivalrous” is normally not for a gentry-woman to embody. They could be generous in helping the needy but with the permission, always, of the familial authority. And indulging in poetry writing with free abandon is the distinct prerogative of the male literati, for even the most privileged gentry-women must confine their writing to the margin of life and never be excessive on any occasion. Qiu Jin’s poem of “boudoir sorrow” here turns out to be a powerful intervention into the socio-cultural territories of male prerogatives in the figure of “the weaker sex.”

Such intervention gives rise to a poetic momentum, which remakes and indeed redefines the texture of “womanly sorrows” in the final lines of the poem: “[I am] Deep in the filthy water yet crystal, / must have been a water lotus in a former existence.” Amid repugnant conditions, the sorrowful woman who is also the author of the poem here seems a reflective witness to her own conditioned state of being as an active embodiment of a refusal of such a state – refusing the closing over of the filthy fluids while being in their midst. “Water lotus” conjures up a key element of Buddhist symbolism – a Buddha’s seat in the form of a lotus flower, which marks an impulse in the figuration of the “sorrowful” here to transcend the state and status of her gendered sorrows. The center of gravity in Qiu Jin’s poem thus seems to both bring about and anchor in a female figure, tension-ridden and struggling, both embedded in and working against as well as altering her textual structuration. Writing in the Chinese gentry-women’s literary tradition, Qiu Jin implodes its organizing protocols and containing rubrics. At times sharpened but mostly mediated by inherited topoi and tempos, such radical turns work with mutable imagery and sustained intensity in and through Qiu Jin’s early boudoir (guixiou) poetry as a recurrent rhythm, structurally distinguishing her poems from a large quantity of writings by gentry-women of the previous dynasties or in her own times.

To the extent that alterations in writing are bound up with changes in the material world and one’s unsettled perceptions of one’s place in it, Qiu Jin’s implosive relation to the literary tradition of Chinese elite women registers a deep-running crisis in her life and society. Such implosive relation in effect anticipates momentous social changes that are neither confined to nor resolvable within the literary terrain. Indeed, when she inscribes and implodes the classical structuration of “boudoir sorrows,” the process of writing itself both distances her from her own condition as a gentry wife and brings her into contact with yet unseen possibilities embedded therein, as registered and evoked in the image of the “crystal lotus” amid “filthy waters.” As such distancing-cum-discovery renders palpable the feelings and sounds of her “silent thoughts,” the fact that they cannot be housed in the available genres and structurations of the classical cultural tradition deepens in Qiu Jin the sense of her poetry as a textual aporia of
sorts. Further, rather than perpetuating or celebrating such an aporia that in and of itself would tend to slide into a concealed state of impoverishing stasis, the process of writing for Qiu Jin seems to intensify and precipitate energies that, in the absence of viable textual dwellings, burst their momentums upon the shape and body of her life, literally. While continuing to write such poems of “boudoir sorrows” that are not about “boudoir sorrows,” Qiu Jin began to re-make her own physical configuration in ways that gave rise to a series of sharp turns in her actual life, and writing.

Like most gentry women, Qiu Jin’s feet were bound when she was very young (since she was six);21 and she had been, particularly after her marriage, dressed in embroidered short coats with long skirts of fine material completed by a stylized hairdo befitting her age and status.22 On 23 February 1904, during her second year as a Beijing gentry official’s wife and the twenty-ninth year of her life as a woman with bound feet, Qiu Jin did the unthinkable. She unbound her feet, took off her embroidered Chinese style short coat and long skirt and donned a Western-style male jacket and trousers. The extant photograph of her in such guise shows that the jacket and trousers are a bit large, and, she also complemented this new arrangement with a bow tie on her neck, a peaked cap on her head, and a pair of leather men’s shoes for her feet. The packaging of these items of clothing results in neither a dress suit (given the casual cut) nor a lounge suit (once the bow tie is added). The peaked cap on her head strikes an incongruous note with the bow tie, peculiarly framing a face whose soft and fine texture connotes something at odds with the masculine cap and tie, as well as with the entire attire. Accentuating such a discontinuous effect is a light and gentle smile, emanating from her almond-shaped eyes and the corners of her lips, suggestive of something akin to mockery and provocation with a touch of amusement.23 Yet such a subtle radiance is haunted by the uncertain but chilly impression that her leather shoes compel: the shoes look large and empty, as if there were no real human feet in them.

In February, Qiu Jin received an invitation to attend a social gathering of the elite women, who were mostly wives of Beijing’s gentry-officials to have modern-style “discussions on literature and poetry.” She attended, shockingly, in her recently invented “Western attire” with all its jarring components.24 Introduced to Hattori Shigeko, the wife of Hattori Unokochi, the Japanese head faculty of the newly established Beijing Grand Academy (jingshi da xuetang), whose presence apparently marked the modern aura of the occasion, Qiu Jin immediately entered into debate with her on “whether Confucian doctrines should be revered or criticized.” While Shigeko embodied her husband’s position on the issue and “insisted on revering traditional Confucian values,” Qiu Jin was “blatantly critical.”25 A peculiar irony was at work here: Hattori Shigeko’s “modern” status was dependent on her husband’s “mastery” of “modern” à la “Western” knowledge. Such knowledge provided her husband with access to the social arrangement of power relations that it legitimized while gaining its values through its legitimating function that secured his contract with the Chinese imperial state. It was with this contract that Hattori Unokochi as a Japanese man landed in an institutional
Qiu Jin in Western male attire

Figure 2.1 Qiu Jin in Western male attire
position involving high political stakes and significant cultural implications for grounding one of the cornerstones of modern China. As one of the earliest key figures in the making of what later became the “cradle of Chinese modern culture” (today’s Beijing University), Hattori Unokochi troped the cognitive capital of Western modernity and the primary scene of its Chinese inscription authorized by the imperial state as “Chinese.” Such inscription is cognizant of the imperative power of “the modern trends” and stipulates that their working apparatus be shipped into the Chinese context without allowing structural transformations of the established power relations among the members of Chinese society let alone encouraging articulations of more imaginative forms of human life. The Japanese head faculty of the leading Chinese modern academy, in other words, prefigured the kind of “nationalist ideology” for the kind of “nation building” that became definable in the 1930s as “the passage to Chinese modernity,” at once “derivatively” Western and “indigenously” Chinese. The problematic of such a “nation” with its claimed “Chineseness,” along with the peculiarity that a Japanese man was appointed to be one of its key tropes, will be unpacked further later. Suffice it to say here that Qiu Jin, debated with his wife who enacted his position, seemed to have already seen how such a yet-to-be body politic, as her debate with its champion Hattori indicates, was a world where a great many Chinese, particularly women, would have no actual place to be. With their “Chineseness” shaped by their bound feet and other associated imperatives for social behavior, Chinese women would be ill fitted for the “modern” part of such “modern China,” their lack of access to cognitive and other kinds of capital of the modern impoverish, dispossess, and indeed foreclose them insofar as their gendered “Chineseness” must remain unchanged. Yet any reshaping of China with its “Chineseness” would require them to critically transform the power relations codified by “Confucian doctrines” and revolutionize their lives, which “the Chinese” part of such “modern China” prohibits. Such an impossible “place” for them to be is that of a gendered aporia and social impasse. The urgent question, for Qiu Jin, was what to do and what was to be done to inhabit and alter such placeless place.

In both “Chinese” and “Western” eyes, Qiu Jin in her bodily remaking that is also a performative social action was a strange sight. There was something psychically “ominous” about a Chinese gentry woman with unbound feet moving around in Western-style male attire openly debating with the Western educated Chinese official of Japanese nationality. Such a figure bears on the radical uncertainty of a historical juncture marked by a series of drastic turns of events that were unraveling established codes of social normalcy. The 1895 fiasco of the Sino-Japanese War and the failure of the 1898 Reform, followed by the 1900 peasant rebellion and its catastrophic suppression by the Eight-Allied Forces including England, Germany, Italy, Austria, Czarist Russia, Japan and the U.S., left the capital city in ruins and exposed the political paralysis of the imperial state with the wide spread corruption in its gentry officialdom. Qiu Jin saw in those events signs of a breakdown of a civilization on a previously unknown scale. She wrote about her feeling of despair with her first-hand observation of
the decay of the political elite, of which her husband was a minor instance and yet daily reminder. Such despair was at the same time coupled with anger and an urgent sense of yet inarticulated imperative and opportunity for change.\(^29\) Having long struggled with her gendered confinements, in other words, Qiu Jin’s despair about China’s civilizational disintegration seems indistinguishable from an anxious perception of social opening. The two in mixture underline her life and work explicitly from 1904 on, precipitating a general presentiment into a distinct impulse to “do something.”

The looming breakdown of a centuries-long imperial system and institutions with its implied magnitude of violence indeed summoned and enabled Qiu Jin to step out of “the cloistered boudoir” just as it compelled more women to find ways out of their shaken if not already shattering cloistering walls. Her transboundary moves physicalize as much as give form to a gender-specific struggle to survive a civilizational crisis imaginatively, by refusing to be fixed and fixated in a state of despair and its concomitant political paralysis, while altering the conditions made of the force fields of the old regime and the new violence. As an embodied figure of the doubly alien (neither “Chinese” nor “Western” and neither “female” or “male”), Qiu Jin not only de-gendered her personal bodily configuration but activated a public imagination for possible alternative ways to inhabit a time of utter uncertainty. She wrote in 1904 in one of her vernacular prose pieces for women: “We cannot depend on others in this world, we must do something by ourselves” particularly and precisely when such “something” needed to be invented itself along with the ways of “doing” it.\(^30\) When Qiu Jin put her body on the line for such invention or really rendered her body as such invention, she was stirring up imaginations and practically creating possibilities by which Chinese women might survive a rigidified governing arrangement repressive to women and its crushing collapse into a “modern world” that was by no means necessarily friendlier to its “female” members. Qiu Jin’s physical reconfiguration, it seems, is an act of survival that entails implications and mobilizes energies radically beyond the usual terms of mere surviving: imaginative survival as and is active transformation.

While working through her gendered aporia in writing, in short, Qiu Jin was revolutionizing her way of bodily existence to exceed the social impasse in life. In June 1904 she left Beijing for Tianjing and sailed from Tianjing to Tokyo via Inchon, Pusan, and Kobe, becoming one of the few women students among the earliest Chinese who went abroad “to examine the world.”\(^31\) The social and human matrix that sustained her in such transformation and indeed enabled her to take such drastic action is discussed in detail in the next section. Suffice it to say here that such a journey across national boundaries was not to be a smooth sailing. In fact Qiu Jin was heading into a storm of history the volatility of which could open unprecedented horizons as well as shatter the map-less traveler. It was in the midst of such storms that Qiu Jin wrote one of her best-known poems about mapping, mapping China in ruins, mapping her own body in motion, and mapping the world in a time of drastic shifting: “Written in the Boat amid the Yellow Sea upon Seeing the Japanese Military Map for the Russo-Japanese War\(^32\) and upon a Japanese Co-traveler’s Request for a Poem as a Gift” (Hunghai zhouzhong riren suojü bingjian rie zhanzheng ditu).
Coming and going with the wind over endless miles, / A lone body sailing on the East Sea carries the thunders of Spring. / How could one bear to stand by and see that the map of Chinese land shifts in its colors of belonging? / Or to let the rivers and mountains be torn into wrecks and scorched into ashes! / Muddy liquor cannot melt the anguished tears shed for the pain of the country / saving it from dangerous times depends on the talents of millions. / With the blood of multitude offered in devotion, / Heaven and earth must be re-mapped into healing energies.33

This is a poem anchored with a woman’s “lone” body and written with her “anguished tears.” While reminiscent of Qiu Jin’s early poems, it explicitly departs from the genre of “boudoir sorrows.” A watershed in her aesthetic practices, the poem seems to both indicate and constitute the woman writer’s movement from the boudoir onto open battlefields, this time internationally constituted. The figure of an ocean-crossing woman in the poem both bodies forth and marks off one of the earliest critical mappings of modern China in its relation to the modern world, with a gender-specific impetus. This raises painful questions about the “shifting colors” of the Chinese human geography and its agony over the problem of its “belonging” in the “dangerous” times of shifting modernity. Uncannily and specifically, the Chinese land is seen as a bodily rupture ripped open by the drives of ethnocentric colonial ambitions in forms of aggressive acquisition, a definitive masculine attribute of the modern, inflicting “pain,” compelling “anguished tears,” and forcing “radical reconfiguration,” all of which doubles its counterpart in the actual world, namely, the poet herself. The proximity between the land and the woman in their predicaments intimates how, in this particular and emblematic case, gender-specific agony is not and cannot be gender-confined, as will be discussed further later; and how the life of art and art of living, while never identical, could be if not always has been mutually informing.

Qiu Jin the actual woman traveled across the Yellow Sea, the East Sea, and the Sea of Japan while scrutinizing “the map of China” scripted by the Japanese military. Her poetic writing at the same time was turning into a literary act of historical and personal significance. Historically, such writing was among the earliest in Chinese literature that reprocessed the shifting of the world map made and owned by modern expansionism to “see” how its ambitious design required the Chinese land and its human geography to be ravished. Personally, it was a deepening process of the writer’s re-making of her own existence beyond her gendered aporia by the way of moving toward participation in life – “doing something” – on a transnational plane, as prefigured in “the thunders of Spring” carried within that woman and waiting to be unleashed. Such spirit pulses throughout Qiu Jin’s writings in subsequent years in such a way that one may characterize those writings as “activist” in the sense that they are “activating,” which means that they issue forth an imaginative opening for human potential to actualize its yet-to-be actualized contents. Examples are many. Another famed poem written in 1906–1907 reads: “Lamenting the country’s danger and
mourning my drifting life, / but ominous mountain passes must be paved into my fearless passage. / Who could say that females are not brilliant spirits? / they are swords that vibrate through life to make history day and night!”

“On Feeling – Written While Traveling in Japan” (Yonhuai – yon riben shi zuo), published in Autumn Rain in 1905, is as good as many others to illustrate such activating energy:

Heaven and earth are in darkness when the sun and moon have lost their vision. / Who are the aides to the lethargic world of women? Jewels pawned to cross the dark blue ocean, / Leaving my own flesh and blood I step out of the last gate of the country. / Unbinding my feet to undo the poisoned years, / Arousing the souls of a hundred flowers to passionate movement. / Reading the fabric of my silk handkerchief, / Half stained by blood and half by tears of pain (my italics).

Here the foregrounded female figure aspires to activate women out of the “lethargic world” where the fabric of humanity is ruptured and stained with blood and tears. In the absence of readily viable ways of healing, she appeals to the “souls” embedded therein to dislodge themselves with “passionate movement.” The appeal is accompanied by and gives rise to a physically painful but viable action. The female figure unbinds her feet, which amounts to a reshaping of the socially deformed bones of Chinese femaleness. This remaking of Chinese womanhood in a foreign land written up in a poem (which is subtitled “Written While Traveling in Japan”) has its real counterpart in Qiu Jin herself sojourning in Japan. The figurative in poem, as it were, lives in her literal or corporal sister in the material world. It was in Japan that Qiu Jin finally divorced her husband, an unheard of act that liberated her from socio-psychic abuse and oppression that entailed her severing her former economic resources and concomitant status.

Once an owner of property, Qiu Jin now was selling what remained of her jewelry for food and textbooks. Battling discriminatory pressures in a modern metropolis, meanwhile, she also walked daily on foot in Tokyo to save transportation money and break the deadening effects of social isolation. The physical strength required by and gained through such daily exercise also can be understood as political and social resources, which sheds light on Qiu Jin’s decision to impose on herself certain kinds of physical training that normally were reserved for male students and included long hours of running, high jumps, and fencing. In letters she sent in 1905, the same year the above poem was produced, to her elder brother in China, Qiu Jin wrote about how she “is doing physical training and exercise every day;” and how “my body is rather strong and can endure what must be endured.” The demand that such activity made on her body was obviously stringent, and the pain she must have endured was unlikely to have been less than the pain she suffered when her feet were first bound. It was commonly known among many Chinese women who made the same attempt how acutely such reshaping could and did hurt. After battling through a long day of “modern training and exercises,” they soaked their feet in cold water at night to alleviate swelling, blood congestion, bleeding, and excruciating pain. In Qiu Jin’s case
just as in all those other cases, the defining difference between the two lies in the fact that an institution of authority imposed the earlier rupture, with the intended and materialized effect of domestication and domination. And the later struggle to unbind her feet and force them to function in radically different ways was waged in a decisive sense by herself as an act of agency-in-the-making amidst conditions that were not made by herself.

Qiu Jin was reshaping the bones of her body as she rewrote her way of living. By understanding that Qiu Jin in her final three years of life as a modern Chinese woman was re-shaped with “stains of blood and tears of pain” in an actual sense, one may thereby approach the strikingly new mode of her activating writings with an informed sense of this actuality. Such new mode of activating writing suggests how changes in daily life activity generate form-giving energies for and are not merely reflected in creative writings, just as new modes of writings are constitutive of and not merely reflections of changes in life. While Qiu Jin’s life underwent unpredicted and unpredictable change since 1904, indeed, her writings proliferated and ventured into styles, tunes, forms, and modes far beyond the topoi, genres, and structurations of classic women’s literature. Meanwhile, when alterations in her life precipitated shifts in her writing, the writing generated imaginative momentums that in turn fueled the changes in her life. While the blood and tears shed in the daily scenes of actual life were reprocessed by Qiu Jin in her writing, in short, Qiu Jin through that process envisions and brings alive the spirit to “rouse the souls of a hundred flowers to passionate movements” in her world. Writing for Qiu Jin, as for the other women writers discussed in this book, was not only an act of doing something in and of itself but also a process of generating imaginative strength to attempt something beyond the normalized realm of the literary and its gendered limit. Changes in writing and activities of daily life here seem not only mutually informing but also mutually enforcing and transforming forces, without ever being identical with one another of course. There, too, can be located a poem she wrote for the photograph she took in 1906 that registers such a drastic bodily transformation:

Who is this one with such a presence? – A bodily return of former celestial bones. / Images of this world are illusory, yet future visions must be true. / I regretted having encountered you much too late, but I gain new strength from you as we share our hearts. / When you see my old friends some day on the other shore, please speak of my nirvana now.

Such “bodily presence” designates an impetus of supple fluidity and fluid potency that shape up an unprecedented change that is no less than a gender-specific human revolution, a revolutionary “nirvana.”

The last years of Qiu Jin’s daily life was indeed full of revolutionary activities beyond the realm of the literary, while informed by and transformed with the spirit of the “thunders of spring” her literary writings evoked. The abolition in 1905 of the imperial civil examination system by the Manchu court did not
resolve its crises; while the establishment of the Revolutionary Alliance (tong-menghui), the first modern political party in Chinese history, in the same year gave new impetus to the anti-Manchu movements and military uprisings that were already gaining momentum nationwide. In 1906, Sun Zhongshan, Huang Xing, and Zhang Taiyan completed their *Strategies of revolution* (*Geming fanglue*) the guiding document for organizing “citizen armies;” and the first military rising directly under their influence and led by the members of the Alliance took place in the border areas of Jiangxi and Hunan Provinces. Qiu Jin apparently saw in these events possibilities for translating the activating spirit of her poetry into transformative forces of history. She joined the Alliance in Tokyo in 1905 and, with her presence and all her public writings, brought into its still forming political programming the question of women’s place in the future modern body politic. The idea of equal rights for women including specifically the rights to vote, for instance, was not only part of its agenda but a visible aspect of its political self-definition. After Qiu Jin returned to Shanghai in December, as one of the Alliance’s leading members in charge of political agitations in Zhejiang Province, Qiu Jin grew deeply involved in an extensive range of revolutionary activities in Shanghai, Shaoxing, Jiaxing, Hangzhou, and the surrounding areas. In early 1907, she arrived in Shaoxing to take up the position of the principal of the Datong Academy, an educational center where anti-Manchu and anti-imperial soldiers were trained. A few months later, she was arrested by the Manchu government and executed on the grounds of political treason.

Scholars of modern Chinese literature who take the nation building project as their organizing rubrics have posed important questions about the gendered nature of the revolutions in twentieth century China. Rather than focusing on the nature and limit of modern revolutions including the 1911 Revolution, the question specific to my discussion is whether Qiu Jin’s activities “outside” the literary realm centrally affected the making of modern Chinese women’s literature and their literary imagination. Further, to what extent do her literary acts figure as central components in the feminist revolutionization of modern Chinese consciousness and society? A revisiting of Qiu Jin’s last poem and its reception may serve as one way to shed some light on those questions. “Autumn wind, autumn rain – they make one die of sorrow” is deemed to be Qiu Jin’s last poem written prior to her execution, and her only response to the Qing court when she was tortured with the aim of obtaining information on other republican revolutionaries and a confession of crimes including her role in the organizing of anti-Qing military uprisings. In purely textual terms of its literary imagery and motif, the poem in and of itself seems a variant of the classical genre of “female sorrows” within the Chinese gentry-women’s literary tradition. And yet no one at the time could fail to see the revolutionary impetus at work in the body of the poem comprising both a figurative inside of the literary and an actual outside world of the political, with which a woman refused a prevailing social order and its precarious operation, enunciating its doom by putting her own body on the line to “rouse the public spirit” to *actively inhabit* a “dangerous times” and thereby open up imaginative horizons for alternatives. Fully cognizant of the impetus
that bound the poem up with the larger political context, the Manchu court filed and published it as a part of Qiu Jin’s “criminal record” that warranted her death. This is a poem that revolutionizes the poetics of Chinese women’s classical literary tradition as a haunting memory and a material monument of the revolutionary activity inherent in the core of its writing and the quality of its evocative feelings. “Female sorrows” in modern Chinese literature from then on have been no longer naturally containable by the walls of “the inner chambers” or other social structures that “cloister” humanity and its art; often now they summon the specters of Qiu Jin and others like her, and thereby are associated with the revolutionary potential of women who threaten to burst their aporia or impasse that is “the continuum of history.”

Such revolution in poetic imagination is also a revolutionization of society in terms of its members’ concrete ways of looking at women and remembering-cum-recognizing their signification. Nearly five decades after Qiu Jin’s death, Fan Wenlan (1893–1969), a prominent historian in his 60s, recalled his childhood memory of Qiu Jin’s activity at the Datong Academy as follows:

The Datong Academy, whose principal she was, was only a few minutes’ walk from my home. The playground of the school was just across a narrow creek from our house. It was the greatest pleasure of us children to watch the students during military drill with their “foreign” rifles – students did such things in those days. Whenever the bugle sounded, we ran down to the creek to watch the goings-on on the other side.

Qiu Jin used to wear men’s clothes, a long gown and leather shoes. Often she went riding on horseback. When we saw her coming, we crowded around her horse. She would look down at us kindly and make sure that none of us got hurt. Perhaps she was also wondering whether any of us would grow up to follow her example and work for revolution...? We were just children then and knew hardly anything about this woman... We ran after her out of mere curiosity.

As a Marxist historian, Fan Wenlan’s conscious political views disposed him to be enthusiastic about Qiu Jin as a “revolutionary for China’s independence.” In his vivid recollection of Qiu Jin riding on the horse back supervising military students, he seems strikingly oblivious to the vital detail that this was a woman whose feet had been bound for most of her life. While most of her life was fixed in gendered bondage, those unbound feet never fit her men’s shoes in modern style and were always hurting when she was on the move. And his readers and fellow historians in the 1960s and later were unlikely to remember such detail either, evinced by the absence of the detail in the copious scholarly works on Qiu Jin produced throughout the twentieth century. In fact, even when in 1907 large regiments of Manchu soldiers surrounded the empty Datong Academy to arrest her (she had ordered her students to leave the school) as if approaching a fearfully powerful danger, when curious men and women crowded in to watch how she was beheaded at the execution field in Shaoxing, and when feminist
women and the general public commemorated her as a revolutionary pioneer of modern China throughout the subsequent crisis-ridden decades, few of them seemed to really remember that this was a woman whose long deformed feet were only unbound in the last three years of her life and whose foot-prints were written with, literally, “stains of blood.”

Such a suspension of memory or liquidation of history could be read as a symptom of gender-blindness in modern Chinese consciousness about women, literature, history, and social change. Yet it could also be seen as evidence of the effects of a largely unseen feminist revolutionization since, if “too much history [is] poisonous,” Qiu Jin’s literary and non-literary acts amount to a bursting of the continuum of such history, its genres of expected femaleness, its perpetuating norms of memory, and its boundaries of imagination. At the heart of the bursting is her “doing something” through neither a historical teleology nor pure nomadic randomness. Constitutive and emblematic of a specific historical juncture of radical uncertainty, such “doing something” bridges while being engendered by both imaginative writing and actual living, artistic reprocessing and social activism, assisted the transformation of modern Chinese women in tandem with the making of modern Chinese history.

**Toward Homeplace: Feminist Passaging**

Such bridging amounts to an imaginative and actual human passaging amid the force fields of a radically shifting world that, inherently uncertain, begets rhythms inexhaustible by the available expressions of the times. Quite a few Chinese scholars and China specialists have categorized Qiu Jin as a “nationalist feminist” in order to explain her high significance in the formation of modern China. Positing modern Chinese history as a local variation of the universal European model of “nation building,” such characterization also confines the signification of Qiu Jin’s lifework to the bioethnic ideology of nationalism as it is commonly known. Feminist critics have long articulated the “unease” if not downright contradiction that lies in the marriage between “feminism” and such “nationalism,” even under the attacks of colonial powers. True, those who are primarily interested in Qiu Jin’s “nationalist politics” housed in bioethnic nationalist terminology, in the light of which history is the teleological unfolding of national destiny, can find pertinent evidence of such nationalist rhetoric in a number of her anti-Manchu political writings and agitations. Yet as I indicate in Chapter 1, China at the turn of the century was so utterly at sea, in a state of such ominous disintegration that no teleology in its strict definition could have been claimed to be on the side of a bioethnically defined “Chinese nation” and working for its “manifest destiny.” The divinity in its secularized versions does not seem to grace Qiu Jin’s “nationalist sentiment.” The agony of the Chinese land mapped in the above quoted poem “Written in the Boat amid the Yellow Sea upon Seeing the Japanese Military Map for the Russo-Japanese War” for instance is not and cannot be reduced to the structure of feelings of such nationalist ideology. It would be difficult to miss and erroneous to dismiss the persistent traces of a female
figure drifting and wandering amid the turmoil recurrent in Qiu Jin’s writings, even in her most resolute advocacies for specific “nationalist” projects intended to overthrow the Qing court. Such famed lines as “coming and going with the wind over endless miles, / A lone body sailing on the East Sea carries the thunders of Spring” or “lamenting the country’s danger and mourning my drifting life, / but ominous mountain passes must be paved into my fearless passage” (my italics), are among many occurring in poems that advocate anti-Qing militancy. The anxiety registered in such a figure surfaced repeatedly with sharpening impulses in her later writings including, for instance, some of the letters she wrote from Tokyo to her elder brother. The following is from one of her more explicit articulations:

[My brother], to my mind, the most painful of all human pains is what your sister now endures, one which cannot be spoken let alone heard. Staying indoors without the delight of a family; stepping outside only to find a wandering life, roving across the world with neither friend nor kin to help, with an ending somewhere or nowhere in future that simply cannot be predicted or discerned. You, my brother, are faring slightly better than I; but you share my pain in that you cannot be heard and you have no help in this world either. Fortunately, you are born a man; your ending will likely be ten times better than your sister’s.

This letter was written on November 28, 1905, nearly three months after she joined the Revolutionary Alliance in Tokyo. She met with Sun Zhongshan at Huang Xing’s residence on September 4, 1905, and had a long talk with him about the political position and strategies of the Alliance. She concurred with the positions and overall principles held by the organization and became its second member from Zhejiang Province. While “doing something” in the political party as a reasoned and committed republican revolutionary, Qiu Jin inhabited an acute feeling of placelessness which both informed and motivated but was not fully expressed in her commitment to what is essentially China’s first modern political party and its agendas. As early as in her Hunan years, she wrote of a certain longing that was close to homesickness, ostensibly about her hometown Shaoxing or her parents. Impulses of such a longing haunt her writings over the years with mediated variations and mounting intensity. Traveling, which was not new to Chinese elite women in late imperial China in general, was often captured in her poems with such impulses of longing. One of those poems is titled “On Traveling by Steamboat” (Lunchuan jishi) and its first part reads as follows:

Looking in four directions there appear no shores, / Vastness is grandeur itself: / the boat seems a small bird flying in passing, / Mountains are dancing as if dragons; / Ten-thousand sounds are surging in the waves, / Ten-thousand peaks rising into the clouds. / In the midst of misty waters, / longing for a homeplace rises between one’s brows.
The term “homeplace” is my choice to translate the Chinese word “jia.” It is a term that refers to the effective family as well as a trope evoking a psychic sense of belonging. Its conventional rendition in English as “home” or “family” seems insufficient to convey the evocative feelings in Qiu Jin’s use here. Written during her second trip to Beijing in 1903, “Steamboat” as a whole seems to register an overt sense of an exhilarating departure toward a particular destination, namely, the capital city; yet at the same time it evokes a feeling of wandering, caught in “four directions” in a directionless world. Even as the end of the poem claims “the city of a divine land” to be “within miles” and settles with the consoling note “do not sing swan songs of impossible travels,” the feeling of “impossible travels” is discernibly at work there while a sense of placelessness lingers. A sensorium of fundamental volatility is heightened in Qiu Jin’s writings in subsequent years as she confronted not only the physical ruins of the capital but also the piled up social wreckages across the country. As her place in the world or what she called “final destination” was persistently in question, her traveling into the modern world did become “impossible” in that what she endured in the processes still “cannot be said let alone be heard.” Such feelings of placelessness as longings for place, uncannily, evoke what a century later feminist critics call “homeplaces,” which I use in my above translation. In bell hooks’ words, “homeplaces” are the places “where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls,” the spatial sense and social sphere of human belonging.

While such a sense of placelessness and its double – longing for homeplace – may be construed as a variant of the universalized modernist sensibility of the metaphysical absence, one may do better by exploring its historical fabric and tracing how Qiu Jin reprocesses its painful pulses in her life, and her writing. Upon arriving in Beijing in 1902, Qiu Jin encountered a group of elite women who had also come to the capital with their official husbands, and shared her growing sense of crisis, anxiety, and desire to “do something.” Their love of poetry and critical views on the state as well as their private affairs soon turned their usual social calls into occasions for making close bonds of unusual significance. Such bonds at first took the familiar form of “feminine literary friendships.” The women regularly met at each other’s residences, and employed an established rhyme sequence to write poems as they responded to one another, while having wine or taking strolls to appreciate the changing seasons in their gardens. Traditionally, such socializing among the wives of gentry-officials was premised on and indicative of the abundant wealth afforded by the dynastic bureaucracy with its perpetuated structural stability, of which those wives of literary cultivation were products and emblems. While such abundance was shriveling and stability collapsing, the ostensibly traditional socializing in Qiu Jin’s social circle was doubled by a making of transformative female friendship, within which an acute sense of crisis was shared and new ideas about society, culture, history, and women were nursed. Coming of age during the ill-fated Reform and shaken by the social turmoil around them, those women explored ideas of “the modern” and were taken by the notion of “equality among all lives.” Beyond discursive
debate, furthermore, they tried out their ideas of “modernity” by “doing something” while taking one another as their witnessing and validating spectators.70

When Qiu Jin unbound her feet and donned Western style male attire in 1904, for instance, she wrote a poem, folded it along with her Chinese bridal dress, and sent both to Wu Zhiying, one of those women friends, “as a gift.”71 The poem reads as follows:

For My Sworn Sister Wu Zhiying:

Your songs brought me to you from the far corners of the world, / finding a kindred soul is what the joy of harmony means. / Without the pledge for life and death, friendship is of no substance, / the joined music of harps and flutes makes the plane of plenitude. / Irises and orchids are imprints of each other’s hearts, / Carved in gold and stone are we sworn sisters. / In literary friendship is the life of mutual love, / Wish the mutual love be ever lasting.72

Like all her poems rather than songs, this poem was shaped in classical form again (lüshi) and yet was vernacular in terms of its narrative clarity and flowing rhythm.73 Wu Zhiying was the daughter of a famed scholar, the wife of an influential reform-oriented official, and a noted social activist in her own right.74 She advocated the republican revolution but with an emphasis on women’s equality. Sharing strong desires to open new fields for women, Qiu Jin read all of the new publications at Wu Zhiying’s place with eagerness, while Wu Zhiying read all of Qiu Jin’s writings with enthusiasm. In the above poem, Qiu Jin made it clear that her radical re-making of her body and life, which amounted to a social and symbolic revolution, was a “gift of love” she enacted for Wu Zhiying. Zhiying’s “songs” were vehicles by means of which a kindred spirit could be reached, and brought Qiu Jin from “far corners of the world” in contact with, as it were, the quick of her own life and possibilities of finding homeplaces. Such “sworn sisters,” then, wrote and bodied forth themselves for one another into unprecedented scenarios of being “modern,” “Chinese,” and “women,” where spatial belonging appeared possible for those who had no place and what “cannot be said let alone heard” seemed palpable. It was with such feelings of belonging as “sworn sisters” that Wu Zhiying and other women friends supported Qiu Jin in her plan to go abroad. When Qiu Jin met Hattori Shigeko and the latter, as a former student of Shimoda Utako, helped Qiu Jin to study in Japan,75 Wu Zhiying offered financial support and from then on followed and backed every step that Qiu Jin improvised as she forged her journey. It was at Wu’s suggestion that Qiu Jin left her daughter with another woman friend, Xie Dieqüan, as the baby girl (unlike her elder brother who would remain as an heir of the Wangs) would likely be treated harshly by the family that Qiu Jin left behind. Wu Zhiying would have adopted the girl herself if she had not been leaving for Shanghai as Qiu Jin departed for Japan.76 They co-authored in imagining “homeplaces” for one another while deepening their “feminine literary friendship” as if they were cultivating a human world of different civilization and its citizenry.
Qiu Jin’s final severing of relations with her husband during her stay in Japan is indicative of her struggle to work through her feelings of placelessness, and her persistence in envisioning homeplaces. The dynastic institution of marriage as a force field of social gendering foundational to male-centered hierarchy, then, was one of those sites where Qiu Jin’s pain of placelessness crystallized with its concrete historical content and meanings. As registered in the extant twelve letters she sent from Tokyo to her brother between May 1904 and December 1905, her battle to work over such pain and redefine her life through the severing process was wrought with prolonged economic pressures and psychic tribulations. When her elder brother attempted to see if Qiu Jin would “make up with” her husband after mentioning how the man now refused her request to use her remaining jewelry that was her own dowry, Qiu Jin’s reaction, as a historian observes, “was violent:”

That person’s behavior is worse than an animal’s. I have never known human shamelessness like it. Now that he has seized my remaining jewelry, how can we even think of him as human? He treats me as less than nothing, and I am sure that the reason for his taking my money and possessions is that he wants to finish me off. My treatment in that household was worse than a slave’s; the poison of hatred has eaten deeply into me. If I am treated decently I respond decently; if I am treated as being of no account, then I respond in the same way – it’s not that I have no feelings. When I think of him my hair bristles with anger, it’s absolutely unbearable.

Send my sister to try to get my money back – if he won’t give it up then sever all relations. I have thought this through fairly thoroughly: rather than be treated as a slave, why should I not stand up for myself? Henceforth I am going to try to support myself through my own efforts; why should I be somebody’s wife? Besides which, we hate each other so much that nothing good could come of it. There has been no letter from him for a year, he has shown no respect to his seniors in my family, and I have also heard that he has taken a new wife.

If any of the sentiments I have just expressed prove to be mere rhetoric, may the gods above abandon me. If I progress even one inch, I shall never let his family name be used on top of mine. If I cannot progress even that inch, and am unable to support myself, then I shall sue him to get back my son, my daughter, and my property. If that suit fails, then I shall die.77

The letter was dated June 19, 1905. Three months later, she joined the Revolutionary Alliance. A week after she joined the Alliance, another letter dated September 12, 1905, was sent to her brother:

I am devoting my life to the making of a lasting legacy that would benefit the generations of women and men to come; and if I cannot manage to carry out what I must do, let me then be a non-existence in this world . . . . I will never allow his kind to ruin my own name, dirty my independent spirit, and forestall my passage.78
Qiu Jin’s tone has visibly shifted from anger to firmness, at a moment when her involvement deepened in China’s first modern revolution and reached a point of no returning. For her such revolution inherently required the dismantling of social institutions and mores that enact the daily enforcement of human “slavery” particularly inscribed onto the female body. In other words, Qiu Jin both envisioned and bodied forth a revolutionary modern China with a feminist impetus as its birthmark and center of gravity – with female-levered desires as its historical sources and political resources. Rather than “bring[ing] feminism and nationalism into each other’s crisis” as a contemporary scholar famously describes the critical gist of her postmodern and postcolonial feminism, Qiu Jin’s making of “modern China” is more about the making of homeplaces by otherwise placeless souls, in irresolvable tension with the bioethnocentric law of modern nationalism as we know it. It is here that the category of “Chinese women comrades” invoked by Qiu Jin while she was in Japan attained particular significance. In a letter to Lü Bicheng, a woman activist in Shanghai at the time, and published in Dagong daily (Dagongbao) in August 26, 1904, for instance, Qiu Jin wrote:

There had been a “women’s society of common love” (gongai huishe) in Tokyo, which was discontinued after a short life. Currently we have more than thirty women students in Tokyo; more are arriving. Today I have talked with Ms. Chen Xiefen about rebuilding the society, and putting its principles into practice. We will arrange to have a woman on location to help the incoming women students with the logistics of settling in and enrolling in schools. Please spread the word among women comrades. If they would like to come to Tokyo to study, do telegraph Chen Xiefen or Qiu Jin (my italics).

The term “women comrades” (niutongzhi) first appeared in this letter, and worked from then on as the central impetus in various phrases coined and/or used by Qiu Jin to group women into social and political forces, culminating in such more participatory designations as “we fellow sisters of China” and “we-Chinese-women” in her editorials in The vernacular newspaper (Baihua bao), Chinese women’s newspaper (Zhongguo nübao), and other journals. Chinese women students in Tokyo from 1904 to 1906 were numerically few; while often the objects of curiosity and fascination, they did not yet amount to a socio-politically consequential presence. The term then was an invented site where those women of different ages, geographical origins (from different provinces), temperaments, and social orientations could and did try out their unprecedented social formation and political rallying, an improvised sphere for thought and action where their spatial belonging could be and was attempted. As such terms appeared in Qiu Jin’s writing, her activity in organizing women students intensified. “Women’s society of common love” that Qiu Jin mentioned in the letter was initially founded in May 1903 in Tokyo. As the first political organization for women in modern Chinese history, its founding members were vital components of the first generation of Chinese feminist activists including Gong Yüanchang, Hu Binxia, Wang Lian, and Lin Zongsu. The society ceased to function by the
time Qiu Jin arrived in Japan in July 2004. Qiu Jin worked with Chen Xiefen, Pan Ying, and Lin Zongsu to revitalize the society and re-named it as “Women’s society of practicing common love” (“Shixing gongai hui”) in October. At the time the above letter was sent to Lü Bicheng in Tianjing, Qiu Jin was also mobilizing women students in one of the first feminist agitations in Tokyo to rally around Chen Xiefen. As the founder and chief editor of Women’s paper for learning (Nüxüebao), Chen Xiefen arrived in Tokyo with her reform-minded father Chen Fan, the owner of Subao, after the Qing court jailed his influential staff writers, closed the newspaper, and issued an order for his arrest. In Tokyo, however, Chen Fan decided to marry his daughter off as a concubine to one of his merchant friends, while his early advocacy of women’s rights apparently evaporated. Chen Xiefen persisted in her refusal of the marriage with the help of these women and their public support. At least partially due to the pressures of such public rally organized in the name of “Women’s society of practicing common love,” Chen Xiefen’s father gave in. He was also forced to free his own two concubines he brought to Tokyo with him.81 The society orchestrated other public events including a memorial for a women student who died of illness in Tokyo and fundraising to help another woman student in economic predicament.82 “Women comrades” were brought into existence through the organizing of those rallies and went on to motivate and make “we-fellow-sisters” and “we-Chinese-women” a mobile site, where those caught in the pains that “cannot be said let alone heard” may try out their words, voices, spatial belonging, and their ways of existence. Qiu Jin was discernibly more hopeful about her own battle with her husband and “his world” amid such momentum. Soon after the “Chen Xiefen event,” she wrote in 1905 of how “breathing the air of a world of modern civilization now, one must never subject oneself to his world of slavery!”83

It would be hasty to infer from the linguistic invocation of a “world of modern civilization” here (and other similar phrases elsewhere) that the mobilizing site of Qiu Jin’s “women comrades,” “we-sisters,” and “we-Chinese-women” is no more than a local variation of Anglo and/or Western bourgeois feminism. Qiu Jin indeed advocated the idea of “strengthening the nation” by the way of “strengthening women” as historians point out.84 The implications of such “nation” and “women” however may not be easily reduced to discourses of bioethnic “nationalism.” In September 1904, barely two months after she arrived in Japan, Qiu Jin already began to question whether the nation state that she witnessed in modern Japan was, as many of her contemporary Chinese republicans argued, a model for modern China.85 The memoir about Qiu Jin by Hattori Shigeko, who was a former student from Shimoda Utako’s Girls’ Practicing School and helped Qiu Jin to enroll there, offers a personal account of Qiu Jin’s “ignorance” and “rude critique” of Utako:

... In August, my husband went back to Beijing. I was very hectic, preparing to go back to Beijing in September also. Qiu Jin came. She kept saying that the food provided by the school was of so poor quality and yet the cost was very high. And Chinese students were considered to be exceptionally low in character whenever
they raised the issue about food and money. Human world would not be what it is without food or money, would it? Ms. Utako ran the School for the Chinese and Girl’s Practicing School, treated us, overseas Chinese students, as commodities for profit; she was too greedy. I said seriously to Qiu Jin:

“You have just entered the school, and yet you are already talking about the Teacher and the School in such a rude way. This only shows how ignorant you are” (my italics).

Prefiguring women writers’ critical renditions in subsequent years, Qiu Jin’s “ignorant” and “rude” critique pinpoints “modern education” that she first encountered in Japan as a business enterprise. Such enterprise, specifically, operates with an exploitive power relationship between the Japanese “Teacher” and the “Chinese students,” doubled by a racialized logic that silences the students and their possible expressions of critical thinking. Qiu Jin apparently did not yield to Hattori Shigeko’s “serious” attempt to make her silent for, as Shigeko’s account continues, she succeeded to persuade the latter to “go and talk to Teacher Utako” about the issue of food and lodging for the Chinese students. Utako’s reply as Shigeko registered is also suggestive: “It is a common problem; students are always unsatisfied with their food. When they are better adapted to their environment and find the classes interesting, they will stop complaining. If you always take such things too seriously, educating the Chinese would not be possible” (my italics). A benevolent colonial attitude is barely concealed here, which should not come as a surprise given Utako’s relation to the expansionist project and bioethnic politics of the Meiji elite. What is vital to my discussion here of Qiu Jin’s thoughts on “modern nation” and “women’s education” is what seems involved in Qiu Jin’s response according to Shigeko’s account:

I was very busy, but I still asked Qiu Jin to come over, told her about my meeting with Teacher and my view that she should focus on her study [instead of being critical about other things]. If she really found the situation unacceptable, she should consider leaving the School. Qiu Jin said:

“Madame, for reasons unknown to me, lately I often feel that I would not live much longer in this world. My soul seems abandoning me and I am just beating up a body that is a soulless shell.”

Tears were in her eyes.

“What’s the matter? . . . Those disheartening words do not suit your disposition. Even if it were true that your soul had abandoned you, you will find a newer soul and would certainly not be only left with a shell. You have family, and you left your family to come to this unfamiliar land, you feel lonely and become extra sensitive. I think that it is better that you return home, you can continue your study after you return. Or, you can go to the U.S.”

I was honest with my words. Qiu Jin shook her head:

“Returning to the family? I cannot indulge myself in that meaningless domestic amity. Thank you for your good intention. I am dissatisfied with the School but I am neither to leave the School nor to go to the U.S. Coming
to Japan is already so disappointing, going to the U.S. would not lead to anything different. I am afraid. I will not live long; I must urge more this soulless body [to do something]."

"Qiu Jin, do not be this sad and have courage. We are about to part, I do not know if you would still keep your words about our agreement [that you are not to disseminate your radical ideas in Japan]."

Qiu Jin laughed.

"Madame, please do not worry. Japan is not the target of our revolution, no use to elaborate my thoughts here. But China belongs to the Chinese, and should not be ruled by the Manchus. If we are fearful of taking real actions, how could we ever find a place of existence in this world?"

Against the Manchu ruling, Qiu Jin however did not see “modern Japan” patterned after Europe as the model of a modern China where “we” may find place to inhabit as “modern Chinese.” Her “radical ideas” for a Chinese republic against the Qing court did not endorse the modern nation state and its educational apparatus that she saw in Japan. And she did not entertain any scenarios that the U.S. could be much different or serve as an alternative model. Deeply in sorrows as Qiu Jin was in Shigeko’s account, she was also disturbingly daring:

It was 1905 when I received a letter from Qiu Jin sent from Shanghai, saying that she had returned from Tokyo and might go to Japan again. I heard that Qiu Jin went to Tokyo that summer for a few months. I really did not understand what was she doing there? Soon quite a few people wrote to me saying that Qiu Jin criticized Japan’s system for women’s education and, in particular, censured Utako and other teachers at the Girls’ Practicing School. She was in Shuidobashi and stood by the side of the road giving her speech, criticizing Japan’s education for and treatment of the overseas [Chinese] students and causing a big stir. The stir even brought the police [to the scene.] This may well be exaggerated, but such action seemed to have indeed actually occurred.

No written text is available now of Qiu Jin’s public speech that Shigeko described here. The contents of her speech may be traced in her published critique of the effect of “Japan’s education” on the Chinese overseas students and turned them into “the translator.” In 1907, Qiu Jin registered and confronted what she considered as the highly problematic role of the “Chinese translator” in shaping up not only the idea but also the configuration of “modern China.” She criticized how the Chinese male educated elite, particularly its overseas members, turned out to be such “translators” complicitous with the force fields of unacceptable modern power relations. More specifically, Qiu Jin in her “Editorial for the Inaugural Issue of Chinese Women’s Newspaper” (“Zhongguo mübao fakanci”) raises the question of what Chinese women need to do in relation to such effect, and then answers:

The situation of Chinese male students as it evolved in the past ten years is a mirror for us with which we can reflect upon ourselves. When the new
schools were not yet fashionable and the system of imperial civil examination
was still powerful, there were young men who abandoned their privileges in
the system, and tried to learn foreign languages with the idea of making
themselves “new young men.” Yet the passage was not clear and genuine
knowledge was not born, and the majority of intelligent young men were turned into
mere translators whose real function was that of compradors; how pitiable this is! . . .

Ah! Such a phenomenon, is it progressive or regressive? I do not dare to know. In short,
we should not allow such corrupting forces [to expand] in our women’s world. Our
women’s future must not suffer through this stage . . . [if our passage] is toward a
promising China and a bright world . . . . If we do not try to do all we can, I am afraid
that a sailing ship without direction will not only be turning around in the midst of ‘waves
but drowned there before long’ (my italics).

In this editorial of January 1907, Qiu Jin observes how “young Chinese men”
pursuing “modern ideas” had become functionaries who served to refashion the
old Chinese social order in amity and complicity with the modern hierarchy of
globally intertwined power relations. Qiu Jin’s conclusion, their “passage”
seemed a pitfall where a “promising China” turned abortive. Such a “they,”
significantly, is another word for Qiu Jin’s former husband and others of his
milieu as well. Like the newly styled male elite, her husband Wang Tingjun
and his family were not simply part of the declining gentry class frozen into the idea
of an essential Chineseness held by the royalists and conservatives in late Qing.
To use some contemporary academic jargon, they were hybrids of a particularly
privileged kind. Wang’s business included banking and was substantial in its
range; and his purchased position in the establishment of Beijing officialdom was
strategic. The Wang family, with its considerable wealth, could navigate the acro-
batics of shifting political alliances among Chinese, foreign, economic and
cultural forces. They were certainly not anti-Western in any general sense but
rather open to things Western in specifically profitable ways. As Qiu Jin
described in her letter to a woman friend shortly after the 1900 Peasant
Rebellion: “[While] Beijing is struggling to recover its strength and rumors
abound, the idea of Western learning and learning from the West has been
gaining a great deal of public praise. Yet the schools are in effect pretending to
be educational institutions; rarely is there someone serious about the real work
and who truly thinks of the country’s predicaments.” And, she added wryly:
“My husband is also learning foreign languages.” That such newly styled elite
was deeply gendered should not come as anything surprising. After all, the
Chinese merchant whom Chen Xiefen’s father wanted his daughter to marry in
Tokyo was one of such men who desired as his second wife a well-educated and
well-known woman fully capable of functioning in modern times. He desired a
modern concubine that in effect embodied and troped the impossible place of
women in the troubling arrangement of an emerging semicolonial Chinese
modernity. That such a hybrid elite was emphatic about its “Chineseness”
should not come as anything puzzling either, as Shigeko evinces in her first
debate in 1904 with Qiu Jin, by upholding the position of Hattori Unokochi (her
husband and head faculty of Beijing Grand Academy) to emphatically “revere Confucian doctrines.” The real overriding drive operative here is the authorized apparatus called “nation state” whose aura is premised upon the disappearance of personal and social energies that question its social configuration and dislodge the variously aporic or erased lives embedded therein. The gendered as the appropriated, weakened, silenced, and/or dispossessed, all of which in fact constitute its human foundation.

Qiu Jin’s writings of how “I envy the people in Europe and America” and “how women in other countries have far more advanced rights” hence may well be read as performative moves in her struggles for social transformation that as Shigeko recognized exceed the available rubrics of modernity. In effect Qiu Jin’s writings since 1905 are charged with an awareness of the world scale of her struggle to dislodge placeless lives with desires for homeplaces, which precipitates a particular kind of literary imagination. In one of her poems titled “Feelings of the Times” (“Ganshi”) one reads the following:

While I plead to the Goddess to reveal ways of repairing heaven and earth, / time flees. / Catastrophe looms large before one’s eyes as China is parceled out, / crying for help is of no avail. / The sinking land of ancestors obliges all to heed the day’s reckoning / drifting around the world I have no homeplace. / Warm-blooded, I cannot bear to look across the ocean, / a broken heart cannot blossom in May (my italics).

A range of images is at work here: The disjointed heaven and earth, the breaking up of the ancestral land, and the looming catastrophe of a country to be parceled out along with its present inhabitants. Such images of disintegration or liquidation, stirring as they are, can be found everywhere in modern Chinese literature. What distinguishes Qiu Jin’s literary imagination is the real pain of such disintegration made palpable by the haunting presence of the homeless female, wandering across the world. And such female figures, in Qiu Jin’s writings, are nearly always associated with the warmth of blood and evocative of the rhythms of heartbeat, as physical traces of the human casualties of China’s modern catastrophe and material sources of their desires to struggle to undo their catastrophic destinies. Indeed, “wandering around the world, I have no homeplaces,” by now a classic line in modern Chinese poetry, captures the agony central to twentieth century Chinese history; the “blossoming flowers in May” has become synonymous in modern Chinese language with those devoted to and connected with the making of homeplaces for placeless wanderers. The term “women comrades,” coined by Qiu Jin as a mobile sphere for thought and action, worked directly against such placelessness itself, and hence was deeply at odds with those Chinese elites who were bargaining for their newly shifting status in complicity with the masculine, expansionist Western big powers. To the extent that the activating dynamic of such a term, site, and sphere posed as contradiction in an emerging semicolonial modernity and its re-gendering elite, Qiu Jin’s “women comrades” in the making served to gather and were grounded
in the painful desire to not only exceed women’s predicaments under the shifting but unchanging Chinese hierarchy but also to imagine and forge homeplaces for their lives in the expanding reign of “new,” modern power relations.

It is crucial to note that such imagining in Qiu Jin’s writing often converged or crisscrossed with an imaginary China, beyond its ominous state of affairs and painful placelessness in the modern world at the turn of the century. All the poems quoted earlier evince as much. Here is another poem, written in 1907:

Wandering around the world with inexpressible feelings, / life such as this one has no imprints of happiness. / Heart-broken over the wrongs done to the country / . . . months and years urge one on with passages in heat and in coldness. / Who could undo such an ominous state of affairs that is sinking a land? / One must do what must be done, / and not bend with the wind.99

“The country” that was “wronged” figures prominently here, at work in the core of the wandering life that is female. The longing to heal such a “wronged country” and find a place for it in the world points to Qiu Jin’s passion for a “modern China” that was yet to be envisioned. Of course, Qiu Jin was not alone in embracing such a passion and doing so by traveling abroad to “learn about the world.” The city of Tokyo, for one, witnessed such passion stirring among the young and educated Chinese. As early as 1895, Sun Zhongshan, Zhang Taiyan, and others worked to spread their ideas about “modern China” among the Chinese students in Tokyo. A range of journals were produced there; and Zou Rong’s Revolutionary Army (geminjun) as well as Chen Tianhua’s Warning Bell (Jinshizhong) and Turn and Look (Menhuitou) found their first eager readers among those students.100

Qiu Jin involved herself in the thick of such fermentation as soon as she arrived in Tokyo, developing friendships with prominent republican figures including Tao Chenzhang, Song Jiaoren, and He Xiangning, and adamantly advocated the overthrow of the Manchu monarchy.102 Yet envisioning a modern China, as shown in Qiu Jin’s above quoted poem and her literary writing in general, was not only about replacing the Manchu monarchy with a Chinese variant of the modern nation state. According to this poem, China’s “heart-breaking” state of affairs is alterable if its wanderers “do not bend with the wind” but seize the time and “do what one must,” thereby giving it different contents and organizing features. The evocation and enunciation of such alterability, palpable in this poem and many others, involves implications that bring up and recast the traumatic encounters recorded by other women travelers such as Xüe Jinqin about how “we are convicts by our [bioethnically defined] nationality.” The insistence on such alterability is in effect an insistence upon no less than an undoing of the foundational logic of modern times along with its daily-ordained scenes around the world. The double violence, or the logic of bioethnic politics, maintained by the great powers naturalized their dominance. In the
light of such bioethnic politics, China’s doom is unalterable just as the predica-
ment of its female wanderers is the sign of necessity, part and parcel of those
human casualties produced across the globe where the great powers expand
without limits. Refusing such necessity and its inalterability, Qiu Jin’s female
figures as bodies of desires to dislodge their placeless places in the world are
brought into being amidst historically conditioned political mobilization. Their
longings for “homeplaces” stir with such poignant persistence, designating some-
thing other than the drives for ownership of power in the form of the modern
state patterned after the rubrics of the great power politics in the service of the
masculinized “natural fittest.” Qiu Jin’s literary imagination questions the
claimed laws that divide humanity into the bioethnically marked polarity between
the “weaker sex” and the “stronger,” between the subordinated and the domi-
nating persons, peoples, regions, and continents. When she envisioned a modern
China with a historically ruptured female body as its impetus and leverage, the
modern China so envisioned appears to be a live body caught up in modern
catastrophes while struggling to work through and work over her nightmares.

Such impetus and leverage at work in Qiu Jin’s literary imagination underline
her non-literary writings as well, including public speeches, political writings,
popular songs, and private correspondences: “Warnings for My Fellow Chinese”
(“Jinggao wo tongba”), “Respectfully Speaking to My Sisters” (“Jinggao jiemei men”),
“Editorial for the Inaugural Issue of Chinese Women’s Newspaper” (“Zhongguo niubao
takanci”), “On Reading Warning Bells” (“Du jingzhong ganfu”) and “Song for women’s
rights” (“Mian nüqüan ge”) are among the best known. In them are found her call to
“undo the nature of slaves,”103 “root out the habits of slavery,”104 or “extricate our
body and spirit from our predicaments.”105 In those writings, Qiu Jin’s “modern
China” as a possible body politic is at fundamental odds with the bioethnic polit-
ics of modern polarity marked by its primary binary between the male and female
and all its variations including the newest between the “strong Westerners” and
the “sickly Chinese.” In her poem “On Precious Sward” (“Baojian ge”) that was to be
cited over and again by Wu Zhiying and other women friends,106 Qiu Jin lamented
that “the world ruled by great power politics has no place for equality and
humanity,” and “no one can depend on universal axioms of justice under such a
rule of iron and blood.” Her response to such a state of world affairs was “doing”
what “one must do,” even if such “must” requires one’s life since “my life and death
in and of themselves are light as feathers, both can be given up for actualizing
possible homeplaces for our humanity.”107 To the extent that the politics of the
Revolutionary Alliance acknowledged and endorsed such desires in the 1910s,
Qiu Jin remained its most firm and passionate advocate.108 To the extent that the
impetus of such politics shifted to marginalize, devalue, and suppress such desires
in the decades that followed, the “modern China” Qiu Jin mapped and engen-
dered with her life and death remains a monument for critical measurement and
a live source for imaginative alterations. In this sense, such female embodied
desires are Qiu Jin’s China at once rising in and redefining the modern times.

This feminist envisioning and embodiment of modern China shed important
light on the personal bonds between Qiu Jin and her women friends and their
significance in her last days. If her early literary friendship with those women gave rise to an enabling momentum in her social actions, her later political activism opened up a horizon where such friendship gained an unprecedented signification. Over the last three years of her life, Qiu Jin not only shaped her friendships “for life and death” with politically noted Beijing women such as Wu Zhiying, or developed unbreakable bonds with other socially active women in the south such as Xü Jichen, the principal of a school for girls in a county (Jiaxing) near Shanghai where Qiu Jin taught in 1906. She also gained lasting influence among younger women such as Xü Xiaoshu, Xü Jichen’s younger sister, and one of Qiu Jin’s students. Unlike her relationship with Xü Xilin, and others involved in the political agitation in Zhejiang Province, or her connections with Tao Chenzhang, He Xiangning, Sun Zhongshan and others in the Revolutionary Alliance, those female friendships were lived at a more personal level and often expressed in the tradition of Chinese literary women. Qiu Jin confided in them thoughts and feelings that are not ostensibly connected with the politics of the Alliance. They wrote poems continuously for one another, as gifts and letters, and as trying outs of personal changes of historical significance for one another while having each other as the primary-witnessing and validating forces in their minds. In addition to her poem for Wu Zhiying discussed earlier on the occasion where Qiu Jin remade her bodily configuration, here are some other examples:

For Jichen and Xiaoshu: On Parting

At this parting you bestow upon me a new poem, / let me return your kind songs with a few echoes. / That I do not show the signs of parting is not due to my hardened heart, / there would be no benefit in stirring the sorrow as it permeates. / In a time when rivers and mountains across the land are torn asunder, / how can one bear to look at them across this vast distance? / Filling my chest are oceans of tears, / which must not flow until the time ripens. / With this parting I am anguished that we may not meet again, / holding your hands I wish you to treasure yourself. / Let us not wash our blouses ever again, / so we can have the parting tears always in our hands! / Feeling myself in your heart as my soul is printed with yours, / with your seeing eyes I can brave death. / We both desire to extend our hands to wandering lives and injured humanity, / please never say I am your teacher as we are best friends. / Know the invaluable worth of yourself and think not only of me, / allow this small portrait of mine to stay in your life and accompany your gentle spirit. / If I do not end as the exposed bones on the river-shore of the netherworld, / like drifting duckweeds in the midst of the wind we will gather again.109

For Xü Xiaoshu before Death:

Anguished by my fellow countrymen who are drunk in fatuous dreams, / lamenting my broken homeplace with no one yet to keep its spirits. / At the
end of the day and at the end of the way, tears of despair are in vain; / mutilated mountains and leftover waters, who can summon back the ghosts of their integrity? / No need for a lone grave of a meter size, since China no longer has clean soil; / with a cup of wine, let us sing the songs of her spirit beyond the times. / In death life stays, as I complete my sojourn in this world; / my farewell to you, as the storms are coming to take away my head! / Aspirations are yet still void; as longings unfulfilled; / looking back at my heartland, let her and only her break my heart!110

Qiu Jin wrote the first poem in 1906 during a personal visit with Xu Jichen, left it with Xu as a gift with a photograph of herself enclosed, clearly aware of the dangers in store for her. The second poem was sent to Xu Xiaoshu on July 10, 1907, five days prior to her execution. Writing for those who were outside the domain of her political activism and yet resonated with her in the most intimate ways, Qiu Jin was actualizing her desires and longings for a modern China that was not yet actualized. Such friendships grounded and enabled Qiu Jin’s imaginative writings by providing an impetus at once constitutive of and beyond her historically conditioned political agitation. It is necessary to note how those women actualized the possibility of homeplaces through their public assertions and stagings of their personal friendships. After Qiu Jin was executed, the Manchu court prohibited the collection of her mutilated body. Ignoring the court decree at personal risk, Xu Zihua (Jichen) and Wu Zhiying worked together for a proper burial. They purchased a lot on the shore of the West Lake of Zhejiang province and buried Qiu Jin there, a place where they had promised each other to lay their bodies after their lives in “this world” ended and they were free of its limiting temporality. Xu Xiaoshu immediately joined Wu Zhiying and Xu Zihua in publishing their memories of Qiu Jin, fully aware of the consequences of such publications. Early 1908, Xu zihua organized at the West Lake a memorial service for Qiu Jin, with four hundred or so women and men friends present, which led to the establishment of the Society of Qiu Jin (Qiu she).111 Amid the public anger fermenting across the country over Qiu Jin’s death, those women multiplied Qiu Jin’s actions and desires with such public influence that, while the threatened Manchu government ordered their imprisonment as “the friends of the beheaded,” the magistrate of Shaoxing County who enforced Qiu Jin’s execution felt so haunted that he had a nervous breakdown and committed suicide. The order was then dropped.112 Materializing their personal and literary friendships into unheard of public and political scenes, these women of gentry origin joined Qiu Jin in revolutionizing themselves into actual forces for and possible scenarios of a yet-to-be made China and its feminist agency, as the human rhythms of yet-to-be-made homeplaces with their female-levered embodiments of revolutionary desires.113

The Imaginary

Such rhythms register the evocative imagination at work in Qiu Jin’s writings and the way she lived the last years of her life, which does not lose potency at her
death in 1907. This is also to say that Qiu Jin seems to have been continuously returning in the at once unstable and resilient sphere of human life, namely, that of fluid memories surfacing around monuments or rising in commemoration, through stories told by mothers to their daughters, teachers to their students, writers to their readers, performers to their audiences, or vice versa; living on the tongues and minds of an elastic and unclassifiable range of people. As if anticipating her own recurrence, Qiu Jin wrote once that “in death life stays” through a sensorium of the human potential that is also an energy of the social imaginary, always renewing, urging, enabling, and activating. Her dramatic piece Stones of the Jingwei Bird (Jingwei shù), with its incompleteness as an artistic work and the imaginative transformation that it aspires beyond the artistic, pinpoints thresholding dynamics as the content of her life story and a trope of modern Chinese history.

Written in Tanci, a southern Chinese performance form, Stones tells of five young Chinese women’s struggles to step beyond their cloistered station in the family and its kin-defined hierarchy, and their journeys overseas in search of their places in the world. The five women – Autumn Beauty, Little Jade, Unity, Vitality, and Awaken – are angry about the socially crippling conditions of their daily life. They feel pain when they see how their mothers follow the male-centered authority of the family clan, and how they are expected to take the pattern of their mothers’ lives as their own destiny while society and the world are drastically changing and such changes are soon to hit their households with unknown imperatives. Confiding in one another, they gradually gain and sharpen a sensorium with which they become cognizant of their shared feeling of suffocation as if they were drowning amid an invisible, hostile sea. Coming to terms with their obligations as “young women waiting to be married” (daizi guizhong), they define the obligatory waiting as routinized waste, stylized humiliation, and imposed paralysis, at the place called “home” which in effect is the site of their imprisonment and bondage. As Autumn Beauty says to Jade, “The boudoir is worse than prison, so why should you be banished there? How can you bear it? What a waste . . . When will we ever find a way out of this sea of bitterness? How often I wish we women could escape these slavish confines.” “Heaven is cruel!”

This critical mapping of gendered slavery that produces the “weaker sex” is made with the daily details of those women’s lives and their own tentative articulations of those daily scenes, richly differentiated and nuanced. And such rendition of the personal is at once doubled by an authorial commentary that periodically suspends the narrative flow by situating the details in a general state of emergency where the Chinese land and its inhabitants are seen as being violently and slowly torn asunder. A disintegration of organizational institutions, social fabrics, and kin-defined bonds is occurring across the country under escalating pressures of the major powers of the modern world, without viable or even identifiable ways for its inhabitants to survive and make over the structural rupture of their society. As an acute sensorium that connects and distinguishes the scenes of the individual and the calamities erupting all over China, this authorial commentary traces the anxiety and agony in the “inner chambers” in relation to the coming storms of history that threaten to instrumentalize
humanity into a new social hierarchy whose function of subordination does not seem much less stringent than the old one. When, for instance, Autumn Beauty makes a personal observation that “those who have surrendered and turned over territories have always been men” and “I am ashamed that such men now are traitors to China,” the authorial commentary accentuates the observation and

Figure 2.2 Qiu Jin’s handwriting of *Stones of the Jingwei Bird* (2a)
points to the ominous signs looming large on the horizon of the country: “The storms from abroad grow more threatening by the day and I am in increasing pain . . . [Another] great calamity is arriving at our doorstep.” And when other young women reflect upon how “those faint-hearted, shameless men” claim to be “our lords” and yet their abilities let alone courage “don’t even measure up to us,” the authorial commentary sharpens such thought by indicating how those same men have authored both Chinese women’s “weakening” and the “predicament” of China with its “decapacitated humanity.” Those are the semicolonial Chinese elites who follow the dictates of the global powers and block the way for others to find transformative possibilities: “I contemplate the crisis now facing China and how hopeless the situation is without any heroes to come to the rescue.” When the young women discover that it is the task for them as women warriors to re-engender a broken land and its spirits, the authorial commentary embraces such discovery: “Every day I burn incense, praying that women lift themselves from their slavish confines and stand up as heroines and female gallants on the stage of liberty.” Evoking an international range of women heroines and their political activism, the authorial voice issues a China-specific call to arms: “I beseech and beg my twenty million female sisters to gather their courage and assume their responsibility for a land that is being ravished. Arise! Arise! Chinese women, arise!”

Such dual enactment defines Chinese women’s transformative “arising” as constitutive of rather than resulting from the re-engendering of a ruptured China and its human geography. Desires for women’s transformation and longings to re-engender China, at the same time, are mobilized in such a way that they actualize themselves as part of one another without being reduced to identical energies in the name of “the nation state” and its nationalist ideology. As the authorial commentary in this *Tanci* affords those women’s daily life scenes within a contextual whirlwind of global storms that are closing in on their cloistered chambers, every shift in those daily scenes of thought and behavior including their most private feelings are drawn into the central turbulence of such storms of a global proportion. They are themselves the sea changes in an embattled China, and are both constitutive and emblematic of the sea change of the modern times. When they finally carry out their plans to step out of the social limits of a dynastic order and sail abroad to “study the world,” they are opening a passage in and as the history of modern China whose shifting dynamics make up the shifting fabrics of the modern world and open up horizons of its potentials. The end of Act Six is charged with exhilaration about such an opening, where the authorial commentary merges vibrantly with these women’s voices, celebrating their personal steps as epoch-making movements:

It is said that the young women boarded the ship, which set sail after the whistle was sounded three times. They stood at the railing holding hands and turned to look back at their distant homeland far away, engulfed in the evening clouds. Knowing each other so well, they talked harmoniously.
Facing the wind, they clapped their hands and discussed their lives. The author can’t help but be filled with joy at this image, though I have written of it poorly in plain language.

How great these young women’s ambitions must have been to break through such barriers! They had gone 1000 li from home, and now they were traveling 10,000 li as fast as the wind. Everyone on board looked at them and thought, “The new learning will surely thrive. One day these young women will act to save the land of their ancestors and make their homeplaces, as the bells of freedom for the world”121 (my italics).

When Chinese women’s transformation is felt and rendered as central to an epoch-making modern China, the imagined body politic and its institutional articulations are posited upon, rather than function as a priori forces that predetermine, the possibilities of a women’s revolution. The feminist imagination at work in such women’s transformation is inherent in the envisioning of a modern China in and as revolution. And such revolution, while being informed, motivated, and charged by its female-leveraged dynamics, exceeds any blueprints of nation building and rubrics of nationalism as usually defined. Such dynamics embodied in variant figurations underlines this drama, as it marks the signature of Qiu Jin’s literary writings about the possible or imaginable formation of twentieth century China, its feminist agency, and its implications suggestive of the potentials of the modern world.

This mutual constitution of Chinese women’s revolution and the revolution of modern China, featuring Qiu Jin’s literary imagination, of course does not transcend the confluences of the social conditions and political discourses of the crisis-ridden 1910s. Rather, it bears tangible traces of strategic anti-Manchu agitation, didactic statement about modern progress in the forms of industrialization, and a vision of the globe as an organized human community of modern republics.122 The twenty acts of the drama, as planned, would cover all the activities that those women conduct after they step out of their inner chambers: their work overseas, their return, and their further revolutionary transformations as they join, lead, and embody the social movements for a republic China that would “stun the world.”123 The table of contents registers such titles of those planned acts as “Promoting ideas of liberty and opening factories to save the country and its people;” “Women with natural feet conduct military training and soldiers with warm hearts announce their independence;” “Learning about Japan arouses spirits and speaking of the globe awakens even the stones;” “Raising Chinese flags to shatter the Manchu’s mind and regaining the Chinese land to afford ground where its inhabitants stand up;” and, of the last act, “Amid triumph all rejoice the recovering of a lost China and with one heart and one mind all participate in building the great republic.”124 Given those titles, this Tanci drama in its planned entirety seems a program of the 1911 Revolution. Its structural arrangement is explicitly conceived with a blueprint, as it were, termed by the Revolutionary Alliance with the rhetoric of modern nation building and its readily interpretable rubrics of signification.125
Yet this seeming political transparency is deeply mediated by the literary complexity of the work. It is significant that Qiu Jin sets and tropes the whole drama in the ancient Chinese myth of the Jingwei Bird, as evoked and stated by the title. In Chinese mythology, the Jingwei Bird in her former being is the youngest daughter of the Sun God. After drowning in the East Sea one day while swimming, the young woman returns to the live world in the shape of a little bird. Desiring that others never drown as she did, she works day and night trying to fill up the vast, hostile ocean with pebbles, bits of soil, and small tree-branches that she picks up elsewhere and carries over in her bill, until she exhausts herself and dies on the shore while her tender mouth is still bleeding. Hence the image of the female Jingwei Bird is always associated with bloodstains or, more accurately, the still warm and live blood of those small lives that are erased by giant powers. The myth of Jingwei Bird seems to have touched upon or in fact shaped a central impulse of Qiu Jin. She wrote of the mythological bird periodically throughout her life, in poems, in letters to friends, in political essays, in narrative stories, and in speeches to her “we Chinese women,” “we full sisters,” and “we women comrades.” The earliest appearance of the Jingwei Bird occurs in her Hunan years in a poem written for her mother, with an evocation of the folkloric Goddess Nüwa who refines colored stones to repair the broken heaven. Like the myth itself, the poem enacts the life and death of the Jingwei Bird as a parable of the longing and action to body forth impossible imperatives as imperative possibilities. A figure of recurring struggle, the Jingwei Bird stirs and tropes desires for a different world beyond the casualties of life that seems impossible and yet must be made and is always in the process of being attempted. As she ends her life in one shape, returns in another, and ends the second life again only to turn into yet one more shape with her warm blood as the sources of her recurrence, she figures and evokes the rhythms of a permanent live memory, urging what seems impossible as what is not yet but can be.

The myth of the Jingwei Bird, then, is a sensorium cognizant of life’s potential as the real energy of social imaginaries inherent in the rhythms of a “weaker sex” and small being, which underlines the tanci-drama Stones as a whole just as in her other writing where the myth recurs. It insists on what “we must do” and presents such a doing as being bodied forth by those small lives with unassuming, unrecognized and yet unbreakable strength. Amid such insistence, however, it consciously premises itself upon the contingency and incompleteness of any specific attempts to embody and materialize such imperatives; the multiple, shifting and alterable shapes of the small lives in their attempts to carry out such imperatives; and their immediate, tangible effects as well as their long-range, evocative significations. Stones of the Jingwei Bird in and as the work of a Chinese female-leveraged literary imagination, in this sense, again misses the bioethnic logic of modern nation building, namely, the scientifically ordained natural laws of history manifested in and as bioethnic destinies of peoples and nationalities, with their determinable if not imminent places in the world order of modernity. Uncannily and pertinently, the actually written tanci-drama does not complete
the pre-designed or pre-scripted plan for its totality. Qiu Jin initially wrote it in
the form of a *ci*-poem and sent it, in April or May, 1906, to a friend in Tokyo, in
the hope of finding a publisher for it. For reasons unknown to us, Qiu Jin wrote
another letter to the friend requesting the *ci*-poem be returned no sooner than it
was sent. She then rewrote it entirely in the form of *tanci*-drama, and seemed to
have stopped at Act Six, where the five young women in the story are sailing over-
seas and embarking on their journeys in search of “new horizons.”

How those young women may manage their journeys on uncharted waters is left to the
readers and audiences who respond to the scenes enacted in the *tanci*-drama to
invent, imagine, and bring about in writing or in life.

Such textual incompleteness physicalizes the sensorium at work in and with
the mythological imaginary of the Jingwei Bird as a poignant thresholding and
suggestive opening, whose haunting actuality evokes the impossible imperatives
of what “must be done” while designating the contingency of their embody-
ments and the alterability of their forms, shapes, textures, and rhythms. It is a
thresholding dynamic in space that urges the vibrations of the yet unknown
rather than a transcendental point in time that fixes a limit of the unknowable.
This sensorium and the landscape it evokes seems to find their uncanny counter-
parts in the actual world. The unfinished histories or the incomplete scenes of
those young women in the *tanci*-drama set in motion certain passages of “doing
something.” Qiu Jin’s acts in life and in death since 1904 and particularly after
1906 appear to be an actualization of such transformative developments that
those passages mobilized in art. This actualization aspires to beyond the realm of
the artistic without, however, simply resulting in or testifying to what their pre-
designed programs intend, promise, and claim to realize. If Qiu Jin in her
literary activity took the art of drama and dramatic action as her medium to activ-
ate her imaginary women figures, Qiu Jin in her political activism took her own
body as her resourceful content and rendered it into a real force of the imaginary.
A feminist agent of history’s impossible imperatives and a revolutionary actor of
contingent historical transformation, she brought forth the remaining scenes of
this *tanci*-drama with her life or live performance. Living as an authorial
commentary on the desires and longings of her imaginary women figures, she
actualized with her real blood the impossible imperatives troped in her imaginary
women figures and materialized their imagined revolution through a series of
political actions including, most of all, her death and the way it was brought
about.

It was a chosen death as historians have noted since, when the Manchu
soldiers were on their way to the Datong Academy, Qiu Jin was well informed
and was urged by many to leave the school. Various kinds of help were offered,
and she could have escaped had she chosen to do so. She chose to stay, and
waited. When the army attacked the school, she was with only a few colleagues
who had refused to leave her. Some scholars hence consider her final act as
suicide. Other interpretations take it as a gesture of defiant utopianism, unreal-
istic heroism, or concealed defeatism and overt personal despair. One may also
however dwell on Qiu Jin’s envisioning of modern China and its feminist agency
as yet another force at work in her final choice, with which she made death a contingent form where “life stays,” stirring up desires to re-begin history and urging longings to remake humanity, as the memory of the Jingwei Bird stirs and urges in her poems, prose, and tanci-drama *Stones of the Jingwei Bird*. As if long anticipating this chosen moment and its blood-stained implications, Qiu Jin wrote in a personal letter to a male political friend named Wang Shize in 1905, two years before her death: “Since the chaos in 1900, I have already put my own life and death aside to search for ways of recovering the [broken] land and the spirit of its people; should I die without succeeding in this search, I would not regret it. Men who died for such recovering, after Tang Caichang, are many; but it seems unheard of as yet that women have done the same... I am willing to be a beginning in doing so.”

At the age of thirty-two, her chosen death was fundamentally “unnatural,” a human-made event which defies notions of an individual’s life and death as given or ordained, along with modern assumptions about such given or ordained nature in history as destiny. Evocative of the figure of the Jingwei Bird and her connotatively open parable, Qiu Jin in such death carried forth a rupture where a sensorium of an imaginative world and the energy of the socially imaginary intertwine, with which the possibility of actualizing the impossible imperative transpires. A real and living force of the imaginary, Qiu Jin wandered through and confronted her impossible time and her placeless place by insisting upon their alterability. As she figuratively and literally exceeded their limits, she turned herself into “a gift of love” for her “Chinese sisters” and “fellow Chinese” in the heat of July 1907. To use her own words, one may say that “in [her] death life stays,” as posterity finds there a lived and living site, mobilizing sphere, and rupture-cum-opening for reimagining their passage in history, reshaping themselves, and remaking their spatial belonging. Indeed, modern Chinese women writers visit and revisit the memory of Qiu Jin to “go on living at the edge of death” and, as the rest of this book traces, to reimagine homeplaces for themselves as they open up variable horizons of human potential. Qiu Jin, in her rewriting of life and through her chosen death, turned into an enduring homeplace that is also a recurring occasion in Chinese history for remembering, reflection, reinvention, and revolution. A live rupture in history, she features a Chinese feminist imagination against which all Chinese social movements in the twentieth century and beyond would be and indeed have been critically measured. Writing herself into a haunting evocation of the Jingwei Bird and materializing her literary imaginary into a female-bodied monument, in art and in life, Qiu Jin with her own body placed Chinese women’s feminist demand permanently at the center of China’s embattled search for its modernization, a demand to undo the bioethnic ordering of human lives, be it is ordained in the ancient regimes or naturalized in modern times.

Who could say that such demand trooped in an imaginary is invariably ineffec-tual in history? Four years after Qiu Jin’s execution, the last Chinese dynasty ended.
And who could say that Qiu Jin’s physical departure marks her as either an absence or simply a myth claimed by nationalist history? Twenty years after her execution, her spirit seems returning in the body of her daughter who embarked on her own journey overseas while remembering her mother in writings, like so many Chinese women did over the twentieth century, and still do today.
3 The Stars of Night
Bing Xin and the Literary Constellation of the 1920s

Multitudinous stars are shimmering in the dark sky; has anyone heard their discourse? In silence, twinkling, they offer one another glimpses of gratitude.

Bing Xin, 1921

Whenever I lift my pen and start writing, I always see her gentle eyes looking at me, with a smile or sadness. Her love enables me to search for death in life – to shoulder others’ suffering; and to search for life in death – to forget my own pain.

Bing Xin, 1927

One year after the collapse of the Qing court, Sun Zhongshan led the Revolutionary Alliance to reconfigure itself as the Kuomintang, the National People’s Party (the Nationalist Party). In 1913, the first Chinese Parliament was formed, its core members drawn from the Nationalist Party. Before it started functioning, however, Song Jiaoren, the leading engineer of this Chinese version of electoral politics, was assassinated at the Shanghai railroad station. The republican forces proved to be ineffective and held no real military power. The country was sliding toward political chaos while the Western powers including Japan furthered their encroachments. Years of extreme violence were to erupt, during which militarists of different factions scorched the land as they fought to control China and its human geography. Many who partook in the 1911 Revolution suffered from a combination of demoralizing disillusionment and a painful lack of direction.

Then on April 30, 1919, came news of the Versailles Treaty with which, in the aftermath of the First World War, the Western Entente countries transferred Germany’s colonial rights over China’s Shandong Province to Japan as a reward for Japan’s wartime cooperation. This was particularly galling as China itself had contributed to the war efforts on the Entente side. A few days later, the May Fourth Movement, as it was later named, erupted. Initiated by university students in Beijing on May 4, 1919 and quickly spreading across the country as people from all walks of life joined in, it was a tumultuous protest against the “imperialist forces that amputated China” and vigorous public agitation for social change. Publications for and by women drastically increased; newspapers
and journals promoted “equality between men and women” and urged “support for women’s movements.” Under mounting public pressure and in response to requests made by women such as Deng Chunlan, Wang Lan and others, Beijing University went co-educational in 1920 with the historic enrollment of its first nine women pangtingsheng (auditing students); other institutions of higher education followed suit. Women’s organizations momentously came into life across the country; Women’s Federation (Nüjie lianhehui), Chinese Women’s Association (Zhonghua funü xiehui), Association for Women’s Political Participation (Nüzi canzheng xiejinhui), Alliance for Women’s Rights (Nüqüan yündong tongmenghui) and others gathered considerable followings. Amidst social upheaval, a group of new women writers arrived on the scene of Chinese cultural history; Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Chen Hengzhe, Feng Yuanjun, and Su Xüelin were among the more noted.

Discursive features of those early May Fourth women’s writings registered in a range of concepts such as “equality,” “co-education,” and “women’s rights” suggest their links with Western protocols of the modern subject and its female versions. My discussion here does not focus on such links, as many scholars have intensively explored them over the past decades. Rather, I am centrally interested in how the interaction between what those women put down on paper and what they carried out in life, as activities in two irreducible spheres of human functions, may also be approached as mutually engendering, precipitating, and transforming processes. What is central to my discussion here, in other words, are such processes whereby those women writers attempted “startlingly fresh” ways of writing and unexpected passages of life by drawing on various and mixed literary genres and cultural modes of cognitive behavior, whether “Western” or “Chinese,” to navigate an uncertain moment in history. This chapter focuses on Bing Xin’s literary writings and life trajectories, and related aspects of her contemporaries, as prominent instances specific to and emblematic of the lives and writings of Chinese women writers emerging in the early 1920s, with a view to the interplaying impulses and carry-over effects between their art and lives that bring about unusual and unprecedented scenes in Chinese women’s literature and their lifeworlds. Those scenes point to important dimensions of modern Chinese history that often remain unseen at the time and/or seem forgotten over time, as they open up certain cognitive horizons central to the legacy of the Chinese feminist imagination.

**Sight of Another World: Bing Xin’s “Motherly Love”**

Throughout the decades Bing Xin wrote extensively about how her mother loved her and how such love moved and motivated her in life and in writing. Indeed, *Stars* (fanxing) and *Waters in Springtime* (chunshui), her earliest collections of poems published in 1921 and 1922, that established her literary fame, are studded with figurative references to “my mother” and her “love”: “Mother! As the wind and rain strike the sky, small birds all escape into their nests. / When the storm of the heart erupts, I escape into your arms.” “Creator – If there is only one consent one may receive from you in the eternal life, / I beseech you to allow me
Figure 3.1 Bing Xin in the 1920s
be in mother’s arms, / carried by a small boat at sea, / in bathing moonlight;” and “Mother, please heal your sorrows, / [you are] the only home of my soul.” Such evocations of the existence of a loving mother seem to have touched a raw sensorium in the emergent reading public at the time. Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun), later a prominent figure in Chinese literature and politics, wept while reading one of Bing Xin’s short stories about the memory and effect of a loving mother on an embittered young man. Young and educated women and men copied, recited, quoted, and memorized her poems as if, in the words of a young man named Shen Congwen, they were “caught in an ecstatic trance.” Later a noted writer himself, Shen Congwen raved that “no other writer can be compared with Ms. Bing Xin in terms of the joy that literary writing promises to bring to life.” Bing Xin’s writings continue to draw a wide range of readers and have become part of the vocabulary of the modern Chinese language. Literary critics and cultural historians converge in their basic characterization of the center of gravity in Bing Xin’s literary world: Muai, “mother’s love.” Whether celebratory of Bing Xin’s figurations of “mother’s love” as “refreshing and beautiful,” or critical of them as indications of the “lack of broader social concerns,” scholars also share certain indistinct perceptions that her writing was “narrowly” personal and hence limited, with respect to the time of rupture and crisis in which they were written.

Feminist studies have of course long taught us that personal is political. In Bing Xin’s particular case, Muai designates complex layers of meanings. In the Chinese language, Muai evokes a feeling that may well be specific to one person but not necessarily “narrow” or socially unmotivated. As a term, it refers to not only “mother’s love” drawn on Bing Xin’s own life but also “motherly love” with general implications. The former registers more the imprints of personal experience about one’s mother, and the latter designates a social mode of relational behavior with the body of a female as the site and ground of its enactments. Bing Xin certainly is specifically personal in many places where she writes about her mother’s love. In one of her renowned prose series, she begins to designate such a specific love by delineating how she learned about her own “primitive life” from her mother:

[I remember] I liked to sit next to my mother, holding her sleeves, pleading with her to tell me things about my childhood. Mother gazed inwardly, with a smile, and said in a soft and low voice: “ Barely three months old, and yet had you already had so many troubles, being ill often. Hearing the steps of someone who was bringing medicine, you already knew to feel worried and to cry. So many people surrounding the bed, yet your pleading eyes only turned toward me, as if you already knew and recognized your mother in the crowd.”

At this moment, tears dampened the corners of our eyes, both of us.

“It was the day when your first full month in life was completed; I carried you to the front hall, you were in your pink cloth, which was a gift from your aunt, and wearing your big red hat with a blue satin brim. Seeing your rosy cheeks and shining smile, I felt proud as I stood among my sisters-in-laws.”
“You were only seven months old, we were all in the sea-boat; I held you in my arms standing next to the railing, and in the sound of the sea waves, you already knew to utter mama and sister” (my italics).

That the two nouns – “mama” and “sister” – are uttered in a temporal symbiosis by an infant-girl is important, as is the fact that such utterances of temporal symbiosis are thrice witnessed, first by the mother orally, second by the daughter who hears the mother’s oral story, and then by the author textually. What is immediately striking in this passage – written in the first person about the most intimate and intensely personal experiences – is the figurative evocation of a female-levered originating moment of a child’s social existence and human consciousness. At the beginning, there was a woman’s embracing body, attending thought, and sustaining gaze with which the infant’s life journey unfolds amidst “already so many troubles.” As the textual rhythms of the prose are moved on by and measured with such phrases as “your first full month in life,” “you were barely three months old,” “in your seventh month,” and so on, the vibration enacted therein amounts to an embodied act of cognitive caring which follows, feels and accompanies “you” under shifting conditions. Hearing what “you already knew” in the absence of legible linguistic expressions, this woman’s eye recognizes “you” in “your” eating, sleeping, feeling, and breathing, while sustaining and furthering “your” being, in sickness and in health, within and beyond any given moments of “your” history. Bing Xin searches into the workings of such a cognitive caring with both reflection and enthusiasm by focusing on articulating its effects with abundant detail, innovative imagery, and supple vitality throughout her writings. In another prose selection, for instance, one reads:

What surprising wonders I gradually discovered through my mother’s accounts of the primitive rhythms with which I anchored myself! From the very beginning and before I came into the world, she has already known me, has recognized me, and has appreciated me; when I did not yet know to acknowledge that there was “me” in this life, she already loved me. From the time I was three years of age and onwards, I have been slowly finding my small self in this large world and learning to recognize and love this life of mine; and yet what I know as “myself” is only one percent or one thousandth of what “I am” in my mother’s eyes, life, and thoughts.

A specific mother’s love is designated in such specific effects as a gentle and yet potent gaze, which works to map the “primitive rhythms” of an infant into passages of a life in the making. It was through this mother’s cognizance of those rhythms from “my” infancy that the small “I” became aware of “this large world” with all its challenges and possibilities. This “mother’s love,” in short, is a mode of seeing whose operation receives and enables another humanity in and as a process of fluid formation replete with dynamic potential, amidst “already so many troubles,” involving then a great deal more relational implication than what “a young woman’s limited experience,” as critic Chen Xiying phrased it at
the time\textsuperscript{21} and as conventionally understood, might promise to disclose or enact in literary writings.

The readers and critics, ranging from elementary school children to the learned and the elderly, drawn to Bing Xin’s works at the time and over time intimate as much. Some scholars contemplate the relational implications of those otherwise “simple” (meaning womanly) writings, and wonder at how reminiscent they appear to be of traditional Chinese literary writings and kin-defined cultural codes central to the Confucian system of ethics.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, “mother’s love” as a literary motif is not an unfamiliar occurrence in the classical Chinese tradition, which is both constituted with and constitutive of the Confucian codes of familial relations, namely, parental benevolence and filial piety.\textsuperscript{23} Narratives in Chinese classical literature, accounts in historiography, and treatises of philosophy articulate and illustrate such benevolence and piety as foundational to the Confucian system, since they embody and trope a paradigm of ethical relations that regulate the Confucian society at different levels of its institutional arrangements and posit its structural hierarchy in a general state of mediated “harmony,” at least in principle. A benevolent parent to his or her child is a familial variation of the benevolent official to the commoners under his administration,\textsuperscript{24} which is itself a reflection and extension of the benevolence that the emperor bestows upon his ministers which, in its turn, is the humanly embodied manifestation of the benevolence of the cosmic \textit{Tao}.\textsuperscript{25} Such a paradigm in its institutional configuration and social practice is deeply gendered of course, for a woman’s status as a parent is determined by and derived from her institutionally subservient relationship to her husband. Yet it is not gender-confined in bio-essentialized ways but power-defined in its socially stipulated manners. Indeed, a son or daughter specifies the same set of ethical codes that both variously and consistently require a virtuous wife to follow her husband, an honorable bureaucrat to follow his lord, and a loyal lord to follow the emperor – for life and for death.\textsuperscript{26} Such codes of benevolence and piety that are premised upon the parent–child, husband–wife, official–commoner, minister–emperor hierarchies, in other words, enlist parents’ caring for their offspring insofar as such caring is sanctioned or regulated into a proper function in the Confucian order of social relations as manifestations of the cosmic laws. Hence the Confucian teaching that human relations or really humanity itself “start in (personal) feelings” (\textit{fahu yü qing}) and “arrive at (social) rites” (\textit{zhihu yü li}).\textsuperscript{27} A mother’s acts of caring toward her children, in an ultimate sense, define her humanity as an assigned function in the organization of the Confucian family mandated by the cosmic order of things and, like other types of relational behavior, must be properly measured. Any “caring” that may allow the cared-for to transgress the rites and / or boundaries of social ordering would be morally problematic or simply an indication of the ethical failing of an excessively indulgent and disqualified parent.\textsuperscript{28} A more accurate translation in modern English for a mother’s caring, as the Confucian codes would have it, is “mother’s kindness” (\textit{mu en}).

Emerging in the midst of the explosive energies for change unleashed during the May Fourth movement and yet distanced from some of their iconoclastically inclined refusal of anything “Chinese” and “traditional,”\textsuperscript{29} Bing Xin’s renditions
of her mother’s caring and its relational implications intimate complex engagements with what is considered to be “Chinese tradition.” On the one hand, those renditions do draw upon the cultural mores and social practices of parental benevolence. Aspects of feeling in a maternal parent’s acts of caring toward her offspring are evoked with nuanced intensity. Such evocations, on the other hand, do not follow the rubrics that order such feelings into proper social hierarchies; in fact, those rubrics are exceeded or, to be more accurate, fundamentally missed. Feelings and acts of muai as “mother’s kindness” are enlisted insofar as they are altered into “mother’s love” where a female-levered relationship takes shape without collapsing the many-sided distinction between mother and daughter and yet going beyond the codes of parent–child hierarchy.

“You were only seven months old, we were all in the sea-boat; I held you in my arms standing next to the railing,” as the above-cited mother’s recount in Bing Xin’s prose goes, “in the sound of the ocean waves, you already knew to utter mama (mother) and jiejie (elder sister).” The infant’s first utterances register and create an unusual connection between mother and daughter with a reference to the third term “sister,” and the mother’s recounting of such utterances co-registers and co-creates the connection since the young woman who learns the story has no actual knowledge of her own “primitive rhythms.” Rather, she enters her life in language and history with her mother’s recounting, which is more of a sisterly storytelling rather than a parental teaching or disciplining. The unfolding history of the young woman constituted by the mother’s storytelling, at the same time, is constitutive of what the mother bodies forth. Her first memory of her own “primitive rhythms” shaped in the midst of hearing her mother’s tales not only grounds the formative dynamics of her life and history but amounts to a validating witness to a loving mother and the actualizing evidence of the meanings of the “mother’s love.” “Mother’s love,” in this sense, is “motherly love”, where a co-authorship between a mother and a daughter is made possible as a mutually enabling process of storytelling and history making.

The workings of this motherly love at once continue and discontinue the kin-defined relational mores and their practices in the Chinese tradition, bringing about a sensorium that is cognizant of potential “sister-ships” between lives of irreducible differences and hence conducive to – and even constitutive of – impulses of equality amid institutionally marked unequal relations. With sisterly impulses, in other words, this sensorium exceeds and threatens to burst the familiar hierarchies of Confucian institutions and their functional rites including, specifically here, the rite that regulates the relationship between the parent and the child in “appropriate” behavioral and psychic patterns. Bing Xin’s disagreement with those who define her as a writer of either “boudoir literature” in the 1920s or “children’s literature” decades later in this sense deserve serious hearing. Indeed, her early fictions such as “One Year Away from Home” (Lijia de yinian, 1921) about a teenager’s first year at high school in another city and his homesick feelings, “Lonesome” (Jimo, 1922) about a boy’s friendship with his elder cousin sister, or “After Parting” (Biehou, 1924) about a young man’s wish to have caring and thoughtful elder sisters, for instance, are much more than “stories
about children” or “narrow feelings” rendered with “concrete cognition” in the “Chinese sentimental tradition.” One may better approach the unusual impact that those writings had on the wide range of readers of the 1920s with a view to certain “sisterly”-cum-equal impulses engendered by those writings in the readers. This gives rise to the possibility of a cognitive mode that may dislodge the familiar hierarchy between the seeing, speaking, writing author and the seen, spoken to, and receiving reader, along with all the social relations and psychic patterns implicated therein. Critically unprecedented, such impulses cannot be found in classical Chinese writings whose foundational form is posited on the very notion of the divide between the knowing Confucian scholar-official and the illiterate common folks that he both speaks for and instructs, parentally. Of course, such a cognitive made of sisterly impulses is not a discrete occurrence, for it invokes memories and practices of existent social mores and available cultural resources; yet invocation – and here is the key in Bing Xin’s case – is made with and through decisive alteration.

In a time and place where established institutions and cultural fabrics were unraveling amid expansionist motions of Western-dominated global force fields, the invoked resources also include a varying range of “foreign” traditions featuring many of the thematics that are culturally emblematic of the modern West. The central question here is how such invocation-cum-alteration of any available cultural resources – Chinese and others – operates with certain distinct impulses and effects that have important implications for the context of Chinese society in the 1920s. In Bing Xin’s writings one finds many emblematic instances where such an operation can be traced, as in the following passage, taken from Letter to the Young Reader (Ji xiao duzhe), a collection of twenty-nine prose pieces written during her sojourn in the U.S. and published in a series from 1923 to 1926 in the “Literary Supplement” of The Beijing Morning Post (Beijing Chenbao):

This letter is written not only to introduce you to my mother herself; what I wish to remind you of are the two words “mu qin” (mother). Isn’t it true that in this world, everyone has a mother, and everyone is someone’s child; and mother’s love is evinced by every life that comes into being and makes me feel that I cannot have even the slightest sense of self-importance or superiority in the front of others, since there is no one under the sun whose life does not come from a mother. Now my little friend, who then can justify himself to say that heaven endows lives with more and less human worth? The differences between the rich and the poor, or various versions of the precious and the lowly, mean nothing in the light of the fact that they all have mothers. At the beginning of the world, there were no such human-made systems of classifications and classes dividing lives into the rich and the poor, the privileged and the desolate. At the beginning of the human time, there was the mother; and in her loving light everyone was free and equal!

The cognitive caring of a specific motherly love with sisterly impulses, it seems, is hereby further generalized into a function of universal love, taking on some topoi
from discernibly Western traditions, namely, Christianity and its version of universalism. Indeed, the biblical syntax in the last lines of this passage in the Chinese original is intentional, directly marked by a reference, immediately prior to these lines, to the Gospel of St. Paul. Bing Xin compares the impulses and effects of her motherly love with the message of St. Paul’s Gospel. The former “affirm the world as a place of actualizable plenitude,” the latter discloses to the world the beneficence of the divine in Jesus – the image with human form – as the spiritual authority over conscience. She writes: “St. Paul puts forth in his correspondences a line that has the power to break boulders and shake the heaven: ‘For the blessings of this Gospel,’ he says, ‘I have become a messenger in chains’ – A messenger for and therefore chained to the Gospel of love!” My little friend, please help me to continue on my way of becoming such a messenger in the chains of our mothers’ love!” What begins as a socio-culturally specific sensorium of possible sisterly co-authorship between a Chinese mother and daughter, it seems, is shifted and inscribed with a proclamation of Christian love and its universal routes of redemptive reconciliation.

A Chinese woman from a privileged socio-economic background, Bing Xin received her secondary school and college educations at privately endowed American protestant missionary institutions for women in Beijing. When she was writing *Letters to the Young Reader*, she was at Wellesley College in Boston on a scholarship completing her Master’s Degree in literature. The gospels and their various interpretations informed the process of her formal education, and left traceable marks in her writings. One of her earliest writings titled “Painting – Poetry” (Hua-shi) is about how a painting that shows a shepherd saving a little lamb evokes feelings of illumination. From March to November of 1921, she published fourteen poems that are lyrical exegeses in their content, ranging from readings of Chapter Three Verse Eighteen of *Genesis* to reflections on Chapter Eighteen Verse Ten of *St. Matthew*, including one piece contemplating on the transformation of Simon into Peter “the Rock-Man.” One of her early prose works titled “Smiles” (Weixiao), to take yet another example, opens with a depiction of a white Angel with a “radiant smile;” then shifts to map the Angelic radiance appearing on a Chinese boy’s “fresh checks” and in his “clear eyes” as he stands in green fields at dusk. Finally, she moves to intimate its presence in an elderly Chinese peasant woman leaning on the doorframe of her hut in a courtyard where ripening grapes and weighty wheat are wet with spring rains: “My heart is in a state of bright and transparent clearness when I see her,” the piece ends. It would be too easy to read such lyrical and narrative instances as mere derivative repetitions of Christian signs of the divine or repetitive variations of their secularized versions. What is striking in those instances is an impetus that, using the topoi of Christian universal love, appeals to and stirs up a sense of universal human equality among different lives in terms of their human worth. Such appeals and stirrings, more importantly, persistently *miss* the scheme of things ordered and ordained by an invisible beneficence to mark its manifestations with religious or secularized rubrics. The sense of universal human equality that those lyrical and narrative moments appeal to and stir up, in other words, is suggestive
of a normative potency rather than possessive of a normalizing authority," as it is rendered openly fluid and contingent in its embodiments. The shifting scenes of "smiles" in "Smiles," for instance, dislodge the radiance of the "Angel" from the positionally superior terrain of whiteness in the Protestant scheme of things and, furthermore, re-materialize it with the heathen bodies of a Chinese rural boy and a Chinese peasant woman. Those scenes constitute a process of alteration amid invocation that misses the foundational signification of White Angel with its pre-ordained mission as manifested destiny.\textsuperscript{41}

Such a "miss" amid the constant shifting scenes of "smiles," in a way, brings back traces of St. Paul in his famed tension as "the traveling convert." Originally Saul, he changed his name, changed with the times, advocated his new ideas, wrote and stirred up controversy, fought, and journeyed far and wide. It might be due to the unsettled nature of the convert that Bing Xin holds a lifelong fondness of the stories of St. Paul.\textsuperscript{42} Yet similarly and more significantly, when Bing Xin evokes St. Paul and his message in connection with motherly love, the center of gravity therein is occupied by Chinese female bodies and gives rise to feelings of human equality across boundaries. Indeed, St. Paul's piety, as a filial type of devotion to the heavenly Father that hypostatizes universal beneficence while constituting a spiritual turn in the Judaic-Christian history, however different in terms of substance, conjures up the Confucian ethical codes of filial piety and parental benevolence. In the same way in which Confucian benevolence and piety are altered in the midst of being engaged, the governing order of the universe that privileges St. Paul's message about Christ's cross and God's chosen children is more than discursively complicated in the midst of being evoked by Bing Xin. It is structurally missed since such an order and its rubrics would not allow the heathens especially the female ones\textsuperscript{43} the special access that St. Paul has to the writ of its laws in relation to the cross and to the unseen heavenly Father. In Bing Xin's evocation of the biblical topoi, the body of a Chinese woman is placed in the special position that St. Paul occupies to establish his mission and canonical authority in civilizing the non-recipients of the covenant of faith.\textsuperscript{44} Also, the embracing Chinese mothers and their motherly love are rendered as the site where a new kind of relational life engenders, where motherly love acts not as the "life-giving spirit" of bodyless mystery endowed with supreme power but rather as embodied possibilities of co-authorship in life and in narrative appealing to sisterly equality. Just as the kin-defined rites of Confucian benevolence are engaged insofar as to be transformed, the biblical topoi of universal beneficence are invoked insofar as to be altered into a female-levered horizon pointing to an unprecedented sight beyond the scheme of things ordered and ordained by their implied theodicy: The sight of universal human equality of normative potency, where the conting-ent organizations of different human connections are not conflated with fixed and fixated power relations and hierarchies. "Little friends," Bing Xin continues, "let me tell you one thing that we children regard as simple and yet the adults consider unfathomable: [It is through our mothers' love that] the world is built!"\textsuperscript{45}

This "simple" yet "unfathomable" way of organizing the world and human relations, sighted through Bing Xin's cognitive mode of "motherly love," is non-
Christian just as it is non-Confucian in its defining impulses while transformatively invoking both traditions and their topoi. This may account for the fact that it looked “startlingly fresh” to the readers and critics in the Chinese context of the 1920s and at the same time stirred up unusual resonances. The impulses and appeals at work in such a sight of another world initiated part of the most influential scenes of women’s literature in early twentieth century China; their female-levered potency invites further exploration.

Of Symbiotic Feelings: “Bing Xin Style”

It is tempting to see the potency of those impulses as derivative of “humanism” imported from the modern West, given its appeal to universal equality in terms of human worth against both Chinese Confucian and European Protestant orders of fatherly authority. The possible world of mutually enabling human relations that such impulses bring about in imagination, however, critically jars with the modern cogito, the key in the humanist formation of modernity. After all, Bing Xin’s motherly love as cognitive caring grounds itself in “feeling” more than “thinking” as both categories are usually defined in modern times. In another episode of Letters to the Young Reader, this “jarring” is more directly addressed:

Once, when I was very small, I suddenly went to my mother and turned my face up to her, asking: “Mama, for what reason do you love me?” Mother stopped her needlework and bent down toward me, her soft cheek touching my forehead; tenderly and without hesitation, she said: “I have no reason.”

... “I have no reason” – these four words are uttered with such resolution, without the slightest margin for misinterpretation. She loves me, not because I am recognized as “Bing Xin” or with any other illusory and hypocritical title in this world! Her love has no “reasonable” conditions. Little friend, when you find a human being in this world whose love sees you and knows you hundreds and thousands of times more than you can manage to do yourself, how do you feel? Can you not see her and love her with all the feelings that she feels for you and all the feelings in her that you have felt with your own bones? (my italics).

Two features are discernable in the working of motherly love here as a cognitive horizon. First, it posits itself at the limits of reason and hence is openly at odds with the foundational cornerstone supporting the architecture of universal modernity according to which “reason” reins all other human faculties. Second, it actualizes itself through the interfacing textures of feelings, which are deemed the “lowlier tiers” of human formation where the boundary between individuals is blurred as each feels the feelings in, of, and for the other. Seeing and knowing then is gained from and works as feelings between different lives in mutually actualizing symbiotic vibrations, each attending to the sublest nuances of the other’s life, while resonating with the live pulses of each other’s significant potentiality. In the war-torn society of the 1910s and the 1920s where kin-defined
bonds and social institutions were disintegrating, such feelings and their implied symbiosis often seemed out of step with the times if not altogether out of the question. Bing Xin herself was acutely aware of the fact that sisterly impulses were by no means an innate or natural feature of women’s relations to one another let alone readily available among members of a society en route towards a crisis-ridden modernization. Her short story “Sacrificed under the System of Nuclear Family” (Xiao jiating zhidu xia de xisheng, 1920), for example, tells the story of a modern son who depletes the emotional and financial resources of his parents to acquire for himself social advantages, including an overseas education and a marriage to a “new woman.” He then abandons his elderly parents to poverty, illness, and eventually death in the name of practicing the “new ideas” about “modern individuals [who] are autonomous and should not depend on others.”

A force field of self-serving rationality emerges in the story as part and parcel of the modernizing drives at work in a crisis-ridden society, where the elderly were “sacrificed” to become the socially vulnerable and humanly superfluous, as their lives were not transformed but depleted into material and psychic ruins. And the elderly were not alone in Bing Xin’s literary geographies of the sacrificed; they were joined by the young, the economically impoverished, the politically manipulated and socially dispossessed, and the female-gendered—the variants of the list grows longer and longer as Bing Xin’s writing continued, to include more varieties of the so-called “the weak.”

Cognizant of such workings of the modern force field and its range of human casualties, Bing Xin’s writings on and of motherly love—as a mode of mapping the world and enabling its human relations—are more complex than they seem at the first glance. Indeed, her scenes of symbiotic feelings appear “typically feminine” as some put it, which means they are inconsequential or simply unreal in the world of acquisitive wars, old or new. Yet the rhythms bodied forth in those scenes are not easily dismissible in terms of their felt effects. “Paper Boats—For Mother” (Zhichuan—ji muqin), one of Bing Xin’s poems written in the mid 1920s, may serve a case in point as good as many others:

I never toss away any single piece of paper, / always keep one, one more, and more; / folding them into a long, long row of small boats, / and sliding them from the deck of the liner into the roaring sea.

Some are blown by the open wind / and flattened into the crevices of the ship-windows, / some are soaked by the waves, but still hold onto the prow. / I still keep folding, and folding, folding; / there shall be one, among them, / that reaches the place / I want it to be.

Mother, if you see a small boat in your dream, / don’t be surprised by its unexpected appearing. / Your daughter, your ultimate love, / folded it / tearful-eyed, and pleaded it / to return home carrying her sorrow and devotion, / from afar, ten thousand crags and torrents away.

The poem was written in the autumn of 1923, an important moment in modern Chinese history as it was in Bing Xin’s personal life. While wars among the
warlords were tearing the Chinese land apart and the First National Revolution was about to erupt, Bing Xin was on her way across the Pacific to the U.S. for her advanced study. Like the overseas journeys of others discussed earlier, such traveling from primarily agrarian countries to the industrialized world for “advanced knowledge” was emblematic of the predicament of the travelers whose lifeworlds were embattled and unraveling amid the expansionist moves of the big industrial powers. And such predicament was constitutive of their struggles to reposition themselves in relation to the outside world dominated by those expansionist powers. The liner that carries the passenger away from her loving mother for “advanced learning” embodies and tropes the modern divide between the advanced and the left behind, the modern and the traditional, the outdated and the current, the deathly past and the forward future. Motivated by and insisting on a felt symbiosis as a cognitive bridge between lives ever distanced and divided by such motions, the poem and its imagery both register and work through the force fields that threaten to sever those mutually constitutive live fabrics. Caught up in the motions of sea change, the “tearful-eyed” gently and yet firmly makes fragile boats of humanity, as messengers of dreamt connection across the temporalized vast space and its ferocious divisions of time zones. Some boats are instantly torn to shreds and others are repeatedly pounded or slowly drown, but the “tearful-eyed” persists in making more and more of them, lining them up “in long, long rows” and sending them out as recurrent dreams evocative of one moment – “there shall be one” – of homecoming.

To a reasonable mind, the sight of those fragile boats of life battling the sea of modern divide to join the dreams on the other shore evokes hopelessness itself. Yet the unwavering persistence in such fatal journeying is strangely stirring, even awe-inspiring. Sensing the working impetus in Bing Xin’s writings that takes the assuredly impossible as the plainly imperative and makes the extraordinary simple, Su Xüelin, herself a noted woman writer since the 1920s, comments as follows:

Bing Xin’s works appeared as if . . . by a miracle. . . . [At the time] many tried to liberate themselves from the rules of classical poetry, making strenuous efforts to experiment with new literature. . . . In search for their destinations amidst cultural wilderness, some of these adventurers fell in the middle of their journey; others stumbled upon pieces of land for temporary resting; some continued stumbling blindly, with commendable courage but laughable scenarios. Yet Bing Xin, following her specific feelings and sensibility, directed her path without any of those strenuous struggles. Walking as if mesmerized, she instantly found an oasis and . . . thereupon built her kingdom of poetry.

An “oasis” indeed, but this oasis of symbiotic feelings, where normative appeals are made to human equality across social divides in the schematized time and space, is not so much “found” as made. Bing Xin’s fiction “The Ending of a Fiction” (Yipian xiaoshuo de jiejü, 1920) offers a reflective disclosure of her early
attempts at representing the real, in the light of which the “oasis” of her literary world seems begotten in and as a refusal to accept what exists or claims to have the monopoly of existence. The fiction, in other words, is about the problem of fiction writing in relation to the real. A young woman author wants to tell a story of happy reunion in which the son is to return from the army to his aging mother. What arrives at the old woman’s door instead is the news of her son’s death, against the author’s own plan, expectation, and hopes. The fiction ends with a rupture that makes the author’s writing impossible:

[She] finished her writing and then read it from the start. When she got to the ending, she was shocked. Rising from her chair, she said to herself: “Didn’t I intend to write a happy reunion between a mother and a son? How did this end happen?” She then tore the paper up. Taking another piece of new, blank paper, she was to rewrite the story. Yet she found herself unable to write anything. With pen in her hand, she only stared at those torn pieces of paper on the windowsill.61

The writer is here confronted with something called “reality” amidst which what she hopes for and really wants has no place to be in representational writing. The proximity between this character of a young woman author and Bing Xin herself can be traced in the details of the former’s figuration (she is also a woman student, the same age, in her study room much like Bing Xin’s, etc), and in the latter’s personal letters to friends wherein she described how she found herself unable to write at times.62 The distance between the two is at work in, among other occasions, the literary scenes of mutually enabling feelings or lives of symbiotic rhythms that Bing Xin did manage to produce in the 1920s and following years, with an often latent if not concealed awareness of their actual or perceived impossibility. They take on a fairytale feeling in overall settings and key moments of rendition. Superman (Chaoren, 1921), one of Bing Xin’s early signature fictions, depicts a random encounter between an educated young man with suicidal tendencies and a servant boy suffering from poverty and illness in an urban setting, which leads to their unintended mutual help that heals both through their memories of mothers’ love. The servant boy distinctly conjures up the smiling angelic boy in “Smiles” discussed earlier.63 In another short story titled National Flags (Guoqi, 1921), a Chinese boy and a Japanese boy transcend the national hostility between China and Japan in the aftermath of the Versailles Treaty, and keep their feelings of friendship intact. The story ends with two little boys, hand in hand, walking into the sunset.64 Good Dreams (Haomeng, 1923)65 tells of how “I” a woman student from China and “she” a woman student from Egypt spend a moonlit evening at the lake of an American college, and how each attends to the other’s subtlest feelings across language barriers, thereby questioning the world that is posited on the logic of “might is right” and re-envisioning such a world into another place of symbiotic feelings, mutual help and compassion (huzhu yu tongqing).66 The story ends in a way that marks some of the most enduring fairytales about dreams coming true – a reflective comment by
the Chinese “I” on the truthfulness of the dream evening which cannot claim
the real: “I found myself walking alone on my way back, with my thin shadow
on the ground – the past hundred and twenty minutes spent with her was
pulsing in my heart longingly, as if a good dream.”

Critics, writers, and literary historians have marked such fairytale feeling of
Bing Xin’s writing with the term, for lack of any available words and concepts,
“Bing Xin style” (Bing Xin fengge), and noted how such a style distinguishes itself
from other literary work in vernacular in the 1920s. Classical Chinese (wenyan)
as the language of the cultural elite was in fundamental crisis then; and yet
urgently needed alterations of or alternatives to this language were painfully
slow in coming. Many male authors, recently severed from the former system of
imperial civil examination and the institutionally ready-made life path of the
literati-official, were struggling in search of styles appropriate to their newly
adopted or invented vernacular as well as their not yet certain social positioning.
Without much choice, it seemed, they often equipped themselves with literary
importations from the modern West. The complexity of such struggle is partially
registered in their often haltingly heavy and really tortured linguistic maneuvers,
indicating the degrees to which they were pressured by both Chinese literati
norms and the phrases they borrowed from the modern West, a predicament
that underlines modern Chinese cultural history. Coming like “a breath of fresh
air” amid those of her struggling contemporaries, Bing Xin’s scenes bring about
“a completely new style of writing” as a critic put it that seems to have
exceeded the stringent pressures of such predicament to a surprising extent.
“Fluid, simple, fresh, and direct,” its dynamics alter the institutional features of
writing not only in terms of the feelings that it renders but in terms of possible
relationships it configures and enables. Writing turns into a process where
dialogues on equal footing across social boundaries should, are, and can happen,
which undoes the principles of the “old” Chinese hierarchy that divide the
learned literati and unlearned commoners and misses the binaries of “new”
Western order that divides the advanced adult and the undeveloped child-like.

It is such a dialogue that animates and indeed organizes many of Bing Xin’s
major works produced since 1923, of which Letters to the Young Reader is one of the
most noted and enduring examples. The first letter of this prose series, signifi-
cantly, opens as follows:

Little friends whom I feel I know:

... In this first letter which makes clear the purpose and main themes of
our correspondence, please allow me to introduce myself to you. I am a late-
comer to your ranks – yet there is one thing in life of which I am proud.
That is, I was once a little child like you and I am a little child at times now
still. In order to preserve this grain of simplicity, I plead with you in the
hope that you will help me, leading me by the hand. I will also keep encour-
aging myself to be a most devoted and enthusiastic friend to you! ... I
cannot find in the existent words to describe what I feel in my heart – it is
my fortune and privilege to be able to write to you.
A dialogic interaction between the writer and reader is activated here as not only a literary scene but also a cognitive horizon, where the writer turns away from the status of the traditionally “learned” and modern “advanced” while turning into a “latecomer” among the “unlearned” and “undeveloped.” Such a “latecomer” in her non-linear movements is of course not identical with the “young reader” for whom she is writing and whose ranks she chooses to join, since she is already a “learned adult.” As a “learned adult,” she is cognizant of the established boundaries that arrange and define human relations in various structures of social hierarchy including the divide between the writer and the reader in terms of the old authorship and new ownership of meanings. And yet such cognition is precisely what she marks and dismantles as a “latecomer” of “the unlearned” and, along with it, the established systems of writing and their implied institutional and social schemes. A figure of transboundary linkage, her dynamic amounts to an opening for dialogic encounters among the parties that are otherwise fixated in ready-made books – Chinese or Western – of relational behaviors and social orders. The sisterly impulses at work in such an opening for unprecedented encounters, however, register more than manifestations of “a-historical” transcendence or “pre-Oedipus” naivety, since they are neither located somewhere above historically conditioned human lives nor taken as a natural-original state of humanity. In Letter Six, for instance, one reads:

Little friends, I have a suggestion: this column of “Children’s World” is for children who write for children. We might as well push an inch further when we have an inch, and push a page more when we have a page, inhabiting this sphere as fully as we can. . . . Little friends, this then is our secret world: let’s talk and laugh in our lowered voices among ourselves! The adults of this world are so advanced that their ways of behavior are unintelligible to us: . . . For instance, look at all that cannon firing and gun-shooting; a hundred thousand people are dead and more are wounded, lying on the fields, with flesh and blood mixed into miles of human decay. Our hearts are shaken when we hear about it; we lose sleep or have nightmares; yet the adults not only don’t mind but also like to manipulate such horrors with more horrors! . . . All in all, we don’t dare to intervene in their powerful affairs; they simply do not bother to care for us. So we can bravely talk and laugh and be unafraid of whatever they seem to be doing – There, I have said it, please, little friends, let’s have a good round of applause to show our agreement!)

In the post-May Fourth Movement moment and amid the full rage of fighting warlords wielding abundant supplies of advanced European weaponry, what “I have said” here certainly involves more than biologically defined children. Those who would give “a good round of applause” to what has been said here could come (and as historically happened, did come) from all age groups. No one, including children, inherently shares or necessarily follows the “secret” that works at the heart of such applause. “The young reader,” in other words, points to a readership that is neither ready-made nor naturally existent. She is not premised
upon the European romantic idea of childhood and purity. Rather, she suggests an imagined humanity in and as an imaginary readership, actualized in the dialogic encounters that the “Bing Xin style” embodies and enables. At the best dismissed and at the worst disallowed by the world of the powerful, she comes into lively existence when she chooses to partake in a “secret world” at odds with the ways in which the world is openly run, as an active part of an imaginative community always in the making. Here one may find the key to one of the enigmas in modern Chinese literary history: that _Letters to the Young Reader_, intended for children and composed putatively in their language,74 gained an immense socio-cultural influence at the time of their publication among educated adults and continues to gather enthusiastic readers from a wide social spectrum. The writing of _Letters_ makes, and is made by, its readers and their chosen participation as its active co-authors, generating sisterly impulses for human equality, its articulations, and its difficult if not impossible actualizations. Hence Bing Xin’s writing “flow” endlessly as if “moving waters and clouds,” with multiple and multiplying sources and their ever renewing and renewable “freshness.”75

It has been long argued that the style of literary writing implies a contract between the author and the reader. Bing Xin’s literary style, without any ready-made patterns of available social contracts at the level of literary signification, evokes and indeed invents a mode of social production of human relations, or really her writing style is new pattern of human relations and mode of social production of such relations in the making. The content of “the Bing Xin style” is a dialogic co-authorship, and its center of gravity is foregrounded in Bing Xin’s later writings that are structured as explicitly made-up stories. _Segregation_ (fen, 1931) is one of most influential of those works.76 Set in a hospital, it tells a story of how two babies discover their baffling differences. Born on the same day, they are wrapped in similar white garments and placed in basket-beds next to each other. When they start chatting, they find that their mothers, unlike them, are moved into separate places. One is in the First Class Room graced by abundant fresh flowers, and the other is in the Third Class Room crowded with many other women patients. When the nurses bath the babies, they continue their chat and find out more differences. The house awaiting one is surrounded by a large garden and filled with many kinds of toys and programs for the best possible education, and the hut awaiting another is small and empty since the mother has to leave the baby with the aging grandma and work as a wet-nurse for a wealthy family. When they learn that they can remain in the hospital and spend their first new year’s eve in this world together, they grow still closer to each other. Yet the reasons that allow them to remain temporarily together differentiate them again. One mother is afraid of having no quiet time to rest well at her house since the family would have too many visitors coming in cars to congratulate her at the new year’s eve; and the other’s mother is afraid of aggressive creditors who would not let her and the child to survive the new year’s eve at their hut.77 Then comes the scene of the first day of the new year where they are prepared to leave the hospital:
Two nurses glided into our room; their faces lit up with New Year smiles, and toted us off to give us our bath. The nurses opened my little suitcase and pulled out some new clothes. She dressed me in a little white suit with a long vest and nightgown. Over that she put a light green silk gown with matching hat and socks. . . . My little friend was also being held up by a nurse. I stared at him in dazed silence. I could hardly recognize him! He was wearing a blue, thickly padded coat with arms that were twice too long. The coat had been patched and stitched in a dozen places, and the little apron around him was so faded that you could hardly tell that it was once also blue. . . . I looked down at the pile of white garments that had just been taken off us. A shiver of remorse shook my body. So this is how we would part company; the two of us—our thoughts and attitudes, our material worlds—forever and irreconcilably separated!

All those differences between two babies in terms of their conditions are now inscribed onto their bodies, amounting to a crystallization of socially made human segregation. The connotations of such segregation are unfolding in the fiction’s ending, where one baby is put inside a warm car that starts moving smoothly, and the other is set on the shoulders of a bare-headed man who is walking under heavy snow amid the crowds on the streets, while the distance between the two parties rapidly increases. The possibility of the young lives to ever cross again is clearly to be eliminated. Yet the feelings they gained from being with each other persist in their bodies as— to borrow Bing Xin’s phrase when she depicts her childhood shaping with “mother’s love”—“primitive rhythms,” just as the fresh memory of the their first new year’s eve in this world spent together remains in their psychic sensorium:

There was a different look in my little friend’s eyes now, a gleam of pride: “You will grow up like a flower in a greenhouse. Neither wind nor cold shall touch you . . . I am a piece of grass that grows along a pathway . . . stepped on by people and facing the elements daily. [But] there will always be plenty of my humble but brave companions in this difficult world: as the grasses of the field, cut them or burn them all you want, we will always come back. Though we must live beneath the foot of mankind, our green colors are spreading into every corner of the globe!” I felt so miserable that I want to cry: “I don’t want to be pampered, that’s not what I want!” The expression on my friend’s face softened: “none of us wants to be so differently arranged, but we get different lots in life—we’ll see how we deal with them and how we each make our futures.”

Outside the window, the snow fell ceaselessly . . . We only had a few more hours together before we would both disappear into the teeming masses of the city tomorrow. What were the chances of us ever sharing the same roof again? We looked at each other with warmth and affection.

Such feelings and memories of “warmth” and “affection” and socially charged dialogue between two infants, made in deep winter and across unbridgeable social
divisions, are marvelous and unreal scenes – and they are rendered as marvelous and unreal. More than demonstrating a state of “natural humanity” in “a-historical” or “pre-Oedipus” fashion as some critics put it, they are enacted in a way that simultaneously indicates the real impossibility of their existence in the “difficult world” with its polarized classifications for human segregation, not only in terms of the story but in its style of telling. If it is in “the Bing Xin style” that *Letters to the Yong Reader* and its readership actualize each other as the “secret world” of an imaginative and participatory community, it is in the same style that *Segregation* is composed with a language that is not a language to articulate the social and textual impossibilities. It is a story by and for “infants” whose narration is explicitly fictional and whose realness cannot be “realistically” validated except by the readers as its co-authors if they so choose. As if Qiu Jin’s Jingwei Bird returns in another way, here one encounters something close to a modern parable, simply and profoundly suggestive of impossible imperatives in life, writing, and social relations. In an emphatically unreal setting, in other words, the ordinarily unrealistic feelings for sisterly connections are enacted and the not-yet-available memories are created that serve to engender normative appeals to social equality. No overall alternatives are offered, but endless readers’ reflections, judgments and imaginations are stirred up, about whether alternatives are imperative and how they might be made. Such co-authorship without the language of established intelligibility, as the organizing principle of the Bing Xin style, finds one of its most crystal evocations in a simple poem that Bing Xin wrote in 1921: “Multitudinous stars are shimmering in the dark sky; has anyone heard their discourse? In silence, twinkling, they offer one another glimpses of gratitude.”

### The Stars of Night: in Print and as History

Just as oasis discloses desert, stars mark night. Indeed, the bulk of scholarly works that examine how innovative ideas and radical movements were begotten in Chinese society in the 1920s also intimate how such initial scenes stage and respond to a specifically troubled moment in modern Chinese history. It is a moment featuring an absence of sustaining social institutions, the reign of warlords in tangled warfare, and massive human displacement, among other factors. Though born into a relatively privileged life, Bing Xin the actual woman could not be and was not far removed from the general conditions of the moment. Planning to be a medical doctor, Bing Xin seemed to be caught by writing as a radically shifting force field of history. In her late 70s, Bing Xin recalled what happened in her life on May 4, 1919 and the days after:

That night I was sleepless. . . . Next day . . . when I arrived at school, I saw that our Students’ Union was entirely changed. No one went to classes; all were deeply agitated and talking loudly in the courtyard while starting to work together with intense concentration. Since our Students’ Union was a member of the Women’s College Federation of Beijing and I was the writing secretary of our Union, I joined the propaganda department of the
Federation. . . . We went to the streets, talking to people everywhere, persuading them to boycott Japanese goods, and sharing with them our views about why we must resist Japan’s imperialist ambition and work together against the warlords who monopolized the Chinese government while capitulating to aggressive foreign powers. We collected donations to help our fellow students who were arrested for their activity in the movement and we went to court to support them when they were on trial. We began to write in the vernacular in various ways, articulate our ideas and feelings, and publish them in all kinds of journals and newspapers.85

This secretary of the Students’ Union at an American-missionary college for women was named Xie Wanying. “Bing Xin” as one of the quickly emerging women authors from the May Fourth movement is the pen name with which Xie Wanying, three months after the events noted in the above quotation, published her first fiction in Beijing Morning Post.86 Significantly, she published two non-literary writings with her given name before she remade herself as “Bing Xin.” The first was a report about university students on trial on May 21st, 1919, for their agitations against the Chinese government’s move to sign “the humiliating treaty that sells the city of Qingdao to Japan” in the aftermath of the post-World War conference for peace in Paris.87 Titled “Thoughts on the Trial of May 21st,” it not only offers a witness record of an important court case in China of the 1920s but also evinces how this woman author’s first publication was composed of her reflections on a scene in which she actually participated. As one of the eleven representatives from those women’s colleges involved in the May Fourth protests, Xie Wanying was present in the court to both support those fellow students on trial and report to the public about the trial as the movement was still unfolding and soon to spread across the country.88 She was thus a part of what was happening while being made into a witness to and writer of what was happening; and her first published writing was both an actual part and an emblematic result of a culminating moment of what was happening, namely, the trial.

The trial, which did not end with any clear verdict,89 involves of course not just a group of protesting students but also a range of issues central to the formation of modern China. These included the problem of the nature, function, and connotation of the modern body politic, its constitution of citizenry, and the idea of sovereignty, all bound up with the predicament of a semicolonized country caught up in the operative apparata of international big power politics.90 More specific to the course of Xie Wanying’s own life, the trial crystallized the entry of China’s first generation of university educated women into the public arena. This confronted those women with pressing questions about how to act as a “modern Chinese woman” and what such acts mean in a moment of radical paradigm shift in Chinese society and the post-First World War world. In her next publication still signed with her given name, Xie Wanying directly raises such questions:

My revered and beloved fellow women students! We have gained the attention of society, we have jumped onto the stage; there are numerous people...
looking at us with total concentration, waiting to see the results of what we are doing. Backstage there are also numerous young women who are waiting very quietly, hearts in their mouths. If we triumph with our performance and win thunderous applause, they would also move with us into the light of the day. If we fail again . . . that audience, and those who are waiting backstage, how would they “feel” and “judge” and “make decisions” – we can well imagine. But how would we ourselves manage? King William isolated in a small village or Napoleon exiled to a deserted island – their disappointments, their felt blows, and their deepest sorrows and pains cannot reach one ten thousandth of ours; for they were plotting for their own “achievements of a century,” we are striving after what would enable countless people’s happiness. Their failures only concerned themselves. Our failure would concern lives of millions.91

The question of how to make themselves “modern Chinese women” is opened up here with a striking evocation of the dynamics of social performance, riding on and compelled in a juncture that is also a historical predicament. Rejecting both European versions of modern male heroes and the norms of Chinese female virtues, those women move onto public stage and, at the same time, find no ready-made scripts for their acts. Chinese society, in other words, afforded them a stage of context that is a rupture in history, with scenes of embattlement ranging from unrest on streets to confrontations in courtrooms indicative of disintegrating institutional fabrics. Yet as part of this rupture with all its real or potential casualties, they had no available roles of normative signification to perform, and were meanwhile fully cognizant of the high stakes involved in their performance. They must act on their own feet, which they did. Xie Wanying, for one, seized the emergent and by no means stable venue of newspaper publication just made barely accessible for women,92 and inhabited such venues with all her imaginative energy. Her next publication, a short story published under the pen-name “Bing Xin” about the crisis of family and the problematic female roles inherent to such crisis,93 set in motion not only an unprecedented female-embodied literary journey that lasted for eight decades, but also an hitherto unavailable live passage suggestive of a defining dynamic of the Chinese feminist imagination. Indeed, one may go so far as to argue that Bing Xin the actual writer came into being as and through the impetus of fiction-making, which is both constitutive and emblematic of the struggles of a land and its inhabitants to exceed their predicament, in print and in history. This fiction-making in other words should not be conflated with fiction as such. Rather, it is a socially conditioned improvisation of the fictional whereby the involved parties are actualized as part of lived history. The making of Bing Xin as a woman writer and the Bing Xin style as a social relation, in short, constitutes an event that both makes and tropes some of the most enduring textures of modern Chinese culture, an entity that was still on its way to become tangible if not intelligible in the 1920s.

The stories are fictional, but their inventions through bodily performance thus amount to unprecedented scenes in Chinese women’s social movements and
political activism. The key to such actualizing effects of the fictional is what it does in the large context it is bound up with, the dynamics of which can be vividly seen in the May Fourth movement when, for instance, Bing Xin performed with fellow women students a range of fictional stories for public agitations and donation drives. Her production of *The Blue Bird (L'Oiseau Bleu)* by Maurice Maeterlinck is an example. After she finished her Chinese rendition of the play from its English edition, Bing Xin invited elementary school students to play the children. What came into being in this production includes the very first experience of public acting that those Chinese children had ever had and would never forget, and a defining part of Bing Xin herself and her imagination precipitated therein. Decades later, Bing Xin, in her 80s, recalled in vivid detail the process of mounting *The Blue Bird*, especially the scene where the children in the play finally arrive at a startling new horizon marked by the sight of a motherly figure and the words she utters: “People do not see it, because people see nothing when their eyes are closed . . . [but with] a kiss which they receive or give, all their tears turn into stars in their eyes. . . . Yes, it’s true; your eyes are filled with stars.” The cognitive sensorium of the motherly love that was both brought about and expressed by “the Bing Xin style” is discernibly at work in the remembered scene in the 1920s, as it is in the act of remembering such a scene sixty years later. Bing Xin’s fictional writings, in a similar way, work as “stars” that rise and shimmer in a dark landscape whose wondrous motions pressure the otherwise “closed eyes” to decide whether or not to shift their sight and see the lives variously disappear under certain inexplicable rules of destructive power, to become lights – figuratively or literally – in the dark hours of history. *The Blue Bird* was mounted for donations to help the refugees of the 1921 drought in north rural China, stirring public criticism of the warlord government’s indifference toward those lives dispossessed in massive numbers. Other performances in which Bing Xin partook that drew intense crowds were similarly also social actions. The modern parables in Bing Xin’s late writings, as discussed earlier, register such dark hours and their dialectic partners – the shimmering lights of cognitive caring in their varying configurations. Even in her early and more representational writings, examples are many. *Who Ruined You* (Shishe duansong le ni, 1920) traces how a young woman struggles to gain an education and dies in silence and sorrow when she fails to survive sexual slanders. The intense tone of the narrative flow haunts beyond the ending of the text. *Final Resting (Zuihou de anxi, 1920)* sets up an encounter between a rural child bride in a mountainous area and an urban girl whose family has a summer cottage there. As the two gradually become friends, the child bride becomes lively as she is enabled to speak of her sufferings and longings. By the time the urban girl is to leave the place with her family when summer ends, however, the child bride has been tormented to death at the hands of her owners as a punishment for her daring to “talk and imagine things beyond her lot.” The pain inherent in her death saturates and pressures her unlikely friend in the story and others who read it. *Third Son* (San er, 1920) depicts a little boy who picks odds and ends from refuse heaps on the streets to support his mother and himself. He passes an open square where
warlords’ armies are doing their shooting practice, begins to pick up the fired bullets that can be exchanged for a few dollars, and is hit in the chest by a stray bullet. Driven away by army officers, the boy manages to get home and dies, extending his hand to his mother with some money in it, wet with blood. Fish (Yüre, 1920), tells a story of how a little girl goes fishing at the seaside and encounters an armless soldier who lost some body parts during the Sino-Japanese navy war in 1894. She sees that “the sea is all human blood” and drops the golden-colored fish she catches back into the sea: “It eats everything in the water, it eats that soldier’s arm, it drinks the blood of the wounded, it fattens itself on torn bodies in the blood water!”

Invariably at work in those different stories, one should note, is an operation of what might be called “the law of the jungle” in gendered, class-specific, semi-colonial, or expansionist violence. Such “law of the jungle” has another name in modern history that naturalized its violence, namely, “the law of human nature” as manifested in the inevitable “reality” in the light of which “the weak” are by definition the prey of “the strong;” and the “strong” mark their status by “fattening” themselves on the lives of their “natural” prey. And yet these stories are more than symptoms let alone evidence of such law and its absoluteness. Rather, they work with the bodies of those who are ruined amid its reign, with a calm and yet unrelenting light of cognition that afford those bodies with haunting potency. Such workings can be seen in the letters left by the woman student as if admonishments from another world in Who Ruined You, in the dead child bride’s vivid vision of a plenitude in Final Resting, in the rising shadows of the armless soldier at seaside in Fish, and in the dead boy’s extended small hand holding the blood-stained money in Third Son. These last scenes of largely representational fictional works stir with sights of a certain unrealness whose powerful effects, suggestive of the Bing Xin style further shaped in her later writings, is posited on what they engender in the world of the real and its actual readers rather than on their claims to the “real” or “reality” with its dominating and predatory owners.

Significantly, “the Bing Xin style,” with its organizing content and normative impulse of “motherly love,” took shape during the three year period when Bing Xin the writer was away from her mother, all those who loved her and those she loved. Her major works where such a style and its relational thematics are finally solidified, of which the earlier discussed works amount to a small portion, are the products of her overseas life in the U.S. from 1923 to 1926. Her departure from China and sojourn in the U.S., like that of Qiu Jin’s trip to Japan, were part of modern Chinese women’s historical journey away from the cloistered chambers and onto the battlefields of Chinese society and the modern world. Also similar to Qiu Jin albeit in a different manner, Bing Xin was quick to sense her own predicament inherent in a time and its world when and where the model of the modern West and its great power politics stood for modern advancement itself and assigned its Chinese inhabitants to the rank of the “undeveloped” or the species of the “primitive,” “backward” and “weak.” Cognizant of herself as caught up in this “advancement,” Bing Xin battled with its organizing rubrics
Mr and norms of operation. “Paper Boats – For Mother” discussed earlier was the prelude to this battling; two other poems – “The Disconsolate” and “Homesickness” – insisting on her unbreakable attachment to what was “left behind” – were also written aboard the liner that “was carrying her forward.” Such “homesickness” thickened after she landed in the U.S., and was the triggering factor of an illness that lasted for eight months from November 1923 to July 1924:

For no reason, I happened to knock at the door of a friend in the east wing of the dormitory [and walked in;] she had just put out the light of the lamp and was sitting in front of the window. Moonlight saturated the room! I was startled, and yet had no time to withdraw; I could only let her, rising from her chair, come to me and pull me by my hand to the window.

Simply flawless! The moon is full and completely bright. I fell into silence. I bit my lips; I almost burst out with one or two curses!...

Homesickness paralyzed my whole body; brushing my hair, I touched homesickness there; grabbing my fingers, there was homesickness. It was a physical pain of the actual body, and not some floating sorrow of the soul!

I was taken ill. She was found to be suffering from haematemesis. It was during this illness that she finished twelve episodes of Letters to the Young Reader including Things Past II (Wangshi), Miscellanies in the Mountains (Shanzhong zaji) and other stories that establish her place in modern Chinese literary history, in an “icy cold room” of the green-mountain sanatorium which “is not my home,” in the U.S. which “is not my country.” The “oasis” of the “Bing Xin style,” rich, supple, potent, evocative, and renewing was developed in the very absence of such “oasis,” and actualized as a cognitive force through writing where its presence was imagined and inhabited. In another short story, Bing Xin writes about how the first sight of the city of Washington, D.C. evokes in her memories of Beijing and all feeling of love associated with it. She then notes how she quickly becomes cognizant of the fact that Washington, D.C. is not Beijing and how the physical absence of the latter in the immediate surroundings precipitates and sharpens in her a distinct recognition of “all the love” associated with Beijing precisely in its very absence: “It is a tangible love and one you will never feel when in a foreign land!” This fiction-making that evokes what is not available, dialectically, is itself a process that makes the unavailable most sharply “tangible,” which designates a feature fabric of Bing Xin’s overseas life. Ostensibly, such an overseas life had a financially and institutionally well-supported purpose, namely, gaining a MA degree in literature. Bing Xin completed the degree with a thesis on Li Qingzhao, the prominent Chinese woman ci-poet of the Song Dynasty. Though valuable, the thesis is far from being comparable to the volumes of imaginative writing that she produced in her “spare time” and as a “patient,” the volumes that have become central components of modern China and its cultural memories. Literary writing as the invention of the fictional is itself actual, turning into a vital part of an individual life and collective history. Bing Xin’s act of writing here sustains her act of
living in the absence of what must be invented as the center of gravity of her life – a process of bodying forth the fictional as the sources of real life in an otherwise deadly desert of history, the oasis.

This “oasis” invented on the other side of the Pacific was embraced by a reading public in China, as the First National Revolution (1924–1927) was radically transforming a semicolonial society, implementing programs with visions cognizant of its impulse and appeal. Bing Xin returned to her readers and the high hopes of the Revolution with exhilarated spirits in the summer of 1926. She was soon however to confront another China. At the personal level, her mother was suffering from a grave illness and moved to Shanghai with her father while Bing Xin began to teach at Yanjing University in Beijing. In 1929 Bing Xin married a scholar. In her story First Party (Diyici yanhui, 1929), the oasis of motherly love is kept and felt in the hidden core of the woman newly embedded in the institution of heterosexual marriage. The silent pain in her that, invisible to her husband, insists on her link with her mother despite the lack of any institutional support in life and any viable articulations in print. At a more general and social level, Chinese society was plunged into the White Terror of the post-First National Revolution moment by the nationalist coup d’état in the spring of 1927, which suppressed campaigns for social equality, eliminated hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries, and targeted women activists with particular cruelty. The 1930s arrived with the ominous shadows of the Japanese invasion thickening on the northern front, which was soon to erupt into total war. Yet wondrous “oases” as enactments of the fictional in the Bing Xin style continued to appear in the public arena, conjuring up her awe-inspiring “paper boats” in their persistent battling with the roaring ocean. Her long poem “My love, return my love” (“Wo aiguilaiba! wo ai”, 1928) is a mother’s summoning of her overseas children to return to the land of the ravished and join their strength to foil the forces of modern expansionism. Her long prose work Returning South (Nan gui, 1931) traces the dying of her mother suffering from blood cancer and turns it into a rediscovery of the life of the dead as a recurrent energy enabling others to go on living. The “preface” to a collection of short stories by a student of hers titled Nora’s Way Out (Nala de chulu xu, 1933) attends to women who embody possibilities of change in the worst moments of social despair. A journalistic piece, A Diary: Traveling along the Pingsui Railroad (Pingsui yanxian lüxingji, 1935) maps out China’s one and only early railroad that was designed, built, and run by the Chinese with “perseverance and endurance” at a time when the Chinese land was in real danger of being made into wreckage as its Northeast was subjugated by the Japanese military. The preface to a collection of first person accounts by a young girl, who had been a war refugee since 1931, titled In A Young Refugee’s Own Words (Xiaonanmin zishu xü, 1939) embraces the “new life” emerging from the writing amid “darkness of the wartime.” And her essay Treasures that Can Never be Lost (Diubudiao de zhenbao, 1946) traces “all I have” that was literally destroyed by the Japanese army in occupied Beijing and makes those losses into a living memory: diaries over decades, manuscripts and teaching lectures, letters from her family and from her young and old readers, books written by friends and
signed as gifts to her including Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and works by fellow modern Chinese writers, photo-albums, rare books, collections of paintings, fine prints, and much more. Leaving occupied Beijing for the city of Kunming in the South and then leaving Kunming for the city of Chongqing, the wartime capital in the Southwest, Bing Xin the woman was among millions of war refugees. She persevered with such writing amid the piling up of social and human ruins around her. Such acts of writing set up a particular relationship to the larger context with which the writer is bound up, bring the destroyed back to life, and make the endangered indestructible in a time of catastrophic destruction. Lost treasures and endangered lives are rendered by writing into the live components of the woman as fiction-maker, which in turn constitute the living memories of the readers as her co-authors: “They are all I have and can never be lost.”

Fictional writing then evokes the treasures fundamental to a life caught in a time and place where such fundamentals are eliminated, erased, or absent. “The stars of night,” as evocations of the otherwise lost and dead speak the darkness of the moment and illuminate its refugees as key origins of ever-renewing lives. Here one encounters an organizing feature shared by the works of many women writers emergent from the May Fourth movement, who had otherwise invented distinct styles and different life passages. Lu Yin was of course a most notable example. Nearly as influential as Bing Xin and a student activist from Beijing Normal Women’s College, her first published fiction is indicatively titled *A Catastrophe in the Sea* (*Haiyang li de yichu canjü*, 1921), depicting a shipwreck in the darkness of night where all the passengers are confronted with the impossible imperative to survive the un-survivable oceanic abyss, literally and figuratively. From then on, Lu Yin engaged the emergent and fragile venues for women’s publications in the 1920s and rendered such venues into a social space where “writing women” as a modern form of life and social meanings could appear. Writing continuously over more than a decade, she issued into the public arena one story after another about lives struggling in the abyss of impossible imperatives traced and troped in her first fiction, as if those lives were a human-bodied long series of “small boats” battling in the violent sea of modern history. *Seaside Friends* (*Haibing guren*), her most influential work, published in 1923, delineates the predicament of a group of May Fourth women aspiring to social equality in the absence of any social space and institutional loci wherein to make a basic living. After completing their hard-won education, they find themselves caught up in a labyrinth of semicolonial force fields. Eyes wide open in deepening horror as it were, they watch themselves cornered, pressured, or induced into old and new gendered power relations, becoming shadows of their former selves. Their private letters to one another, carrying their intense but socially unseen vitality, are the shimmering stars in their otherwise lost life journeys in darkness. *After Victory* (*Shengli yihau*, 1925), another major work by Lu Yin, explicitly raises the question about the equivalent predicament in which May Fourth women are caught in the post-May Fourth moment, with a severely repressed anger pulsing through the writing, barely contained in its sorrowful cadences: “I sit in silence by the lamplight, / How deep my sorrow goes! / I bemoan what is lacking on earth,
One of the most prolific writers of her time, Lu Yin’s literary landscape is intensely populated with the most ardent of those wrecked or erased lives that she calls “the wonderers” whom she “treasures.”

Intimately resonating with her literary “wonderers” and looking at “the world that is not mine” through their eyes, Lu Yin the actual woman bodied forth an
uncompromising struggle for alternatives to their sorrowful placelessness, no matter how precarious and dangerously vulnerable her state of being had often seemed. If Bing Xin the writer long acknowledged that “some accomplishments in this world are beyond the language of written words” and “humans are not made with words and words are made by humans,” Lu Yin acted and struggled to make up what was unavailable in the available Chinese words with her life. Significantly, she began such a struggle by writing up a script in such a way that put her own real body on the line. An article published in Women’s Monthly (Funü juékan) about “Lu Yin’s Life” in 1934 describes her first writing and its particular publication as follows:

[When] she was a student at Beijing Women’s Normal College... she gained her initial public notice by her performance at the Young People’s Association of Beijing [during the May Fourth movement]. She was both the organizer of this performance and the author of its play-script. The script was written after the tragic events in Fujian – her home province – took place. A group of Japanese soldiers publicly beat several Chinese citizens to death. In the play, a husband and a wife are divided since they hold oppositional positions on what they should do about what happened. The wife argues for protest action, while the husband is against such “insane” and “unnatural” action since it is “self-endangering.” Lu Yin played the wife. The high tension of the story and her unconventional attitude stunned the audience and gained her public attention that lasted throughout her life.

The last line that blurs the boundary between the fictional wife in the play and the actual woman in life is indicative. The unmarried young woman as the author and performer of this fictional scenario was named Huang Ying who, from then on, began to publish fictional writings under the pen name Lu Yin. With, through, and as such an embodiment of the fictional, one may suggest, Huang Ying set her life journey in motion as “Lu Yin the woman writer,” writing into existence herself as a yet-to-be made mode of being for modern Chinese women, precisely by inventing and bodying forth such a mode in a time and place where it was non-existent. Such a time and place then offers no sustaining environment for her life, which accounts for the fact that writing for Lu Yin, in her own words, affords “best friends who stay with me in life and death, in all the adversity in this indifferent world.” She needed those imaginary friends greatly indeed, particularly as she continuously violated the behavioral norms of a society hung in precarious balance. She infuriated her family by announcing her engagement to a cousin whose poverty took him off the list of welcome guests of her relatives including Lu Yin’s parents. Such a scandalously self-chosen engagement forced her parents to finance the young man to gain and finish his overseas education. And yet after he returned from Japan with a solid degree eager to “succeed in society” and “provide for her” as a “good husband,” Lu Yin scandalized everyone again by breaking off the engagement since, as she put it, “you and
I have conflicting views about life; I don’t accept society’s designs that put women in their ‘proper places.’” She thereby reached a point of no return as a woman of no proper place in a society whose troubling volatility was matched by its intensified sense of social hierarchy presented as the matrix of human stability. Her behavior defied Chinese codes of propriety and the rational logic of the modern for self-advancement as a variation of the “insane” and “unnatural” wife in her performance of her own first script. This behavior recurs during her life including her two similarly scandalizing marriages, first in 1923 to a married man who was gravely ill, and second in 1930 to a man who was not only ten or so years her junior but, more importantly, penniless. Such marriages are “inexplicable” in the terms of “traditional” or “modern” rationality. It comes as no surprise that the status of “married woman” was quite inadequate a term to use to describe her in both cases, and Lu Yin was never placed in the position of a normal à la dependent wife. She held multiple jobs to support the men she married and her children while producing writings. Years of overwork, malnutrition, emotional injury, and unrelenting social discrimination showed their effect when she was giving birth to her third child in 1934. Lu Yin died in childbirth at the age of thirty-five during the Japanese attack on Shanghai, leaving an unfinished novel about the war of resistance. Li Dazhao, a leading intellectual in the May Fourth movement and a founding figure of the CCP, was one of Lu Yin’s teachers at Beijing Women’s Normal College. He commented with acumen as early as in 1921: “Lu Yin is a real revolutionary in the sphere of feelings.” What he did not seem to see is how such “revolution in feelings” is fundamental to the revolutionization of Chinese society and the world that he was envisioning: A refusal of the codes of human behavior and social arrangement governed by power relations in a world of gendered, class-posed, and bioethnically naturalized hierarchy. Lu Yin, for one, invalidates the “naturalness” of such a state of hierarchy by living and writing her desires for its alternations as “most befitting natural humanity.”

The most “unnatural” here is, in Li Dazhao’s book at least, revolutionary. Such a “revolution in feelings,” shocking at the time and stirring over time, claimed Lu Yin’s life as the revolution of modern China as a whole claimed numerous others. Like all revolutionaries, Lu Yin the woman writer turned herself into an embodied social space hitherto nonexistent, for others to join her as co-authors. Her imaginary friends in her writing, in this sense, are actualizing forces much like Bing Xin’s imaginary readers, which make both writers and readers possible. Here one may find the key to the form that organizes so many of Lu Yin’s writings, namely, that of private correspondence among her female protagonists. Indeed, this dialogic form features in Lu Yin’s works to such an overriding extent that it appears to some critics excessive and inappropriate so, particularly as it includes a large proportion of actual correspondence between Lu Yin and her women friends as mutual beholders of “genuine understanding,” breaking the boundaries between the fictional and the real. Struggling in an abyss called the formative years of modern China, the real and imagined correspondents in Lu Yin’s worlds seek the impossible oasis of mutually enabling and
life-sustaining human relations with their own enactments of “mutual recognition,” in the absence of viable institutional articulations. Such real and imagined sisterly correspondents and their variations configured in human and non-human forms populate works by a wide range of May Fourth women writers. Chen Hengzhe’s _West Wind_ (Xifeng, 1924), “written in September 3, 1924, in the city of Nanjing where the dark clouds of war want to drive the crystal beauty of autumn out of the human world,” depicts how the West Wind in its heavenly place receives and responds to a song by a young woman from the human world, and comes down to the earth to clean up the clouds of war. Feng Yüanjün’s writings that announce “a shockingly new look” at women, China, and the world are often shaped in the form of private letters and include her real life correspondence from her first fiction _Separation_ (Gejüe, 1924). This was a work about freedom and love, while many pieces in her other collection _Traces of Spring_ (Chunheng, 1928) deal with the subject of writing, life, longing, and history. Su Xüelin’s _Thorn Heart_ (jixin, 1929), her major novel about an overseas woman student’s emotional trials and tribulations as well as final homecoming, features corresponding impulses and communications between the young woman and her aging mother whose life turns out to be the real center of gravity of the story. And these are only a few examples.

As real and imagined possibilities for the formations of modern China, Chinese women, and Chinese women writers in the midst of an uncertain time and torn-up place, those scenes amount to a female-bodied constellation suggestive of a country on its own, hinged on an impulse of cognitive symbiosis among various and irreducible “I,” “her,” and “others,” all in the making. One of Bing Xin’s poems in 1923 prefigures such a constellation: “Multitudinous stars are shimmering in the dark sky; has anyone heard their discourse? In silence, twinkle, they offer each other glances of deep gratitude.” Indeed, as the unprecedented literary scenes constitutive of their authors and co-authors’ actual life journeys to become modern Chinese women, they point to a republic of “secret talks and laughs,” where the disallowed are attempted and the unavailable are embodied, as marvelous sights across the night of a humanity wrecked by the segregating force fields of history. Here Bing Xin’s words about her writing in and as her imaginings of life may be read as a generalized cognitive stance on the changing world. A stance that is also a basic social position concerning its troubled human relations, held by many women writers emergent in the 1920s: “Whenever I lift my pen and start writing, I always see her gentle eyes looking at me, with a smile or sadness. Her love enables me to search for death in life – to shoulder others’ suffering; and to search for life in death – to forget my own pain.” If “one’s writing and one’s life prospects are greatly related” as Bing Xin’s mother once commented and those women writers’ coming-into-being life passages evinced, writings of such kind summon certain prospects of life that at best have a very long way toward coming true amid a sea change that daily claims shipwrecks. Engendering such writings in response to the impossible imperative that unprecedented ways of life be invented out of their very non-existence, their authors seemed to know that at worst the writing pens
in their hands may never run out of their usefulness as long as their bodies are still breathing. One of Bing Xin’s poems alluding to her pen in hand, in this sense, evokes an overtly personal plea as much as asserts a hidden collective manifesto – “Wind! Please do not put out the light of the candle in my hand, my home is still in the deep reach of this long journey in darkness.”155
4 Other Life

Bai Wei, Yüan Changying, and Social Dramas in the 1930s

Is it the bell of a tocsin to arouse the stranger to come on stage, or a human voice gracefully calling me? I wake and gaze at these pearl-like words that seem to be drops of my blood, left among nameless flowers and plants.

Bai Wei, 1933

At first one is astonished; in the aftermath of such astonishment an inner calmness arrives, therein stirring forth such strength as alters one’s disposition – it is one’s life and not merely one’s opinion that is genuinely altered.

Yüan Changying, 1934

Bing Xin and other women actualized themselves into unprecedented social existences with their writings, and thereby bodied forth a revolutionary tradition that was a radical invention. If revolution in society is always also a revolution in cognitive imagination, openings of cognitive horizons are always indications of revolutionizing moments or are themselves revolutions in life. Indeed, the cognitive mapping of human mutuality that evokes feelings of social equality was among the driving energies in one of the most significant turns of events in modern Chinese history – the First National Revolution (1924–1927). This is a revolution of multiple movements involving an entire society and aimed to end, in the theoretical terms of its programs, the competition among and reign by rural landowners turned local despots, armed officials turned regional warlords, and the intensifying encroachments by the great foreign powers across the Chinese lands. The Great Northern Expedition, jointly launched by the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party from the South, was rapidly gaining victories. As in all revolutions, the battles were not confined to the military theaters. Workers’, peasants’, and students’ movements were mounted, and women’s movements flourished. A Women’s Bureau in the Nationalist Party was founded as a project coordinated with the Chinese Communist Party; organizations agitating for women’s rights grew in size and influence across the nation. A substantial number of educated women joined the Northern Expedition while producing writings. The coup d’état orchestrated by Jiang Jieshi and the Nationalist Party in the spring of 1927 put a sudden end to those movements
and their aspirations, while launching what has been aptly described as “an orgy of counter-revolutionary violence which in scope, scale, and brutality was unprecedented and is as yet unmatched in twentieth century revolutionary history.” The casualties included the workers and peasants in the movements, and real or perceived women activists. Drawing on carefully researched empirical materials, historian Christina Gilmartin points up a particular feature of such brutality as fundamentally gendered:

Though female casualties were considerably fewer than the male casualties, intense political symbolism was associated with the women’s deaths. Women’s bodies were subject to mutilation as a statement against female activism, which had come to be viewed as a disturbing indicator of a world turned upside down. When the Nationalist Commander Xia Douyin, for instance, ordered his troops to put down the peasant associations in Hebei, they reportedly “cut open the breasts of the women comrades, pierced their bodies perpendicularly with iron wires, and paraded them naked through the streets.” Cai Chang (a leading woman in the CCP) estimated in her discussion with Helen Snow (an American journalist) that the Nationalist troops killed more than one thousand Communist women organizers and leaders during the first year of the White Terror.

Such extreme violence indicates how women’s social configurations, ways of existence, and behavioral patterns are foundational to both traditional hierarchies (as physical evidence of the heavenly mandate) and modern orders (as natural attributes of human cosmos); just as their envisioning of other forms of being women are central to revolutions. That the White Terror dealt with women activists with particular cruelty evinces the real human depth and social magnitude of the revolution when it is embodied in and by women revolutionaries. Jiang Jieshi’s Nanjing government, established in the aftermath of the crushing of the revolution, was premised on a double erasure of women revolutionaries, namely, their physical existence and political signification. Such a double erasure pre-indicates the particular gendered nature of its Republican era that followed. The female body has always been needed as a central site for the solidification of any regime, and she is particularly needed to be so for a regime caught in a chaotic land under escalating threats of external invasion, as Japan’s ambition to take over China was turning further explicit. The unifying ideology that emerged in such a context was predictably restrictive for women in general and hostile to socially active women in particular. This enforced ideology “mandated” that “modern Chinese” behave as “good citizens,” and called upon women to embody and trope “Confucian and Christian virtues” in order to follow the models of “European nations” and create a “modern Chinese state.”

Women were urged to “return to the family” as “educated wives and mothers,” and were promised with rewards if they “fulfill their duties” in “breeding a strong Chinese race.” Analyzing the effects of such demands on women, activist Wen Gan wrote in 1934 in *Women’s Monthly*:
We must see clearly the new conditions of our society today [as a combination of] the persisting dynastic forces and the increasingly dominating international powers. It is the mutual mediation and enforcement of the two force fields that control our economy and manipulate our political scenes, preventing our modern industry from developing while at the same time strengthening the old moralities hostile to women, thereby blocking the ways for our new social movements to emerge. As a result, we see how the urban economy is not sustainable and the rural economy is bankrupt; the rate of unemployment is skyrocketing. All of these, while chaotically at odds with one another, converge on one point, namely, to drive women back to “the family” by using “happiness” as inducing bait, “duty” as controlling device, and the name of “good wife and wise mother” as pressures with hidden threats and intimidations.13

A counter-revolutionary moment set in following the turns of events in the spring of 1927, which contained and repressed the question of women and their places in society. Social crisis and contradictions, intensifying amidst such containment and repression,14 registered their battling forces in the terrains where the shapes and meanings of the female body were reassigned. Of the woman artists active in the late 1920s and the 1930s, playwrights Bai Wei and Yüan Changying were the earliest in staging the volatile conditions and drastically shifting configurations of women’s existences.

**Bai Wei: Ruins, Furies, Stirrings**

Arguably the first woman playwright in modern Chinese history, Bai Wei is known for being a “romantic” and “ethereal” female talent.15 Yet the world captured in her dramatic vision casts heavy shadows on anything “ethereally romantic.”16 Her first play was published in 1926. A three-act drama titled *Sophia* (*Sufei*),17 it tells the story of Sufei, a young woman from a gentry official family who breaks away from her husband by arranged marriage, a general’s son named Chen Te, since she loves another young man who has neither economic means nor social privileges. Infuriated, Chen Te sets out to destroy Sufei’s father, her lover Huang Ning, and the rest of her family. Meanwhile, he seduces and marries Sufei’s younger sister in the name of freedom of love, and thereby inherits the family property.18 As it has been amply discussed, the many tragedies about arranged marriages composed in the early 1920s shaped up a pattern of cultural imagination and a social stance not only against “the backward Chinese culture posited on parental authority” but for a gendered form of “modern romance” derived from “advanced Western civilization liberating the individual’s desires.” Bai Wei’s *Sufei* distinguishes itself from those stories in that the destructive effects of the institutions of marriage, family and property are not presented there as peculiar to Confucian codes of social order. Rather, they are central to a generalized logic common to all the established authorities according to which questions of economic ownership, social status, and power relations claim priority in marital consideration and familial arrangements.19 In Bai Wei’s words, the “old
Chinese system of marriage was always connected with the management of money and acquisition of power.” In her plays, the variations of such a system in combination with new, imported, and “modern” patterns seem to constitute yet another operative mechanism of an inherently gendered labyrinth where business dealings in sexual relations are conducted and lives are ruined. Another of her early dramas titled *Rose Wine* (Qiangwei jüo), drafted in 1925 and published in 1929, depicts how a woman named Xiaoqian, growing up orphaned and forced by poverty into the profession of nightclub dancer, is made a token of exchange in a changing society in which the gendered nature of power relations persists. Her lover Wanbai, a student of Western music and son of a warlord, decides to “give her up” to his father in exchange for his freedom to purchase — with his father’s money — a separate residence. The father in turn plans to “give her up” to another warlord Commander Zhang in exchange for an “alleviation of the political tensions” between them. Commander Zhang, while he wants her as one more concubine, is signing treaties with Japanese and other Western powers in exchange for “ammunition supplies.” Without any social resources, as the scene where she meets her Western-style romantic lover Wanbai shows, Xiaoqian seems to have no alternative but give in to her doom:

WANBAI: . . . what are you planning to do?
XIAOQIAN: So be it, whatever it may be.

WANBAI: (pause) Are you going to be with my father or the Commander Zhang?
XIAOQIAN: Whichever is the first to arrive and grab me.
WANBAI: Hei! How could you say such a self-loathing thing?! (seems shocked or cross)
XIAOQIAN: It seems the only way.
WANBAI: This is insane! (very uneasy) You have no other road to walk on?!
XIAOQIAN: When one is tired of living, any road is a road.
WANBAI: (miserable) You are going to walk even among those animals?
XIAOQIAN: Yes! (circling the room)
WANBAI: You are muddled! Where is your usual sense of the beautiful and sublime? . . .
XIAOQIAN: (cold laugher) This is not a usual time.
WANBAI: (saddened) Life is disappointing in many ways, but you are going to let yourself be ruined because of it . . .
XIAOQIAN: I let myself be ruined? (A long laugh) Heart is red or lung is green, see whatever you see, and say whatever you say . . . The warm sun will not be shining on my body before or after this life. If one world is lost, why not find another?

Wanbai, a man who is part and parcel of the orchestration of Xiaoqian’s doom, speaks here as the voice of modern morality and indicts Xiaoqian as the sources
that ruin her own life. Contrasted with Wanbai’s moral eloquence comprised of a mixed lexicon of Western and Chinese sensitivities on female purity, Xiaoqian’s response is accentuated by a palpable feeling of unspoken violence culminating
in her laughter suggestive of the typical modern female disease, hysteria. When Wanbai finds himself roused again by the sight of this fatally vulnerable and hence doubly alluring female body, he demands her to “dance, dance for me, one more time.” She chooses to perform her new piece “Death of a Peacock,” which results in her physical collapse and conjures up the grotesque image of real death. If the material power of the old warlord father marks her body as sexual property to be possessed, the moral sensibility of the modern son preinscribes her as a social ruin—a double bond that fixes and fixates her as an always “owned” or already “fallen” woman, “drowning in sludge” as she herself puts it. The logic at work here goes as follows. She is forced into a ruined life, she is hence the embodiment of human ruin. She is made fatally vulnerable by the force fields of power that be, she is then the “weak.” Yet what happens in the following scenes drastically alters her destiny and astonishes Wanbai and his associates. In a series of rapid turns of events, Xiaoqian poisons his father and shoots the Commander Zhang to death, while taking poison herself in her rose wine (hence the title of the play). The rose wine is spilled all over the ground as if blood indicative of unknown calamity, which makes all present speechless. After a commentary made by Commander Zhang’s rebellious son who discloses his father’s collusion with the colonial powers, the play ends in silence as the stage light enshrines and dies upon Xiaoqian’s dead body.

Beyond the familiar representational trappings and tropes of a melodrama, astonishing imagery charged with unusual passion mark Bai Wei’s dramatic staging. The female figure Xiaoqian in the play moves from the world of the living to the world of the dead with an eerie fluidity of some presence that feels unreal, accompanied by fierce laughter that is deadly ominous and yet most intensely alive. This is a signature of Bai Wei’s dramatic landscape and their female inhabitants, which will be further discussed. Suffice it to say here that such a female figure’s vibration saturates the stage and haunts the air even as all is ended, signaling a physicalized annunciation that, in one of her own prophetic lines, “floats in a sea of blood.” As an agent that sharply eliminates those who destroy her life, such elimination also ends her own form of existence that is “drowning in sludge,” designating a double passage that joins an impossible imperative to exit from “one world that is lost” and “another world” that exists in not yet discernable shape. She is a female-fleshed rupture in the gendered continuum of history, fiercely laughing and stirring amidst its silent piles of ruins.

At one level, such female figures as stirring ruins in many of Bai Wei’s plays seem symptomatic of a concealed political defeatism; some critics note as much when they comment that most of those heroines are unable to go beyond their self-cognizant predicaments, alive. And yet their motions are charged with such eruptive energy that designates more than a political statement. They constitute strangely vibrant images whose mobile presence attains momentums of another kind, as if silence that is a call to arms or a death that is life in alternation. Breaking Out of the Ghost Tower (Dachu youlingta, 1928), Bai Wei’s best-known
work, affords such momentum another range of dramatic images. Published in the important leftist journal *Benliu (Racing current)* edited by Lu Xun, this work established Bai Wei’s status as the leading woman playwright in the cultural circles of the post-revolutionary Chinese society. This three-act play is set in the turning point of the Northern Expedition, when the fever of revolution still held sway while the signs of its betrayal were emerging. The story concerns a young woman named Yüelin. Like Xiaoqian a female orphan since childhood, she was bought and sold a number of times as a maidservant and child bride until a powerful landowner and businessman – Master Hu – took a look at her and acquired her as his “adopted daughter.” Without knowing that she was borne by a woman he raped earlier and hence was his biological daughter, the adoptive father of modern fashion patiently watches her grow into young woman and sets out to make her his “eighth concubine.” Yüelin seeks help by turning to her childhood friend Lin Xia, a leader of the newly founded Peasants’ Association, her adoptive brother Hu Qiaoming who hates his father, and Xiao Sen, a representative of the Women’s Federation who is actually her biological mother. The new forces however are metamorphosing as some of the leading figures in the Peasants’ Association join the old powers in reordering the area and the relations of its villagers. Master Hu maneuvers his muscles again to eliminate his new enemies whom he also regards as his sexual rivals. He kills his own son Hu Qiaoming and accuses Lin Xia, the peasant rebel, of being the murderer and puts him in prison. Deeply shaken, Yüelin tries to break out of this “ghostly place” as she calls it – hence the title of the play. Then, in Act III, she appears on stage as follows:

[She] is wearing an outfit made of white silk embroidered in a pattern of large red flowers, and her white silk shoes are also embroidered in the same pattern, with a fuzzy red thread ball affixed on the tip of each. A glittering band of pearls holds her short hair, with a red flower hanging on each side of her head; her neck is multiply circled with a pearl necklace, a gold one, and red gems heavily hang from a third gold necklace. She looks like an actress in those performances by foreign circus troupes.

The outfit and ornaments that cover her body are a motley of expensive Chinese (silk and embroidered clothes in red) and foreign styles (hair band and necklaces). Weighted down by heavy precious stones almost to the point of breakage, Yüelin seems a walking chaos that defies the genre of traditional concubine and the fate of modern sex object in the household of old land and new money, and a furious ghost of deformed life that is in spasmodic motions. It soon becomes apparent that she has actually gone mad, which triggers a series of turns of events that culminates in her final eruption. In a confrontation with Master Hu, the mad Yüelin grabs a pistol and shoots him. Before the old man dies, he kills Yüelin amidst the commotion. Like the female fury’s passage in *Rose Wine*, Yüelin’s act to break out of the “ghost tower” occurs with a simultaneous undoing of her own form of existence.
embedded therein. Her form of existence, more distinctly rendered than in *Rose Wine*, is made of “silks and satins,” “diamonds and jewels,” “inner chambers with embroidered quilts, pillows, garden stool, and walls,” “resplendent carriages and horses,” and “millions of dollars safely protected by foreign banks.” Master Hu believes the overwhelming power of such “treasures” to the “weaker sex”: “If you accept and become my woman, all my wealth will be at your use,” he says when he attempts to rape Yüelin, “all the jewels and diamonds and pearls in this place will decorate your dresses.” With her mad eyes, however, Yüelin sees in the midst of such glittering abundance shadowy corpses suffocating the household with their secrets. Her plunge into madness reveals her long endured predicament as “a gaily decked-out corpse” at a place and time where, as she pinpoints with her insane precision, “motley ghosts appear and disappear, unseen.” No one can inhabit this place and time without being “dirtied” by its hidden horrors. When a mad Yüelin confronts her “dirtied” life, she is also working through and over her embedding therein, as her way of marking out the yearnings for what has been muzzled inside of her. Such a working through reaches its crystallizing moment when, at the end of the play, she slowly and meticulously strips off everything that Master Hu has forced on her body as marks of his permanent power and limitless possessions:

Yüelin: (slow dancing, gradually speeding up, circling in madness) Oh, living energies are circulating in my body, every organ in me is singing. I am so happy, my own ecstasy! Someone? Someone? Anyone? (pointing to the corpse of Master Hu) Clean this corpse out of my way! (two servants pull out Hu’s corpse) . . . Who knows? Who is known? Who knows me? Don’t be afraid of this blood on my chest, it is red poetry gushing out of my heart. (sings and dances, actually dying) When I was seven years old, in a night, I was sold to be a maidservant... Sold again to the beast as “adopted daughter.” Sold sold sold . . . who are the buyers? The owners? Insults abuses humiliations insults . . . could not be swallowed; revenge madness . . . sworn with oceans. Oh, what is this world? (finger pointing at everyone present) Red, yellow, green . . . a world of fury colors! Our world comes from our blood – do you know that? (her madness is intensifying, dancing in circles with speeding up steps, prolonged piercing laughter) Everything is turning upside down . . . fresh, and beautiful. Death takes me into life! We die for birth.

Wrapped in a plain cotton robe, Yüelin “dies in Xiao Sen’s arms” by “gaz[ing] in a strange ecstasy:” “Are you my mother? I have a mother like you?” Xiao Sen responds in affirmation; Yüelin laughs a long laughter: “I have broken out of this ghost tower! I have . . . my . . . mother!” Like in most of Bai Wei’s plays, the female laughter vibrates after the scene ends, as if continuing into or bringing about a different sphere of life. The ruined in a female body, Yüelin turns into a sight of the yet not known or available.
It is not simply a random occurrence that such a sight appears in the post-Northern Expedition moment. A human ruin that stirs with a vengeance, this female fury registers the degrees of the hysteria against women in the moment and the feeling of being “drowned” in “sludge” with which Bai Wei, along with many educated women, was battling in her actual life. As the semicolonial Chinese elite, newly and precariously established themselves in the moment, increasingly tightened their control of all spheres of a crisis-ridden society, those women found themselves increasingly removed from institutional accesses to social resources. While viable professions by which to make an independent living were beyond their reach, they seemed often left with “choices” that were not their choosing. To be sexualized property housed in the old or new institution of patriarchal marriage or to be a sexualized commodity traded on the markets, whether as “gaily decked-out wives or concubines” in fashionable residences, “flower vases” in business offices, and prostitutes on the streets.41 Those women survived the counter-revolutionary “sea of blood” as Bai Wei phrases it only to land in an era of “sludge.” Painfully conscious of their disempowerment by the new power that reinscribed what they had set out to dismantle, they saw in their personal passivity a social paralysis that amounts to a measure of complicity in the new arrangement of a regime of unchanged gendered power relations. While feelings of agony resulting from this consciousness underline many of their writings, Bai Wei unpacks such agony with a particularly insistent relentlessness to bring forth what seems impossible in a counter-revolutionary time. She not only acknowledges but exceeds one’s embeddedness in the master’s house of violence and its concealed human bankruptcy. Yüelin’s death dance at the end of the play seems such an impossible and yet imperative movement. A point of rupture in history, a site of opening in life, a summoning for action in the thick of social paralysis, the potency of such movement manifests in her eruptive undoing of the master’s house by simultaneously undoing her own current implication in its given state of reign.

Such undoing need not be hastily conflated with actual death. Yüelin’s death dance, for instance, invites more than a literal approach. Struggling to unravel the social scripts of her ruins assigned by a continuum of the “old” and “new” power regimes, she announces her own meaning of life by bursting the limits of “this world” that “has dirtied” her body. Death in and of itself with all its materiality in Bai Wei’s vision is never emancipatory. Bai Wei’s own actual life, as is discussed later, is made of struggles to stay on living under brutal conditions. How to live in the face of the force fields that ruin and dirty women’s lives and then name them as ruins and dirt is the central question that informs the gravity of her female figures, particularly as they act to redefine their existences in “this world” by dancing through death into another life that is yet-to-be. Here lies the complexity of those despairing furies in the moment of death as energies of an ultimate ethical commitment to yet unknown and unnamable forms, where survival redefines its content as a passage of double imperatives. To exceed one’s complicity in a specific time of history without reasoning-cum-calculating about one’s chances of survival; and yet to survive precisely by exceeding one’s complicitous
embeddedness in such a time where transactions of induced or imposed dehumanization are made to masquerade as the inevitable of all ways of living. One may argue that it is therefore in Yüelín’s live performance of her death that her transformation transpires, thereby opening up the possibility for “the female sex” to survive death while disclosing such survival as an ethical passage. “The other side of despair is not nothingness;” as Bai Wei writes elsewhere, “it is the movement of multicolored clouds as yet indistinct signs of an ethical [demand] for social transformation.”

Yüan Changying: Divides, Encounters, Transit Impetus

Such performance of an ethic for transformation does not naturally occur. It involves a highly critical level of self-reflexivity with practical consequences that presented complex challenges to the educated women in the late 1920s and 1930s. Chinese society was now claimed to be a republican body politic, with urban centers such as Shanghai as its nodes of signification where material resources and symbolic meanings mutually incised. While socio-politically active women were at this time targeted and harassed, neither was it considered desirable for women to be restored to their previous social shapes of a gentry-class. Indicative of an emerging economy of urban desires, “muodeng xiaojie” (“modern miss”) arrived as a prevailing image of “modern femaleness” emblematic of the cultural ethos of the Republican Era, with fashionable dresses that emphasize her breasts and body curves, high-heeled leather shoes that govern her moves as a bundle of desires for [hetero]sexual relations, and Western-style make-up that marks a “modern beauty” as sexualized affluence. She looks like a far cry from and in any case an unintended breed of the “freedom of love” sponsored by May Fourth intellectuals in the 1910s. Chinese femaleness in such a new packaging was poised to play a leading role in the modern or modernizing institution of heterosexual marriage, namely, the nuclear family made and sustained with re-fashioned gender roles, featuring an “educated and virtuous wife.” As the paradigmatic foundation for the modern Chinese nation, such “good family” was promoted by the KMT regime through various mobilizing operations including its “New Life Movement.” Women writers coming of age during the May Fourth era had long produced works to address this “new heroine” often in scorching irony or satire. Bing Xin’s “Our Lady’s Salon” (Women taitai de keting, 1933) or Lu Yin’s “Prospects” (Qiantu, 1932) and “The Suspended” (Geqian de renmen, 1932) are noted examples. In Bing Xin’s work one sees a European style “modern” woman playing the role of a wealthy host with the means provided by her banker husband’s money and status, living the life of a social parasite who masquerades herself as an enlightened force promoting “culture” in “high society.” In Lu Yin’s works “modern love,” understood as the essence of individual freedom of choice, has became an institution of female dependence on male powers, premised on a semicolonial system of economic ownership and social hierarchy. Such scenes of “modern women” and “modern love” problematize the efficacy
Figure 4.2 Yüan Changying in the 1930s
of early literary evocations such as those parables of sisterly recognition. Contestations about “we modern Chinese women” as a generic category intensified as such re-institutionalization of women’s lives into social and economic divisions of a modern kind escalated in the Republican era. Female figures divided by their placements in society took a variety of distinct shapes on the theater stage.

Yüan Changying’s renowned three-act play published in 1929, Southeast Flies the Peacock (Kongqüe dongnanfei) offers a fertile ground for tracing key moments of such contestation and its implications. Nuanced and evocative in its rendition, the play brings divided parties into an uncanny encounter charged with profound tensions. Its dramatic plot is taken from a classical narrative poem of the East Han Dynasty (25–220). Titled The Wife of Jiao Zhongqing (Jiao Zhongqing qi), the poem tells a tragedy caused by a widowed mother – Mother Jiao – who invokes her parental authority granted by Confucian morality with its filial code to command her son’s loyalty above his love for his newly wedded wife. Unable to reject the parental command or give up their love, the son Zhongqing and his wife Lanzhi, after being separated in accordance with Mother Jiao’s decree, commit suicide. The poem ends with their return in the form of a pair of peacocks as their mutual feelings survive as mythology. Leading cultural activists of the May Fourth era seized what they considered to be the contradiction between the parental authority and the young couple’s despairing love depicted in this poem, and worked it into a ground script for staging a new Chinese version of the “ancienne vs. moderne” politics. Students at Beijing Women’s Normal College re-dramatized the poem in the form of modern spoken drama in 1922 and performed it at the cultural forums organized by the University Women’s Federation in Beijing, to enthusiastic acclaim. Variations followed in the next decade, standardizing it into a genre of Chinese “familial tyranny” in a time, as woman writer Zhang Ailing later put it, “when love” – Western romance of the modern individual – “came to China.” Focusing on the “old” that ruined the happiness of “the young,” those re-stagings crystallized a cultural paradigm for “modern China” and “modern Chinese,” premised on a rejection of “the tradition.”

While likewise drawing on the story of the poem, Yüan’s play differs from those other revisions that had negotiated the psychic fabrics of a culture and its inherited topoi in newly standardized ways. In Yüan’s version, Mother Jiao is presented in light of a specific gendered predicament that is foregrounded from the opening scene. While remaining unmarried renders women out of place in the book of Confucian morality, re-marrying is still more prohibited for women as the Confucian chastity codes do not permit widows to change their identity for that may disturb or threaten the stability of male-defined ownership of reproduction and family genealogy. The illness of her son that makes Mother Jiao’s heart sink is due to the delay of his marriage caused by her for, as a young but long-widowed woman, she does not know how to bear the pain when she loses her “last place” in “this world,” her son’s heart, and yet has “no other place to be.” In the next scene, Mother Jiao receives a visit from her neighbor Granny. Widowed herself since she was nineteen years old, Granny now in her sixties...
believes that “losing place” is in effect the point of women’s life: “We widows, for continuing our husbands’ families and for recognitions in our old age, take suffering and sacrifice as our original plan. We have to look for things larger than us stored in the future. The problem of where our hearts can be, naturally, has to be a secondary concern. The real achievement of my life is that I have conquered my feelings that should have no place in this world. That memorial archway for chastity made of white stones standing at the entrance of our village is my real reward.”

Internally trembling at the sight of what is hidden in Granny’s “reward,” Mother Jiao allows the marriage to take place to cure her son’s illness that however only worsens her own predicament. As a tragedy thereby begins which eventually brands her as “the cruelest mother-in-law” in Chinese literary history, the focus of the story is shifted from “the cruel mother” to the mother’s socially scripted destiny that is foreclosed both in the classical poem and its modern variations. In this “widows’ talk,” a social force field is brought into light that shows how “this world” is organized with women as the instruments for the reproduction of male-centered genealogy. In the light of the workings of such a force field, Mother Jiao’s claim to the “old” morality gains its “new” signification. In the absent presence of her dead husband, she resists her predicament by asserting her adherence to Confucian values. Insisting that she has upheld the chastity codes which have dictated her non-existence in the first place, she legitimizes her share in parental authority and demands her son’s filial piety. Seized by her desire to escape the status of the permanent invisible figured and frozen in Granny’s “real reward” and yet unable to find alternative ways to do so, Mother Jiao makes an overt pledge to the cornerstone of the Confucian moral demands that is also a hidden negation of what it commands.

Resistance through such citational maneuver does not automatically give rise to feminist agency. Staging Mother Jiao’s action as an effect of and reaction to the arrangement of a dominant social order, Yüan’s play shows how her cited parental authority also defines her as constitutive of the order. She possesses and asserts power over the daughter-in-law as a mother-in-law, a common practice in the history of dynastic China, sanctioned by its institutions and perpetuated by its social mores. Such power, as Act II shows, underpins the psychic and material economy of the family as an organizing unit in the traditional Chinese mode of production. Lanzhi, now the daughter-in-law in the Jiao family, produces a large quantity of yarn and serves her subservient duties to her mother-in-law while repressing her desire to “read, write, and sing poetry.” Controlling Lanzhi’s bodily moves in every hour of the day, Mother Jiao the old authoritative parent commands the lowest ranking member in a unit of material production that is also a reproduction of human relations. The divide between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, institutionally set up for such oppression to take place with moral sanction, works to induce and perpetuate the acceptance of a male-centered world from those who suffer from its organizing principles. A gendered system with a mechanism for a measure of upwardly mobility, it arranges the complicity of those subordinated therein since it is so designed that a woman does not have to be the
permanent lowest-ranking member; rather, she can become mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law. She can rule those who follow her footsteps, thus compensating for her required function in perpetuating the apparatus that routinizes her own lifelong misery and ultimate loss. Any compensation is by definition excessive. The entire Act II is an enactment of a double process of such compensatory excessiveness, where Mother Jiao acts out her internalized subordination and subordinates Lanzhi with a vengeance. The acts of an “authoritative parent” are hence staged as severe symptoms of the social structuration hidden in the original poem and disappeared from its modern versions, namely, the master script of a Confucian China that has not only fixed Mother Jiao’s predicament but also her ways to survive or even battle against her fixed sufferings.

Strikingly different from the more established May Fourth versions of “Mother Jiao” as the representative of the “parental tyranny,”58 Yüan’s staging not only unmasks the old problems in “the family” foundational to the ancient regime but suggests to us new problems that arise in a variety of its renditions in the 1920s, where Mother Jiao’s gendered struggle is reproduced with a distinctive modern turn. In the name of supporting women’s liberation by initiating them into forms constitutive of the modern political economy of heterosexuality, those renditions need Mother Jiao to be twice as virulent. A representative of the “tyrannical” parent of China’s “traditional” regime, she is so inordinately “cruel” that her behavior is in fact inexplicable in the moral terms of Confucian motherhood. After all, her morally sanctioned power is derived from her institutional status of being her dead husband’s wife and the mother of his heir. The will and satisfaction of her son must be her reason for being after her husband dies. Yet her actions violate any measure of social propriety and destroy her son, marking her as an un-Confucian if not anti-Confucian woman. A female-sexed surrogate father, she lacks any sense of the legitimate limit of her power as all “females” – so it is said – are wont to be when they are in a borrowed position of authority. A specific sensitivity that associates women’s “excessiveness” with biopsychic chaos and bioemotional deformation makes its imprints distinctly felt in those versions of Mother Jiao, now “the cruelest mother”59 amidst the chaotic scenes of twentieth century Chinese culture and society. Here one encounters some of the earliest traces of the category of modern “female sickness” arriving from the scientific West.60 Yüan Changying’s play engages this category and makes it explicit through an added female figure that can be found in neither the old poem nor its modern versions. Mother Jiao in Yüan’s play now has a young daughter Xiao Mei (little sister). Xiao Mei appreciates her sister-in-law and loves her aging mother. She feels particularly distressed after a violent scene between her dominating mother and her miserable sister-in-law, and wonders aloud: “I think that dear mother is ill; it is an illness that is driving her. Otherwise I cannot understand why she is in such a... such an inexplicable temper?”61 As the female face of an ancient and hence no longer intelligible time against which a range of cultural currencies claims their modern values, the excessively cruel Mother Jiao prefigures a Chinese variation of modern femaleness – a gendered body of modern hysteria.62
It is important to remember that the category of modern hysteria came to China along with a range of imported cultural images from the modern West that trope a “morbid . . . subdued or paroxysmal . . . hysteric femaleness.” It is also important to note that this gendered hysteria is coupled with the aging body of the Chinese female rather than that of the young including for instance “Ibsen’s women” and other Anglo or European topoi produced at the turn of the centuries. Just as traditional tyranny is assigned to an image of the Chinese female, modern sickness is located in the body of the feminized “Chinese tradition,” thereby setting up a female-fleshed foil against which “modern Chinese” unfolds with masculinized social constructions. Such constructions underlie most of those renditions of Mother Jiao where desires to challenge the male-centered Confucian institutions and power relations are enlisted only to be aborted of their transformative energies. The question of female agency was raised only to be displaced into that of the “new man” at war with the “old family,” thereby facilitating a new ideology in ascendancy with its foundational dichotomy between the traditional lineage now figured in the body of an aging female and the “modern Chinese” now bodied in a young man. The Darwinist androcentric operation of such an ideology, as Yüan Changying’s play unpacks, re-assigns the gendered roles without changing their structuration registered in the old story. The aging woman who has had a measure of power is de-legitimized into the figure of traditional tyranny and modern cruelty, against which the modern men of “romantic generation” are aroused to revolt with high moral grounds. The young woman is ushered into the evacuated place of the old women, her social vulnerability termed as feminine purity free of the old and moral innocence calling for the new. Against the former in the name of liberating the latter, arrives the timely hero whose heterosexual desires define modern humanity in the terms of a shifting but unchanging power scenario of gender relations. As a paradigm of Chinese modernity, he negotiates Confucian morality of the family by retaining its male-centered power configuration while purging the maternal claim from its kin-defined codes of parental authority. He is “Westernized” precisely as “Westernization” allows him the continuity of the male-centered core of Chinese tradition; he remains “Chinese” precisely through his invocation of the male-centered power relations in “modern cultures” that are thought of as foreign, different, and advanced. Here lies a specific feature of a shifting and re-inscriptive society, suggestive of the predicament of gendered lives in the otherwise volatile enterprises of modern semicoloniality.

The implications of such shifting without structural change were ominous for Chinese females on their way to becoming modern, as those ominous signs momentarily appeared on stage while remaining largely unseen in society. In the context of the play, this re-inscriptive shift, posited on the androcentric axis, requires a new negation of the mother as a parental figure by her son while perpetuating the old divide between the mother and daughter in-laws. The dire effects of such combination of the new negation and old divide are intimated in a dialogue between Granny and Xiao Mei. Hearing Granny’s tales about her long years as a daughter-in-law in the past and long days as a widow in the
present, Xiao Mei feels her mother’s past misery and present fear in her bones. She struggles with broken sentences as she tries to come to terms with their implications: “Granny, from what you have said, to be a daughter-in-law is not a job fit for human beings! And... and poor Mama, Oh my mother... But...!” Granny’s words are no less chilly: “I have known your mother’s misery only too well and too long. How I have wished that she would have conquered her own heart!” Without alternatives to the double dispossession by and between the male-centered old family and the male-centered modern romance, to be deadly unfeeling of her own erasure seems the only way for Mother Jiao to exist as a required casualty of history in transit. Yet Mother Jiao is not dead; she is made particularly alive as she feels her double dispossession. It follows that, within the double bound of the “old” and “new”, her doubled pain finds its expression through her concentrated attack on her daughter-in-law Lanzhi. As intrinsic enemy of her “old family” that has cost her twenty years of life, Lanzhi is also the living mark of her deprived place in the new world where her only possible existence is as a witness to her own emotional dispossession or social erasure. Doubly out of place, in other words, Mother Jiao’s revenge doubles in intensity. Yet such revenge has its internal contradiction. Lanzhi the daughter-in-law is Mother Jiao’s link not only with her son (hence Mother Jiao’s explosion carries her explicit anger toward Lanzhi and her hidden fear that her son would be angry at her) but also with her own life history. Lanzhi is the intimate enemy in Mother Jiao that can hardly be buried; an intrinsic alien that bespeaks the very predicament in the heart of her suffering. And the divided meet in unexpected hours. Toward the end of Act II, when Mother Jiao stands hearing a wave of music flowing into the air from Lanzhi’s chamber late at night, she reacts to the music as if it cuts right into the core of her:

(... the desolate and anguished sound of a lute can be heard, like the accusatory and sorrowful cry of a dying deer or the mournful call of a night oriole, leaving both Mother Jiao and Xiao Mei spell-bound. Xiao Mei bursts into tears. Mother Jiao is first disturbed, then angry, and finally burned as if with blazing flames; she circles the room wide-eyed, muttering to herself). This woman, she is trying to bewitch him again... this slave, this... what is the use of her? No, no, no, I can’t bear the sight and sound of her! My heart... (She hits her chest weeping) Go ahead and break! Break into so many pieces! No, I can’t stand her! This family, has to... Either she goes or I go... I can’t listen to such poisonous sounds. This sound... this is the sound of death... Oh! Heavens! (She lowers her head to strike it against the wall but Xiao Mei holds her back. A string on the lute suddenly snaps and the music stops; silence.) Death! This is death! (Her anguish turns into hysterical long laughter)

A harrowing sight, the scene captures how the music hits what Mother Jiao tries to disavow. Furious at her daughter-in-law who seems the direct cause of her
displacement from her place of being in this world, Mother Jiao is hereby brought into an uncanny encounter with this enemy only to see the face of her own tormented life, with muzzled feelings and buried possibilities. Such an encounter intimates how she and her daughter-in-law are constitutively linked in their assigned roles of being each other’s opposition, and how they are compelled to resonate with each other by an organizing apparatus that rends them apart at the same time. Lanzhi’s music stirs as if it is a returning memory that has been lost, and Mother Jiao feels the sound of her enemy in her own being. Seeing no way to work through what she has felt and lived, Mother Jiao vehemently denies such an inter-vibration that testifies to the extent that Lanzhi is the hidden core of herself. Her hidden core felt in another woman however must be conquered in order for her to exist as the mother-in-law with power over her daughter-in-law in a male-centered hierarchical orbit. Yet when and if it is conquered, she perishes precisely in her conquered existence. When Mother Jiao hears Lanzhi’s music and rejects it as a “song of death,” she is sharply cognizant, for the first and only time in the play, of the force fields that connect them in the midst of dividing them.

This “death music” scene points to some questions central to the impetus of the modern Chinese feminist imagination. As the divided encounter here, they are confronted with their connection in the thick of their otherwise isolated or separate predicament, which reveals that the “threatening” (Lanzhi) and “cruel” (Mother Jiao) enemies are in fact the concealed faces and disfigured bodies of themselves. Lanzhi has long regarded Mother Jiao as the incarnation of inexplicable tyranny. Mother Jiao has long disavowed that Lanzhi, the inferior but fatal enemy, is a variation of herself, at once most intimate and most alien. Yet Lanzhi’s music is the voice of a resonating history of their respective lives, and the passage through which one woman meets her own pulses in the pains of another woman and yearnings for freedom from such pain. Lanzhi’s playing of such music and Mother Jiao’s hearing of it are therefore potentially revolutionary acts. When the former turns the music instrument into a carrier for a gender-specific longing and the latter allow such longing to rise in her, both become potentially the embodiment of mutually felt desires for “ending the subordination of all the subordinated.” And yet such potential in the play does not transpire for, while Lanzhi remains in her identity as the wife of the son, Mother Jiao does not dislodge herself from her place of parental authority in the social arrangement of hierarchical subordination. Indeed, she is painfully cognizant of the invisible force fields that connect both of them in the midst of dividing them, but she seems unable to confront her own unconscious embeddedness therein which is also passive complicity in the workings of such force fields. She stays within the structuration of the “family” and strikes out within its doubly inscribed (old and new) hierarchy only to miss the target and destroy herself. As her son has to be her purpose and fulfillment of life and yet such fulfillment is being broken as “modern romance arrives in China” after her entire life has been prepaid for the “old reward” that is presently and permanently vanishing, her revenge on her daughter-in-law, the intrinsic enemy, has to be similarly immediate and perma-
Lanzhi is ordered by Mother Jiao to return to her maiden home in disgrace and, in Act III, is forced by her father and elder brother to become the concubine of a senile but wealthy official. In despair and defiance, she and Zhongqing drown themselves in a river in hopes of reaching someplace for another kind of life beyond “this world.” Retaining this ending of the classic poem, which is often re-rendered by other dramatists in the 1920s as an eulogy to a young romance and its catastrophic ending caused by a tyrannical old parent, Yüan’s staging reveals how such catastrophe is arranged by the old and new gendered social scripts for women in which Mother Jiao and Lanzhi are fixed. They encounter one another amid an instant of midnight music, only to pass each other by and be restored to their oppositions. When Mother Jiao finally succeeds in eliminating Lanzhi along with her son, she eliminates herself also as if a random occurrence in a silent, indifferent, and brutal universe. Never following through with what she hears in Lanzhi’s music as central to her own survival, Mother Jiao turns into an instrument of the power using her as an executioner of other lives that, in effect, include her own existence. At the end of the play, Mother Jiao holds Zhongqing’s body as if holding her own life that is dead. The stage direction describes:

She sinks her face in the chest of her dead son, bursting into uncontrollable tears. A fierce gust of wind blows her disheveled hair like a tattered flag of a defeated army, surrendering to an invisible enemy. The mournful sound of the wind is like the wailing of defeated soldiers. Amidst those sounds of wailing, we can still hear Mother Jiao’s sound of mourning.  

The deaths of Lanzhi and Zhongqing are also the death of Mother Jiao and her lifelong struggle to stay alive as woman, over which she now mourns, barely discernable, like Lanzhi’s music, like the sound of a “mad ghost,” and like a shadow of “broken souls.” This scene of mourning that evokes the music scene crystallizes Yüan Changying’s dramatic world and its organizing impulse for women to reflect on their internal links amid their divided places in society, where striving for survival only within the gendered arrangement without transforming it is not enough to allow the subordinated to actually survive. Struggling for survival amid the force fields of a semicolonial modernity made of interlocking “old” and “new” social scripts, in other words, Mother Jiao who fails to seek social change including the change of her own formation ends up living her own death in the disfigurement of her perceived enemy. This final scene issues not only a lamentation on the assigned woes of the subordinated, featuring the “weaker sex” in history in violent transit. It stages an admonition about how the subordinated must alter themselves by working through and against their own specific functions required or granted by the operation of power relations. Indeed, Yüan Changying’s Mother Jiao seems to indicate that the gendered condition of the female sex and their need for survival under such conditions do not by definition lead to feminist desires, impetus, and projects, particularly when such conditions afford, or promise to afford, some women more privileges and
power over other women and other lives in everyday routines. Feminist impetus then must be engendered with an ethically charged social refusal of the daily dictates of the prevailing order involving and dividing women in their variously compelled embeddedness and induced complicity. Feminist possibilities must be bodied personally forth as specific sites of social transformation.

**Other Life: on Stage and in Society**

Such personal acts as feminist sites of social transformation are not posited on utopian wishes to transcend the structural agony of the gendered lives. Yuelin’s passage to life through death in Bai Wei’s *Breaking out the Ghost Tower* discussed earlier, for example, indicates how they are driven and fueled by the stirrings for survival inherent in a field of divided human ruins. And, how their mobilization inherently gives rise to an impetus to exceed and even burst the limit of the field and its governing rubrics. Yüan Changying’s play ends with the scene that precisely shows how Mother Jiao’s “living death” results from her failure to burst the rubric divides of such a field, thereby issues an imperative to do so. This is an imperative that recurs in the heart of every failure to actualize it, not as a longing in need of a temporal beyond for its articulation but as an embodied struggle for alternatives to survive the presently compelled and/or induced state of being in living death. The title of the play, “Southeast Flies the Peacock,” is the opening line of the original poem of the Han Dynasty, which is followed by another line, “she returns in circles for every three miles she flies.” The couplet evokes and tropes the young lovers’ destiny. Forced into separation, the man and woman keep returning to each other, not in their present bodily actuality but in their longings lingering on an undefinable yonder. Could it also evoke and trope what stirs in and recurs as Mother Jiao, the figure of an inherently imperative and yet aborted or failed departure from the rubrics that arranged the present order of human sufferings and field of social ruins? If so, such evocation and troping itself not only departs from the original poem and its grounding premise – the androcentric structure of matrimony, but also departs from and bursts its variations in the androcentric genre of modern romance of the 1920s.

Critics and readers alike in the 1920s and the 1930s, however, have often assigned “modern romance” to modern Chinese women writers as their primary territory in writing, and in life. Bai Wei’s reputation of being “romantic” cost her dearly, so it did many others including Ding Ling. Any close look at their literary works makes one wonder whether the contrary was not more truthful, for neither Bai Wei nor Yüan Changying, for instance, shows a penchant for rosy romance, as their female figures amply evince. What does vibrate throughout many of those female figures is their insistence on the “feelings of love,” even when they are fully cognizant of the fact that such “feelings” are basically irrelevant in their uninhabitable world that they must inhabit including, especially, the androcentric enterprises of marriage, old or new. What are at work in such “feelings of love” that seemed so indispensable for those female figures in print and for their authors in life? Indeed, such feelings “were burning” in Bai Wei’s plays in the
1920s, and, as a contemporary literary scholar put it, they appeared like “waves of passion” with an intensity that stunned audiences and critics alike. In the April issue of *Modern Review* (*Xiandai pinglun*) in 1926, Chen Xiying, an active critic, invokes two women writers in an unlikely comparison: “One is Ms. Bing Xin who is known to almost everyone; the other is Ms. Bai Wei who is known to almost no one.” Summarizing Bing Xin’s works as “all about mother’s love” and Bai Wei’s work as “all about love or the lack of it between men and women,” he goes on with a peculiarly tense tone: “What an emotional power her [Bai Wei’s] works possess . . . a crying for love from a woman’s heart that runs through a total of 200 pages from first to last without any pause or repetition and opens such an infinite latitude – what a power and strength and depth and magnitude of emotion it mobilizes!”

Chen Xiying here was referring to Bai Wei’s second play *Lin Li* (*Beautiful jade, 1926–1927*) that, in the words of another literary critic, gained the public attention “as if a sharp light suddenly flashed.” Written in verse, the storyline of the three-act play seems a familiar enough love triangle. A male musician named Music Wave (Qin Lan) is in love with the female dancer Beautiful Jade (Lin Li, the title character), but soon makes her younger sister Glazed Tile (Liu Li) the object of his free-floating fetishistic fixation. Jade dies whereas Glazed Tile becomes the unwilling mother of Wave’s child. Yet the settings in which these acts occur – “a nameless garden in winter;” “an abandoned temple-like site;” and “a space of wilderness in a dream” – are so explicitly unreal that they set the play apart from familiar representational tales of love triangles. The emotionally vibrant flow of verse, meanwhile, is so unstructured that in long passages it bursts the ordering function of the storyline, while crisscrossing the mutual embattlement of Beautiful Jade, Music Wave, and Glazed Tile in their respective attitudes toward and passages of life. The energy of the drama is disconcertingly unfamiliar, so is its impetus.

The play opens in “mournful” singing of a female chorus whereby, in moonlight, Jade appears to announce the arrival of “an early spring” that is yet traceless on stage. Her announcement is rather enigmatic: “Go; let us go! / . . . Let us journey through the night / . . . in the ruins of each for himself, / I bid you farewell! / . . . You the iron-lock [of imprisonment], I throw you away / to the other side of the horizon! / I move / as passion / that summons me, / joins you!” Echoed and accentuated by the chorus’ rising mournful singing, the fluorescent presence of this female body moves and astonishes like an actual “fantasy,” issuing an unseen “vista / with rainbows of . . . / infinitely varying colors; / a place where / to be is / being with you.” This figuration of “my being” as “being with you” initiates the play where human entities are called into boundary-crossing encounters, an initial meeting evocative of a sense of one life coming into being in joining another. As Jade in the following scenes specifically says to Wave, “My love for you is so great that it is a vast togetherness where we live as ourselves.” It is an appeal to a reciprocal dynamic that may work over the norms of “each for himself” and their functioning in the organization of social divisions.

But such division is essential for Wave. Enacting the role of “a romantic artist of the modern times,” he responds to Jade’s initiating “togetherness” by marking
out a boundary between his “autonomy” and her “demanding womanness”: “I am grateful to you / that you love me so! / . . . I have been attached to you. / . . . But to love beyond myself, above myself . . . / is where I cannot go; / I am a birthmark / of this world, / and its times.” Jade defines what structures Wave’s reply with acumen: “It is a stratagem of concealing the real of you / No sweetness here / no love!” Wave’s “I” as a stratagem is rooted in the rubrics of modern culture, featuring the fear of loss of control and the resulting disruption of boundaries between self and other. Indeed, Jade as an offering of love is utilized by Wave toward other goals: “Woman’s greatest charm is in being a beautiful object, / in inspiring the poetic artist.” The moment when Jade’s “charm” seems used up is the moment Wave leaves her and relocates his emotional capital in Glazed Tile for profitable inspiration. The aura of the modern self here goes hand in hand with the instrumental objectification of others for one’s advancements in the name of human sovereignty and the art of the romantic. Accepting the workings of this modern logic and its prevalence as a timeless absolute, Glazed Tile warns Jade as if foreseeing her ending as one of those impossibles whose only place is in the fictional “otherworldly”: “Let it go, my elder sister / or you will die here and now of your impossible love.” Modern sovereignty as a concealed stratagem with which “the stronger ones” instrumentalize and assimilate the “weaker ones,” for Glazed Tile, has been the natural fact of the world and is no cause for disturbance: “Where else have you been? / Who would be your soul-mate for making the garden of life? Life is a tool, / tools are other people’s lives.”

Yet insisting that “only our loving care for another can carry us beyond nothingness and make this life alive,” Jade struggles in the rest of the play to exist, to be a source, body, and trope of such “feelings of loving care” in “this world” where Wave’s normalizing time and Glazed Tile’s parroted claim of its natural reign foreclose any possibility for the actualization of her impulses. Passionately, she declares that even her grave will be “a fluid bundle of crystal love that burns in the darkness of this world.” Unfolding within, through, and against Wave’s time, Jade’s love turns out to be an emotional labor of constitutive alterity, doubling the social design of rationality that inherently instrumentalizes social relations. As if inevitably, Jade dies; miraculously, she returns from death by exceeding the limits set up by “the God of Time” and “the God of Death,” two characters in the play that function more as Greek chorus rather than presiding deities in subsequent scenes. In the last act, Jade shifts into a figure of unreal actuality in whose sphere flowers, stars, sky and earth, and variously shaped human performers encounter one another to constitute a “dream world.” Pulled by the impetus of this dream world that is invisible to his eyes, Wave, as if in a trance, comes to search for Jade after Glazed Tile leaves him. On his way, he is caught in tangled warfare among giant animals, torn to pieces, and becomes one more addition to “piling up corpses of the refugees in a world of ruins and wreckages” as the stage direction describes, at the edge of his normalized times. Jade’s “dream world” outside such times vanishes, only to return yet again, this time in the shape of a nameless place in the thick of darkness where she “wakes
up” and the play ends: “Amid darkness on stage, loud voices and strong knocks are heard, louder and louder, vibrating: ‘It is time to wake up! Wake up and get ready!’ The knocking intensifies, sharpens, and shakes. An indiscernible light dawns on a bed. Jade, in her nightgown and hair disheveled, gradually sits up and remains at the edge of the bed. Voices: ‘You have said that the morning train is to come at seven-thirty? Haven’t you? Please, quickly, wake up and get ready.’ While slowly opening her eyes, Jade is rising. Voice: ‘Yes, I am waking up.’”

In an uncanny convergence, the scene of Jade’s rising in darkness conjures up what feminist critics such as Cathy Caruth in a different context have traced in the unintelligible words remembered from dreams that do not “simply refer to a reality that can be grasped in these words’ representation, but transmit the ethical imperative of an awakening that has yet to occur” or, to be precise in this case, actually occurring without yet recognition.

Differing from neo-Kantian or Levinasian impulses that evoke “the ethical” with gestures and signatures of secularized grace, the imperative dramatized in Bai Wei’s plays is transformative rather than transcendent in its impetus. Her female furies in their unlikely motions are physically actual and psychically palpable, astonishing and shaking the beholders by exceeding their own coerced formations and/or induced passivity. In her another major play Paradise (Letu, 1927–1931), such impetus to challenge the limits of one’s given state of being, while most intensely felt in the female figures, is extended to take the bodily shapes of the old and the young, male and female, the illiterate villager and the learned educator, the muddled soldiers and the indifferent civilians. Set in the aftermath of the 1927 coup d’état, the play unfolds in a mountain that seems to embody serenity, transcending the war, upheaval, starvation, destruction, looting, and death below. An old man, a survivor of the failure of the First National Revolution, lives there with his daughter, and his sixteen young students as well as a servant from a Buddhist temple. Then, a military general of the Nationalist army named Daitian arrives with a young and educated woman named Fan Ying. While the modern hero speaks in eloquent poetry and offers his newly bought villa in the mountain as a token of love to the beloved, the modern heroine responds with radiant smiles: “I am truly happy.” All soon turns out to be not well. The villa is in fact a place to hide the general’s large quantities of silver dollars taken from unknown sources, and ten women unexpectedly show up there who turn out to be the general’s concubines trying to find him as they muddle through a long journey to escape from the wars and chaos “down there.” The soldiers have been ordered to carry the silver dollars to the villa, but end up fighting with one another over the money and the women. When the sweet and beautiful daughter of the old man comes out of the temple and asks them to leave, the general simply decides to take her along and makes her one more addition to his acquired collection of females. As the stage direction describes, Ding Rui, heroine Fan Ying’s best friend, appears “among the pine trees” after a long search for her lost friend. She appeals to Fan Ying’s sense of her own history as a “woman activist student who edited journals, organized public forums, promoted women’s rights, and denounced the system of concubinage.”

Other Life 121
For such a daring act, she pays with her life and dies of gang rape performed by the general’s hungry soldiers. The play ends with the scene in which the temple is burned to the ground with its young students buried under the ruins. The mountain of Paradise stands like a disappeared dream and thickening nightmare. As if two specters, from the ashes emerge the old man covered with blood and wounds, and the servant of the temple lingering with broken legs. “Do not be heart broken,” the old man says, with a voice that seems to come from another sphere, “the world will change. Only if we know how to do it.” The servant responds: “From today on, I am with you, to do it.” Neither of them knows “how to do it.” None of the young, beautiful, and hopeful ones in the play know how to do it. But “from today on,” the mountain of Paradise is no longer temporally beyond and spatially above earthly mortals, since the land itself turns out to be part of this burning world, standing silently “in the breaking light of another morning,” an actual dwelling of the variously ruined with their haunting stirrings and muted cries for transformation, in life and in death.

Such theatrical staging of the impossible imperative for social change in the late 1920s and the 1930s involves vital implications for the real life of its playwright, performers, and publishers. The journal *Yüsi* (*Threads of words*) edited by Lu Xun, for instance, received an official warning from the cultural bureau of the Nationalist government for its publication of Bai Wei’s *Paradise* in spring 1928. Those warnings were not to be taken lightly. As the decade came to a close, political controls were tightening. The founding of Zuolian, the League of Leftist Writers, in March 1930, was followed by the secret arrest and execution of five of its members, all literary writers, including the twenty-four year old woman writer Feng Keng, who was executed in January 1931 in Shanghai. The boundary between ink in writings and blood of the writing bodies was blurred in such cases. The link between the appearances of imagined female furies on stage and the real disappearance of their imaginative authors in secrecy intimates a structurally operative mechanism that posited the intersection between art and life as a real life and death battlefield. In her preface to *Nora’s Way Out*, a collection of short stories written by a young woman and published in 1933, Bing Xin commented that “the current cultural forum is so dejected, and women writers are especially lonesome! Leaving the country, giving up their pens, dead, or disappeared; amid hostile winds and harsh rain, few have survived.” Rather than simply endangering themselves by continuing to write in such a milieu, however, producing art of critical imagination lent these women a public space where they came to terms with their precarious state of being and inhabited the category of “modern Chinese women writers” as a form of survival with significance. If early May Fourth women actualized their unprecedented spatial existence with and through literary scenes evoking unprecedented cognitive visions of humanity in unprecedented human relations, imaginative writing and theater staging came to Bai Wei as the enabling hand of a public friend, helping her to navigate the force field that operated to confine her to a ruinous labyrinth of silent humanity. Grasping this enabling hand as a leverage for the ruined to stir and rise, Bai Wei extended its sphere of concerns and sharpened its potency.
to exceed the limits of the field of human ruins, at the possible cost of her own physical or social “disappearance” which was her assigned proper place to begin with. It is precisely by exceeding and / or bursting the seemingly unsurpassable limits of the prevailing power regimes in the material world, in other words, that she survived into an astonishing sight of “the most influential and important of modern women playwrights in China.” She produced a range of hauntingly powerful works, while paving one of those often unrecognized life passages that textured defining fabrics of twentieth century Chinese society and its women’s history.

Bai Wei’s first battle to make herself into an astonishing sight took place long before she began to write. Born in Hunan Province in 1894, the year when the Sino-Japanese navy war occurred, her given name was Huang Bizhu. Bizhu was promised to a young man of a gentry family who happened to please her mother on a casual visit, and was married off when she turned sixteen years old despite her brilliance as a student in her elementary school. The repressive effect of the social mores that forbade her mother-in-law, a young widow, to re-marry was soon to wreak havoc in the new daughter-in-law’s life. As Bizhu did not become pregnant and deliver children soon enough to afford the mother-in-law a familial screen behind which to keep her own babies that she had with her late husband’s brothers, the mother-in-law was bitterly disappointed. After she strangled the babies for fear of exposure, the young widow tortured Bizhu with a vengeance. One day she made a violent scene whereby she demanded that Bizhu find a husband for her, otherwise she as the mother-in-law would use her power to order Bizhu the daughter-in-law to commit suicide. Already being refused of food for days due to her “uselessness,” overworked for months, and now terrified, Bizhu ran away from the family at night. Such was her first disappearance from the world of the living. When she turned up in front of her own parents, she was a skeleton. As a biographer recorded, “her mother was so astonished and shaken that she thought she was seeing a ghost.”

As if returning from death, Bizhu gained permission from her parents to continue her education. She passed the examination for and in the spring of 1915 matriculated at the Third Women’s Normal College in Hengzhou, one of the three women’s colleges newly opened in Hunan Province. Renamed herself as Huang Zhang and wearing a man’s gown with short hair, this strange-looking woman student quickly emerged as the leading force for women’s rights, organizing protests against the English and American missionaries who frequented the school to teach women “Christian virtues to be good wives and mothers.” The protests infuriated the administration and led to the arrests of seven teachers by the police, prompting widespread protests from women and men students across the province. The administration released the teachers, while moved to expel the “trouble-maker” Huang Zhang instead. Students mounted protests again, and the administration backed down transferring Huang Zhang to the First Women’s Normal College in Changsha. She graduated there in 1918 with first class honors and a record of activism for women’s rights and social change. Yet the woman student and activist Huang Zhang did not exist for long either. Her mother-in-law had been threatening to buy concubines for her
son. Worried, Huang Zhang’s father negotiated a deal with the woman stipulating that “the issue of concubines” be discussed after Huang Zhang finished her college education and returned to assume the role of the first wife and hence the manager of the family affairs. Anxious to ensure these terms, advantageous for most women at the time, Huang Zhang’s father took a special trip to the college. At a banquet he provided for the teachers, he “thanked them all” and requested, at the same time, that his talented daughter return to her husband as an “educated” and “modern” wife with an empowered status secured in a family of sizable land and property. The college administration concurred that “parents’ wishes must be honored” and hence not only dropped their plan to send Huang Zhang abroad for advanced study but put her under the “good care” of student supervisors. On the day of her graduation, Huang Zhang escaped from the school with the help of her fellow women students including her younger sister, and headed for Japan. Huang Zhang disappeared for the second time from the world of the visible. Sixteen years later, in a piece titled “My Initial Literary Turn,” (“Wǒ toudao wenxüe qüan lì de chuzhong”) she wrote:

Father did not know that I had escaped the school’s heavily guarded walls through an abandoned sewer and embarked on a boat bound for Shanghai. An old woman servant working for the school happened to seeing off a professor’s wife there; she recognized me – the fugitive who was shaking and ghostly pale, and looked perhaps rather crazed. With tears in her eyes, the good old woman put two dollars in my hand, mumbling, “Miss, how can you survive without money or anything, and alone?” When I landed in Yokohama, I had twenty cents left.

Her “astonishing behavior” led to an orchestrated amnesia of her existence among the gentry-scholar family circles in her hometown for more than a decade, and cost her the financial support from her father. When the May Fourth movement reached its height in Beijing, Huang Zhang, now renamed Bai Wei, surfaced in the city of Tokyo. A long struggle to live in a volatile world that consistently foreclosed her ways of living thereby reached a point of no return; and she was fully cognizant of her dangerous predicament: “Bai means void,” she wrote in 1924; “I am the name of placeless sorrow; Bai Wei is sorrowful femaleness itself.” Finishing her language training at the Academy of East Asia Studies while working as a domestic servant to earn her living, the non-entity Bai Wei won a Japanese government scholarship reserved for students with outstanding academic records to enter the Women’s Normal University in Tokyo in 1919. She chose to major in biology. When malnutrition and other related hardships finally took their toll, illness interrupted her study and ended her scholarship in her senior year. Bai Wei found herself caught up in a destructive situation. While persisting in her scientific learning, the Huang Bizhu turned Huang Zhang turned Bai Wei was undergoing profound alterations. “I was trapped in an abyss woven with prejudice, discrimination, and all kinds of attacks from both [Chinese and Japanese] cultures and societies,” she wrote; all the while:
The coldness of a foreign country, year after year, was tearing down my body while economic destitution was ravaging my heart. Under the overwhelming pressures of money and power, I saw how in this world humanity was so cruelly and indifferently ruined; truth, justice, and compassion were given up; and the love between children and parents was broken... An indignation intensifying inside of me... I was losing my faith that mankind was the highest form of living species. If it were so, why would human beings found their society on such cruelty, calculation, confusion, and hypocrisy?129

Experiences in a “chilly foreign land,” it seems, convinced Bai Wei that, in terms of women’s lives, the sex-specific codes of social behavior and gendered relations dictated by “traditional China” and the “modern, advanced country” such as Japan resembled each other more than they differed. In a poem she wrote in a despairing moment, one gains a glimpse of her tumultuous feelings about “this world” made of the interlocking reigns of the pressures of the “old” Chinese system of social status and the powers of “modern” money, and her recognition of her placelessness as a “modern-Chinese-woman” in it:

Breaking out of the old prison at home / I have fallen into the abyss of non-being in foreign lands; / lingering day and night / in the borderland of living and dying / . . . Fate exiled me from the garden of hope, / with the ultimatum of cold starvation, / storms of misery! / A woman wandering on the streets with no food in her body and blood-soaked tears in her eyes, / is a lone flower attacked by wind and rain, all in ruins. / See those gentlemen / whose harsh gazes in passing / instantly turn this “shina female” / into a horror of disfiguration. / Chains of oppression, how unjust you can be! / . . . Yet the fire in me will burn you, / in life or in death, / defying your destruction!130

Gradually coming to terms with her “inner fire” in the coldness of a modern country, Bai Wei turned to art and started writing poetry to probe questions beyond the sphere of scientific cognition. Years later she wrote of her still indistinct but sharply felt impetus at this moment: “I needed ways to dissect human society! I needed a way to cut out my pains; I needed to face the agonies of the similarly wronged and disfigured. I must find ways to unmask the crimes of those who, with their unseeing eyes, mutilate and ruin other lives with utter indifference!”131 In her letters to her younger sister and others, it appears that she also included her father in those with “unseeing eyes.”132 Yet as a “modern-minded” man by the standards at the time, and even today in certain dimensions, Bai Wei’s father, who in his youth had participated in the 1911 Revolution himself, evidently saw his daughter’s intelligence and managed to overcome his anger about his first defeat in scripting her post-college life. He proposed a new scenario for her to find her way in the modern republican China as a returned overseas student. It was the year 1925, and Chinese society seemed on its way
toward a functional nation state. There appeared in Hunan Province three congresswomen, and several of Bai Wei’s schoolmates who had scored well in the examination at the provincial level, had been appointed county magistrates. All of which indicated “women’s advancement in national politics.” Willing to utilize his financial resources and maneuver his social networks, the father was reasonably confident that these, combined with his daughter’s overseas university education and demonstrated talents, were enough to mount a successful campaign for her to gain a seat in the Provincial Congress. Yet the attainment of power and status in the body politic as it was configured at the time apparently did not move and motivate Bai Wei, who was instead bent on “winning women’s rights in real terms.” Something else was at work in her daily acts and life turns, which was characterized by a disturbing unpredictability or even unintelligibility in the light of the politics of nation building and its ideological normalization. “Those clumsy tools in my hand can only probe things and not illuminate society and human beings,” she wrote of her biological experiments in her Japanese laboratory, “I was so suffocated and frustrated; days and months, I was circling in such suffocation and frustration.” Her encounter with Tian Han, a founding figure of modern Chinese drama, and Nakamura Kichizo, a leading Japanese scholar of modern French and European drama and literature, seemed to have precipitated her first attempt in playwriting. Dramatic performance, as a medium to set eruptive imagination in actual human movement, meant something more than another institutionally available way of making a living as a modern professional or of attaining status as a female power player in the given structures of a modern nation state and its forming hierarchy. For the second time in her life, the woman rejected a well-scripted scenario for upwardly mobile social placement and recognition, a scenario that, unlike the earlier reformist route toward a half-modern and half kin-defined domestic power, was distinctly public and surely modern. The attainment of power and status in given terms, it appears, did not bespeak Bai Wei’s feelings about what her life was or meant.

The haunting female figures in her plays discussed earlier accompanied Bai Wei the real woman as she survived what seemed impossible to survive. Several times, she was literally at the edge of death due to poverty, serious illness, or severe emotional crisis, and writing plays afforded her a world of human companions with whose passion she sustained herself. Her writings on printed paper and enacted on stage, meanwhile, summon as much as register the imperatives to alter the social landscapes for those lives of other kind to emerge. As if responding to her summoning, the news of the eruption of the First National Revolution reached Japan. With great enthusiasm, Bai Wei left Tokyo and arrived at Wuchang in the spring of 1927 when the city had just been taken over by the Northern Expedition army after fierce battles. She took up a faculty position at Zhongshan University there and worked as a staff translator of Japanese texts at the International Bureau of the Political Department of the Northern Expedition. When the Nationalist military butchered the revolution in the same spring, Bai Wei protested in a dangerous way – by quitting the position.
In September of 1927, she disappeared for the third time in her life and then surfaced in Shanghai with some few cents left in her pockets. From then on, despite a protracted illness, she lived and worked as a woman writer in a decade long economic poverty, social instability and political suppression. Distinctly gendered, her illness was caused by her common law husband, a Chinese romantic poet of Japanese education. His presence in Bai Wei’s life from 1924 to 1934 – interluded by long absences and multiple affairs with other women – left her emotionally devastated and, without her knowledge, her body ruined by sexually transmitted diseases. Undergoing periodic surgery, the fees for which she saved by living in attic or basement and going for days without food, Bai Wei “the non-entity” or a “void” survived through imaginative writing. The stirring ruins of a female sex, rising over and again from her works on stage and in print, seem to designate the values of her life, while the selling of such writings to leftist and sympathetic publishers gained her food to sustain her bodily existence. Believed and even reported to be dead many times, she returned to life over and again, from hospitals where doctors had lost hope for her cure, from streets where she had collapsed for hours without being noticed by anyone, from her cold room where she was sick with high fever for weeks, from the mortuary where she was sent when her heart-beat stopped on the operating table. And she continued to publish. In April of 1937, Women’s life (Füniù shenghuo) printed a letter calling for public donations to “save woman writer Bai Wei from murderous poverty and illness.” Nineteen women of various professions signed the letter. Her existence led critics and reporters in the 1930s to speak of her with awe, as if beholding an impossible figure that recurs. A collection of letters, Last Night (Zuoye, 1933) comprises her correspondence with the man who was one of the forces that ruined her body. A series of feature stories, Third Class Ward (Sandeng bingfang, 1935) is about a group of women across a spectrum of economic classes struggling with diseases sexually transmitted by their husbands. A dialogical novella, Suffering Women (Shounan de nüxingmen, 1935) focuses on rural women refugees. There are also more than thirty poems and published or unpublished one act or multi-act plays for the war of resistance against Japanese invasion and related social issues. All of these bear out the awe-inspiring strength of an otherwise ruined woman, a “spatial void” or “valueless and invisible small grass,” a living sample of “the weak species.” Her heavily autobiographical novel Living tragedy (Beijü shengya, 1936) traces an educated woman’s struggle to refuse the given genres of femaleness as, in her words, “puppets of the powers that be,” “veneers of an old ghost house masquerading as a modern human family,” “the plaything of masculine desires,” and “the sexualized body of Death itself.” Poet Ren Jün wrote in the early 1940s of a war-torn China:

Bai Wei is one of the few noted women writers from the May Fourth period. . . . For nearly a decade, she has been persecuted by poverty and illness and other forces to such a severe degree that it is simply unbelievable that she is still alive. Any life, put under such conditions, would more likely
have long succumbed. Yet she persists, as if iron and fire, in this time of horror that is ours. What an assertion of tenacity; what an act of daring spirit; and what an astonishing human attainment!  

Working through volumes of pain and hardship left by Bai Wei, many of them unfinished or unpublished, one may wonder what might have happened to this first woman playwright in modern Chinese history if she had chosen other life passages. One wonders whether those volumes could have ever appeared if she had accepted the available genres of existence secured for her in semicolonial China, as the first wife in charge of a gentry-business family, a female token in the spotlight of nationalist politics, or a skilled technical hand in the business of translation run by the prevailing powers. Bai Wei seemed to regard such genres of visibility and material returns as variations of the social and physical death that threatened her throughout the 1930s. “I have the responsibility of not dying,” she wrote in 1936, “not giving up in the face of starvation, illness, wars, open signs or concealed intimations that induce suicide.” Refusing to die, in this sense, is a refusal of the prevailing power relations in which gendered lives are assigned personal agonies and gendered bodies are required social casualties. In Bai Wei’s case, artistic writing seems one way for such ruined ones to imagine the otherwise unimaginable and actualize the otherwise impossible at the time, namely, to rise from and undo their socially made ruinage, to live other than the non-human “tools” as mere functions of the shifting power regimes, to body forth an-other life. It is in the light of such a female-levered refusal that one may recall what she wrote in 1924: “I live but take no possessions; die but occupy no territory; love but keep no books of returns.”

It is in the effort to imagine such other life and its meanings that Yuan Changying joins Bai Wei, through her own way of refusing the returns that the gendered modern politics of visibility and disappearance seemed to mete out at the time to educated women of economically privileged status. As one of the earliest women scholars of cross-cultural learning, Yuan Changying was born in 1894 also in Hunan Province. She went to England in 1916 with financial support from her father and received her BA and MA in English from Edinburgh University in 1921. After marrying a Chinese graduate from the London School of Economics, she returned to China and started teaching in the same year. In 1926, she traveled to Europe again to study French drama and literature at the University of Paris, and returned in 1928. For the rest of her life she was one of a less than handful of full-time women professors in Republican China, specializing in drama and literature. A learned woman coming from the elites, the movements she mounted on stage and the actions she took in life often deeply jarred with other women of her class “favored by the times.” Her depictions of the educated women who served as “flower vases” (meaning “sexualized decorations”) in the offices of commercial and/or government establishments, “fashionable ladies” who “lived on their husbands’ power and money,” or the variety of “women celebrities” depleting public spaces as much as public resources, are unrelentingly critical. In one of her prose pieces titled
“Equality in the front of laws” ("Zai falü shang pingdeng") written in 1940s, she satirizes the above mentioned genres of “modern women,” of which the following passage, lengthy but necessary to cite, is illustrative:

How have the female political celebrities been faring? Some exchange their prettiness for access to power, or use the skills of socialites to obtain influence and money. Today she is in a car speeding past on the streets; tomorrow she is in an airplane sliding across the sky – Shanghai or Nanjing were her usual destinations before the war. Now, in the war, Chongqing or Hong Kong are her landing places; perhaps she is flying as far as Manila or some such city, her children are deposited in others’ colonies and Caucasian women are hired to wet-nurse and educate her little ones . . . [Such are the scenarios] when she is on business trips for public affairs. Other days, she sits in the cars that carry her to her office and stays there for a few minutes, making some inquiries about whether the article that one of her subordinate functionaries is writing for her is done, or whether the authoritative foreign book that another is translating for her is completed. . . . When there is no other way but to write something herself, she simply . . . brushes out a grand article with at most several dozens of words . . . her self-styled unreadable handwriting is utterly enchanting! Truly, they are experts, they have studied overseas, and they have no interest in learning the pathetic Chinese ways and skills of writing . . . .157 (my italics).

Yüan Changying explicitly marks the female celebrities, depicted here, as those “experts” who “studied overseas” – those of “her own kind.”158 The depiction of “her own kind,” however, amounts hereby to an unyieldingly critical exposure, and it does not stop here, not yet:

Besides, one must know how really busy they are. Every evening before retiring to bed, they must use seven to eight types of chemical cosmetics made in Hollywood, massaging their faces for at least for one or two hours. They also have to use imported creams of exotic fragrance to smooth their skins after bathing; and most of all they need to add final touches to their finger-nails and toenails and upper and lower lips with famed, expensive, dazzlingly red paint! Are not these kinds of hard work time consuming? And there are more important duties than these. In addition to their hair that needs to be colored and permed fluffy, their gorgeous dresses that need to be changed several times a day, as well as their unavoidable meetings and ceremonies to welcome visitors, there are the most intricate politics of evening parties or banquets. Domestic guests or foreign dignitaries entertained by this young male colleague and that senior male boss require their presence, for those colleagues or bosses may not have presentable wives! So many titles and duties concentrated on one female human, how could anyone be so inhuman as to hold the conviction that she should learn what should be learned and write by herself? . . . Well, look at the male species of
similarly important personalities – aren’t they doing the exactly same thing?\textsuperscript{159}

Published at a time when the Japanese military was enforcing the policies of “burn all, loot all, and kill all” in China,\textsuperscript{160} such satire may seem to target the less than crucial. Yet Yuan Changying seemed acutely cognizant of the fact that, as the next chapter further discusses, the War of Resistance against the Japanese invasion is also a revolution of social transformation. Without social transformation, Yuan Changying seems to say, the resistance is emptied of its deeper and real content. Socially privileged and far removed from the leftist politics in which Bai Wei was involved, Yuan nonetheless repeats Bai Wei’s impetus of refusal as if she were a resonating variation of her poor and sick sister Hunanese. Committed to “a different life” other than “what is seen here and now wrecked by cruel forces of territorial expansionism and self-aggrandizement among nations, groups, modern individuals,”\textsuperscript{161} Yuan Changying took on increasingly heavy workloads in what the poet Run Jun called “the time of horror that is ours.” She worked as a professor who continued teaching amidst massive air-raids, whilst being a mother of two who kept the family going in the ruins of their burned down flat in Leshan, Sichuan province, without water, electricity, food, or chopsticks. She also worked as an activist who organized students for the war of resistance, and as a writer who made trips to heavily bombarded areas to write of the “beautiful spirit of the Chinese land” rising among wreckage.\textsuperscript{162}

Meanwhile, rural women, economically deprived women and others prey to various forms of violence, the illiterate, the abandoned, the disabled and the elderly appear and re-appear in her plays, prose, and fiction to question the official scripts of “modern women” in the Republican era with its deepening semicolonial multi-crisis. \textit{Roads to humanity} (\textit{Ren zhidao}, 1929), a two-act play, is a noted example that focuses on the operative features of the “new” genres of modern femaleness and their underlining apparata that re-arrange Chinese women into polarized and mutually constitutive social places. The play first dramatizes how a U.S. educated woman and her U.S. educated husband as a “modern couple” reflect an image of the nation building model by which China can claim its status as a member of the world family of modern nations. Active in Shanghai’s social and political “reform circles,” Sulian, the embodiment of her husband Ouyang’s civil status and updated domestic stylistics, is a modern housewife who hosts the household and writes on women’s issues for newspapers. Her friend from her youth named Meiying has recently returned from England. Now a woman writer, Meiying visits Sulian and the two enjoy exchanges on women and society. Much to Sulian’s discomfort, however, Meiying peculiarly includes Wang Ma, Sulian’s servant woman from some rural area, in their highly sophisticated and theoretical discussions and, much worse, discovers that Wang Ma is Ouyang’s discarded and forgotten former wife. Years ago the poor woman supported Ouyang’s study abroad for the acquisition of “modern knowledge” with all of the resources that the family could manage to collect only to
learn that the “modern times” have no place for her. One day, after she struggled for years to care for his parents and their two children, she received his brief divorce note sent from abroad with a few dollars enclosed. Wang Ma came to the city looking for her husband but all her efforts seemed to be made in vain. Desperate to find a job to provide for her children, she was grateful to Sulian who happened to be hiring one more house servant while Ouyang was away on a political campaign.

As an urban woman endowed with symbolic capital attained through a Western-defined education and material riches provided through the institution of heterosexual marriage, Sulian prefigures the official programs of the New Life Movement in the mid-1930s that announced the “new” figure of “Chinese female” as “an enlightened wife and educated mother” with trained skills to “nurture healthy citizens of the modern Chinese nation.” Staging such an ideal “newness” foundational to the project of a semicolonial modernity, the play complicates her signification by bringing forth another woman as her unsettling double. Assigned to a bygone past and yet constituting the condition of comfort and leisure that allows Sulian to write on “women’s issues” in style, Wang Ma haunts the stage as a real life in the space of whose erasure Sulian the newly fashioned female ascends and expands. In various modern versions of *Southeast Flies the Peacock* published in the 1920s the elderly mother is invariably rejected as her kin-defined power is lost at the dawn of the modern. In Yüan Changying’s *Roads to Humanity* the operation of such rejection is seen to be expanding the range of its casualties indefinitely to include the rural, the exploited and manipulated, the dispossessed and displaced, the indigenous with no access to translated material or symbolic capital, or any of the “old” or “outdated” marked by modern categories and their shifting classifications. A range of the “weaker species” it seems, is required for the definition and ascendance of the “stronger species” of the modern. Sulian has her ways of acknowledging such casualties necessary for progress: “Sulian: [struggling] But I married Ouyang because of love. [Such new love] is sacred, there is no right or wrong about it... You are not supporting the old, outdated doctrines of permanent marriage, are you?” To which Meiying responds:

Meiying: You say new love?... Is it love when one’s behavior makes caring for another human life impossible? Today he loves you, tomorrow he discards you for new ones; today you are his flesh and blood, tomorrow you are strangers passing on the streets; today he is in the plenitude of sweetness with you, tomorrow he wants you to disappear as if you are the enemy of his reign and as ugly as a bandit... All depends on his need and his pleasures. Masquerading with chameleon faces, he takes, takes, takes, causing illness, death, pain, and suicide... Is this modern love?

This is not love but the “chameleon face” of modern instrumentalism, which renders human lives “tools” in and for a deeply gendered political economy where, as Meiying argues, those with feelings other than appropriative desires,
including perhaps Sulian herself, rarely go through life without losing at least some part of their minds, hearts, and bodies. Sharing with Sulian many of her stories about women like Wang Ma, Meiy ing draws up an ominous map where the aura of the project of a semicolonial China as an imported romance is sustained with abundant supplies of such concealed human losses. As the up-to-date face of her husband’s modern household here and now, Sulian could be marked as “outdated” or “old” tomorrow or the day after when her face wrinkles, literally or figuratively. The “newer” versions of such faces are continuously produced and reproduced as the ever more updated acquisitions constitutive of this project, its gendered laws of ownership, and its organizing hierarchy posited on the “weaker and stronger” divisions. Compelled to confront the implications of such mapping, Sulian agonizes over the secret of its perpetuation that makes her life as a “model modern woman” possible yet her writings on “women’s issues” into a tissue of lies. At a critical point of the play, she cries out: “Sister Mei, I feel so sad, this is too difficult, most miserable! – I am leaving me! No, I am not I am!” A moment of breakdown, this is also a defining turn of events through which her complicity in the suffering of others is not only acknowledged but also shaken, as she yields to a challenge she cannot ignore. Sulian grasps her proximity with Wang Ma in her glimpse of herself as a gendered instrument for “the pleasure house” of a masculine owner, which is suggestive of the possibility of her alteration. The following scene allows such possibility without any sense of closure. As Ouyang returns and the buried past is revealed as on-going present, a distraught Wang Ma runs out while her younger child suffering from scarlet fever dies in the reluctant father’s arms. Amidst the busiest section of a semicolonial metropolis, Wang Ma is hit by a speeding car and run over without being noticed by the chauffer let alone the lady sitting in it. As the “traditional” woman Wang Ma finally turns into a modern sign of disappearance, Sulian slowly kneels down in front of the old and young dead ones – a model modern woman doubles into a return of China’s “traditional” gesture that speaks the unspoken. “Roads to modernity,” as the mise-en-scène intimates, seems paved with disappeared women like Wang Ma who intimates and indicts the secret in its random scenes of routine violence. Double-bodying the disappeared in a return, meanwhile, Sulian the modern woman marks a pause to open alternative “roads to humanity” (hence the title of the play) that are yet-to-be paved.

As the eldest of four daughters in a gentry-turned-official family, Yüan Changying saw her mother die prematurely. Having failed to produce a male child, the woman one day disappeared from the world, living in severe isolation to escape the open contempt heaped upon her by the familial clans. Three of her daughters all succumbed to death in infancy, leaving only Yüan Changying. Holding official posts away from home for years, Yüan Changying’s father soon re-married and had his male heir and another daughter. Yüan Changying’s mother never appears in her writings, and her glaring absence seems to shape a space where female figures of disturbing potency recur, unsettling or unraveling otherwise settled households, relations, landscapes, or familiar scenarios, whereby
the absent appear to speak, the broken rise to signify, the erased return to haunt, as and for the other life that is not readily intelligible.170 The doublings of Mother Jiao and Lanzhi in *Southeast Flies the Peacock* and Wang Ma and Sulian in *Roads to Humanity* are only two noted examples. In a much less discussed novella *Buffalo* (*Niou*, 1942),171 Yüan Changying depicts a relationship between an aging buffalo and a small boy that is vibrant with the subtlest rhythms of mutual love, recognition, and devotion beyond any expressive human language. One day when the boy is sitting on the back of the buffalo taking their walk in the forests, a huge tiger turns up and spots the boy as its prey. The old buffalo, rather than running away for her own survival, fights to protect the boy, one round after another. When the tiger finally hears sounds of some approaching human hunters and retreats, the exhausted buffalo, covered with wounds, carries the shaken and unconscious boy with her mouth and returns to the village. Confused by the unimaginable sight, the familial clan concludes that the old buffalo must have gone mad and attacked the boy. The unconscious boy is coming to but only finds that the buffalo has been shot by the clan in the name of revenging him: “The old buffalo lies in a large pool of blood twitching in her spasms . . . . The boy snuggles up to her and cries: ‘If only you could speak . . . if only you had the words to tell . . . ’”172 But “the great passions are silent” as a certain sage seems to have said at the dawn of modernity.173 Yüan Changying evokes such silence of passion as a scene of a transformative imagination in front of which, in her own words, “at first one is astonished; in the aftermath of such astonishment a certain inner calmness arrives, and therein stirring forth such a strength that alters one’s disposition – it is one’s life and not merely one’s opinion that is genuinely altered.”174

Such genuine alteration seems urgently needed in a “contemporary culture that is misnamed,” as Yüan Changying wrote elsewhere in the 1930s, “culture should . . . help us to extricate ourselves from conditions of brutality. Yet now the so-called progress of science and advancements of culture do nothing but increase the power of and opportunities for animal aggression, directly or indirectly providing weapons that kill lives while erasing traces of their blood. This culture of violence expanding its claws has a real name, which is expansionist militarization . . . How I wish to bury its operations . . . how I yearn for an alternative where human beings can have a little happiness within a range of actual possibilities.”175 One of her ways to sustain such wish and yearning, it seems, was in the act of conjuring up the doublings of humanity. In a prose work about the beauty and creativity of the Chinese land that was “finished on June 10, 1940, amid the shrill sound of sirens,” she continues: “air raids have cut the earth up for five consecutive nights and now erupt numerous times during the day. We, amid such threats of the all-mighty powers, are still enduring and fulfilling our responsibilities. I am still writing, and teaching, grading students’ papers, bearing the unbearable death of my dearest younger sister; I am writing . . . just to be a witness to the unyielding and the indomitable, lying in the floating blood.”176 As if echoing her, Bai Wei wrote in 1933: “Is it the bell of a tocsin to arouse the ghost to come on stage, or a human-fleshed voice gracefully calling me? I wake
up and gaze at these pearl-like words in print and bodies on stage, which seem to be the drops and stains of my own blood, left among flowers and plants." More drops, pools, and rivers of blood, as astonishing sights of the stirring and rising human ruins, were still to come, in the most brutal war in modern Chinese or, in effect, world history.
5 War, Death, and the Art of Existence
Mobile Women in the 1940s

How many hearts and how many brains one must have, just so to be alive in China, to be alive as an ordinary Chinese, to bear the cross of the times!

Wang Ying, Tokyo, 1934

Solemn and stirring, multilayers of the earth are moving along the north bank, reaching into the far distance and turning silvery. The most singular feature of the Yellow River is that it is a vast flow of the many layered yellow soil rather than watery current.

Xiao Hong, Hankou, 1938

On September 18, 1931, Japanese military forces launched an attack in Northeast China and occupied three provinces of the region, soon afterwards announcing there the formation of the Japanese controlled state of Manzhouguo. On January 28, 1932, Japan's air raids caused havoc in the city of Shanghai. From January 1, 1933 to May 11, 1933, Japan's military took the major gates of the Great Wall and controlled the Eastern portions of Hebei Province. From May 29, 1935 on, five provinces of North China were increasingly endangered. On July 7, 1937, the Japanese military launched its attack at the Marco Polo Bridge and quickly moved to occupy Beiping on July 29, Tianjin on July 30, and the Chinese sections of Shanghai on August 13, while isolating its Western concessions. On November 11, Shanghai fell; on December 13, the Chinese capital Nanjing fell. Japan inexorably expanded its attack on China throughout the 1930s, occupying large areas of the country. The Kuomindang government fled Nanjing to the far Southwest. Its capital, left in the hands of the Japanese military, was turned into a city of death in what has been called “the Nanjing massacre.”

Meanwhile, the Chinese political forces underwent rapid reorganization, setting resistance movement in motion. On December 12, 1936, the Xi’an Incident marked a turning point when Nationalist military generals in Northeast China held Jiang Jieshi, the commander-in-chief of the Nanjing government, under house arrest, requesting Jiang to stop his military campaign against the Chinese Communist forces and begin instead a national mobilization of resistance.
against the Japanese invasion. On February 2, 1937, the Central Committee of the Communist Party telegraphed the Nationalist Party its proposals for coalition. On September 22, 1937, the National United Front between the two major political parties was formally established.4

Amid bombed lands, torn institutions, and massive numbers of deaths, lives continued through printed words and daily deeds, materializing “a rich yet obscure message”5 involving ontological implications about what constitutes a modern Chinese and modern Chinese woman, caught up in a world history of extreme violence.

**Xiao Hong: Mobile Violence, Mobile Kinships**

Appearing on center stage of the Shanghai literary circles in 1935, Xiao Hong, then twenty-four years old, established her status in modern Chinese cultural history as “a leading writer of resistance” against Japan’s colonial invasion with her novella *The Field of Life and Death* (*Shengsi chang*).6 Her first piece of writing published under the pen name Qiao Yin, though, already intimates so many layers that invite a revisit of the signification of her writing and her life, as much as the meanings of the Resistance itself beyond the usual rubrics of a nationalist fight. Titled “Abandoned Child” (“Qier,” 1933), the piece tells the story of a young woman caught in natural and human-made disasters. Pregnant and abandoned by her traditionally betrothed fiancé, she finds herself stranded in a hotel of a collapsing city in the midst of a flood. The hotel owner persecutes her on account of debts left by her former husband-to-be and has settled a deal to sell her to a brothel. Accepting the helping hand of a young man with whom she is newly acquainted, the woman escapes the hotel. The young man stays with her while she struggles through till the birth. Afterwards she gives the baby up for adoption.7 The story is often cited by historians for its autobiographical value, as the young woman’s situation is very much like the one that Xiao Hong herself once endured, and the young man whom the woman encounters in her predicament is very much like the man who later became Xiao Hong’s common-law husband and a major writer, Xiao Jün.8

Zhang Naiyin, later to become Xiao Hong, was born in June 1911 to a minor landed gentry family in Northeast China. As a student at the First Municipal Middle School for Girls in Harbin,9 the largest city of the Northeast, Naiyin was socially active and involved in the anti-Japanese movement.10 When, in 1930, her father decided to take her out of school and arranged for her to be married to the son of a local warlord, Naiyin fled. Having moved in with a young intellectual she had met earlier in Harbin, she went with him to Beijing only to find that he was already married.11 Pressured and seduced by her fiancé who had followed her, she returned with him to Harbin, soon finding herself alone, penniless, and pregnant. Her husband-to-be had vanished and the city was halfway submerged under the historic 1931 floodwaters that overflowed when the banks of Songhua River north of the city were breached. Isolated in a small hotel where the owner was planning to sell her to a brothel, she wrote to *Arts and Literature* (*Wenyì*), a
weekly magazine of the city’s newspaper *International Post (Guoji xiebao)*, telling her story. Shu Qin, a literary young man who was a member of the CCP underground, went to find her by swimming to the hotel, and took her some food. He informed another literary young man named Liu Sanlang, who also went to see her and brought her out of the hotel, literally, through the windows of her room on the second floor barely above the surface of the floodwaters to get to a rescue boat. Naiyin and Sanlang began cohabiting in 1932 after Naiyin gave birth to a child whom she gave up for adoption. Their cohabitation was accompanied by the production of joint writings that were to shape the “first chapter” of resistance literature in the Japanese-occupied Northeast. Targeted by the Japanese secret police for their cultural activity, they fled the Japanese military to Shanghai and gained Lu Xun’s support in 1934. There they published their works under the pen names Xiao Hong (Naiyin) and Xiao Jün (Sanlang). “Liang Xiao” (“two Xiaos”), as they have been referred to from then on, thus came into being in the history of modern Chinese literature.12

Sociologically autobiographical and empirically informative concerning Zhang Naiyin’s encounter with Liu Sanlang, *Abandoned Child* is nonetheless a fictional work which, in a number of ways, prefigures Xiao Hong’s later more influential works as much as it tropes some of the features of her lifelong struggles. Significantly, it begins with an evocation of a modern world that is configured along particular temporal-spatial lines:

Water is in all directions like the sky extending into the far distance, floating without limits, one stretch after another of sunlight drifts on the surface of the water. Adults, children, bundles of things wrapped up in clothes of green colors. Soundless small boats, one after another, moving in one direction . . . Watery smells rose in the air; quiet dusk hung in the air; tossed away, a piglet is struggling here, screaming amidst the water with despair . . . [When] it gets onto a wooden board, lying there and thinking that it is saved, its eyes begin to radiate glimpses of hope just as hungry people’s eyes are gazing at it with glimpses of hope to eat it, an invisible thread links those glimpses of hopes . . . All night, the currents on the streets are singing victoriously.13

It is a time and place where humans and non-humans are barely distinguishable in their struggles to live. The floodwater, which turns an unnamed urban site into an ominous turbulence of currents, is captured as the organizing feature of such a time and place where all spheres of society collapse into a moving rupture. All forms of life struggle on the edge of unknown abyss, and the distance between life and death could disappear at any moment just like the distance between the rising water and the sinking air that close in an instant when lives are abandoned and drown. The story continues: “It has been three days since the breach of the banks of Songhua River, and all the city streets are filled with shifting boats, large and small; some folks use trunks and some use wooden boards as floating tools.”14 It is in such a time and space that she, the penniless,
pregnant, and physically exhausted woman, finds herself: “What am I going to do? No home, no friends, where could I go?” When she is carried to a rescue boat with the help of her new acquaintance, or really a stranger, through the window of her second story room barely above the surface of the water, she is further caught in the thick of turbulence, much like the piglet:

. . . the boat, passing several narrow rivers banked by buildings, begins to run toward the limitless sea of glittering waves . . . The dykes have sunk to the bottom of the river, small houses along the roads are on their way to sleep at the bottom of the water as well, people squat on the roofs . . . The rim of the small boat and the swift currents rub against each other, the boat is spinning in the waves, while the faces of all those on the boat turn colorless. She utters a shrill cry and jumps up from where she sits; she wants to leave this spinning boat and walk on land. But where is the land? (my italics).

The spinning boat could capsize and drown in the middle of the floodwater, as might the young woman and her new acquaintance caught up in their particular temporal-spatial predicament therein. Written a year and eight months after Japanese forces attacked and took control of Northeast China, such a life and death predicament as rendered in fiction is no mere product of an imagination speculating about the human condition in the abstract, but the evocation of an actual state of life in the nightmare of a turbulent history. The economy of China’s northeast region, including both urban and rural areas, was in total crisis, while social institutions and moral fabrics, repressive and oppressive when they operated, were now barely maintainable even as the façade of a minimal stability necessary for daily life to continue. The novella ends with the two young friends in utter poverty stepping into “the human jungle” amid “large tracts of wasteland of streets” where they could, like the small boat spinning in the flood, capsize and vanish at any moment, while their connection made in a random encounter is the only sustaining source of their existence. The simple and supple narrative that renders a life and death crisis with graphic precision and an imperturbable calm, a signature of Xiao Hong’s writings, is already palpable.

The at once random and intimate link between the stranger and the young woman in the story had no adequate name in traditional or modern institutions of gender relations and books of kinship. Chivalry, “saving the lady in distress,” has been long associated by literary critics and historians with the young man’s action in the story as with Xiao Jün’s deeds to “save” Xiao Hong in life. Yet chivalry requires certain conditions that the young man does not have; he is not equipped for battles at all as man-at-arms, however gallant he might appear to be. He is in effect in the grips of utter poverty and unfree from the pull of despair, for he could be sunk to the bottom of the floodwaters as many others. “There is only one person I know, a new acquaintance,” as the young woman reflects, “and he does not have a home either!” (my italics). However strong Xiao Jün may have considered himself to be in his relationship with “the weaker” Xiao
Hong in life, he was not entirely incognizant of Xiao Hong’s intimate understanding of the cruelty that life offered him, that is to say of his own vulnerability. Unlike Xiao Jün’s many narrations of his love for Xiao Hong that are phrased with expressive terms about the “passions of a strong man,” Xiao Hong’s feelings appear posited on this one poignant line in her first publication. It reveals that Xiao Jün’s similarly homeless state of being is at the core of his concealed pain and agony. Xiao Jün’s otherwise chivalrous counterpart in Xiao Hong’s story, more suggestively, cannot escape the clouds hung over those who gaze in paralysis at their looming doom. In key moments, he is indistinguishable from the crowds on a rescue boat as “the rim of the small boat and the swift currents rub against each other, [and] the boat is spinning in the waves, [while] the faces of all those on the boat turn utterly colorless” (my italics). It was a time and place where an undeterminable range of living beings from the tossed-away piglet to the abandoned infant and everything in between may well be at any moment drowned. A world war was spreading its deadly floodwater, claiming everything in its way including, in its Asian theater, the Chinese land and its inhabitants as part of the necessary “weak species.” The category of “the weak,” as discussed in the Introduction, is inherently gendered, and is one of the key categories of modern times that grew painfully on the minds and in the psyche of those compelled to “become modern” under the conditions of extreme violence. Xiao Hong, from the beginning of her writing life, offered her imaginative landscape as a site of mobile kinship and homeplace to this indeterminate range of the homeless “weak ones.” They include all those whose struggles for existence are intensified in the moment of their real or possible annihilation regardless of their actual sex, much like the land that appears and disappears amid floodwater as the precarious yet tangible link among those in their life and death struggles.

Such features underlie the bulk of Xiao Hong’s writings including her best-known novella *The Field of Life and Death* (*Shengsi chang*, 1935), where the gendered predicament of a constantly shifting and expanding spectrum of “the weak” is first and foremost figured and troped with the rural females in their everyday battle to live with the shadow of death at their heels. When they give birth, they also visit death. When they die, their life seems to disclose its real content. The narrative is graphic. The chapter titled “Days of Punishment” delineates how the elder sister of Aunty Five, “squirmed on the bed, naked, like a fish... she was in so much pain that her face turned first ashen and then yellow.” The newborn dies instantly while the woman, “like a collapsed, sick horse, lay in her own blood, soaking it up with her body.” In another chapter titled “The Desolate Hills,” the beautiful Yüeying is turned by poverty and her husband’s cruelty into a “human shape composed of nothing but threads.” The daughters of those women fare little better. Mother Wang’s child Little Spring dies at age three, falling from a haystack right on the top of a rake that is lying on the ground. When Mother Wang picks her up, “Her little hand was trembling and blood was trickling from her nostrils and her mouth. It was as if her throat had been cut.” The daughter of Golden Bough soon joins her on a snowy
winter day: Little Golden Bough is grabbed and thrown to the ground by her raging father who is driven by poverty and desperation into madness. Evoking the raked body of Little Spring, Little Golden Bough has her tiny neck broken as her blood oozes from her mouth and nostrils. Mother Wang, the leading mind and will of those women, often rubs shoulders with death. Learning that the police had killed her son because he was driven by starvation to “steal food,” Mother Wang takes poison in her backyard: “Her stomach and chest suddenly expanded, like the bladder of a fish; her eyes grew round as if they were about to emit sparks; her black lips moved as though she were speaking, but no sound came out, and blood spurted from her mouth, . . . [drenching] everything it touched.”

The blood of mutilated humanity here marks the gender of rural China as a land of suffering. Mother Wang and her Little Spring, Little Golden Bough, the elder sister of Aunty Five, and Yüeying, to name a few, emerge as a female-fleshed constellation of daily life ruptured by the routinized violence of rural poverty. Yet it is around such a gender-specific land of mutilated bodies that a certain kinship of caring gathers, with implications entirely distinct from that of the Confucian familial codes that has produced an ontologized order of social classification and relations. Yüeying dies; around her death gather Mother Wang and Sister Five who come and wash her body as they do for newly born and blood-wet babies; the ending of a ruined life, just as her once fresh beginning, is washed clean with “cool water” by female hands that are not clan-confined. When poisoned Mother Wang is deemed dead, the village women put her body into a coffin at the door and rally with their public weeping: “Women sat crying beside the coffin. . . . They were weeping for their children, their husbands, for their own inexplicable hard fate.”

As discussed earlier, such a particular female act of public grief has the power to shake heaven and earth in Chinese mythology and folk literature, to alter destiny. Amid the mobilization of such female-specific kinship that defies the male-centered codes of clan orders, the unbelievable happens: Mother Wang comes to as if from the other end of death as an ultimate embodiment of life to re-engage the earth. She enunciates from the coffin: “I want a drink of water.”

Scenes of human rupture are thus also the scenes of specific sisterhood as a particular kind of human kinship, varying, mobilizing, and always in the making. In “The Death of Aunty Wang” (“Wang asao zhisi,” 1933), a short story published right after “Abandoned Child,” the protagonist is a little girl named Little Ring whose father died of hard labor for a certain landlord Zhang before she was born. When she turns five years old, her mother dies after being raped by the eldest son of the landlord:

Little Ring, five years old, began to live the life of a vagrant. She moved from her poor paternal aunt’s hut to her poorer maternal aunt’s hut and, because both aunts had no food to feed her, she ended up spending a year at landlord Zhang’s compound. Zhu Sanye, the head laborer there, felt ill to see Little Ring being tyrannized day in and day out. When Aunty Wang,
who was also Zhang’s farmhand, went to the compound to receive her share of grain, Little Ring was just being beaten up by the Zhang children, with her nose broken and blood smeared all over her little face. Aunty Wang dropped her bag in the middle of the courtyard, walked up to Little Ring, and began to wipe away her tears and blood. Little Ring was weeping, and Aunty Wang was also weeping. Zhu Sanye took the responsibility of letting the girl go. From that day on, she called Aunty Wang “mama.” That day, Little Ring followed Aunty Wang to her hut, her little hand holding a corner of Aunty Wang’s clothes so tight (my italics).

Aunty Wang and Little Ring have no biological connection; neither do they belong to any clan with the same family name. Yet they become “mama” (mother) and “nüer” (daughter) while shaping up each other’s form and meaning of existence in life; they become kin to one another. What brings them into an encounter and thereby forms their kinship is wandering Little Ring’s broken nose and blood-smeared face. Aunty Wang is actually pregnant with a baby, but her husband had died three months before, burned to death in a fire set by landlord Zhang’s men for he had the nerve to be angry with Zhang. Does Aunty Wang feel her unborn baby stir inside of her when she sees Little Ring’s torn up life? “Little Ring was weeping, and Aunty Wang was also weeping.” Little Ring finds her mama as Aunty Wang finds her nüer in such weeping. Mama though does not get to deliver another fatherless baby: She is kicked on her belly by landlord Zhang and dies of premature birth, as does the baby. When villagers are burying mama in the woods west to the village, nüer Little Ring is asleep at the roots of a tree:

Moonlight floated down through the trees to land on her face in small, broken bits. Her two hands were put together between her knees, and her head hung over her hands, her little pigtails moved slightly in the wind. She was a born little vagrant.

When she is woken by the villagers and realized that she has to go on without her mama, she falls onto the ground in front of her mama’s grave under the moonlight, tumbling and crying: “Mama, please go with me, let’s go home, mama . . .” But of course there is no home to go to, Mama’s run down hut will soon be taken back by the landlord. The question of the young woman in “Abandoned Child” returns to haunt here, with an evocative variation: “She wanted to walk on land, but where was the land?” The young woman and her newly acquainted friend there respond to the question by linking their lives together and walking through the floodwater of modern violence. They turn kin to each other while they “[begin] to walk on the wastelands like a pair of tenacious specters,” so the story ends. “The Death of Aunty Wang” issues an echo, resonating with this pair of tenacious specters in Little Ring, the born vagrant whose mama leaves her a memory of kinship both alternative to and foreclosed by the established clan system and familial structure of rural China.

Those female-specific kinships are not female-confined; for mutilated humanity where such kinships form their contents and set their workings in
motion, in Japanese-occupied Northeast China as in Xiao Hong’s literary renditions, are not female-exclusive. True, the male farmhands, caught up in a bankrupt economy and the increasing cruelty of the landed gentry under Japan’s colonial attacks, are part of the force fields that author the broken lives of the females. The scenes where the man, in fear, disgust, and fury, throws things at his wife when she suffers through a stillbirth, and where Yüeying’s husband curses her to death are only two instances. Yet those poverty-stricken male villagers also join the ranks of the women when their bodies are torn apart by unrelenting hard labor and increasing starvation and soon, like the land they till, they are openly ravished by Japanese gunfire. Chapter Eleven of *The Field of Life and Death* begins when on “one snowy day, a [Japanese] flag never before seen by the villagers was raised and began to flutter under the open sky. Silence reigned over the village” and was soon broken by modern sounds:

The motorcars whizzed across grassy fields, creating clouds of dust, after which scraps of red and green paper fell like scattered seeds. The scraps of paper covered the roofs of nearby thatched huts, they covered the branches of the trees by the wayside, and they whirled and whistled in the wind. From the city more motorcars traveled in their wake. Arrogant Japanese, Koreans, and even Chinese were standing in the cars, and as the wheels flashed by, the flags the men were holding in their hands made a flapping sound. . . . The flag-waving people with their obsequious smiles vanished down the road. And the pamphlets proclaiming the ‘Kingly Order’ fluttered over to the slope and down to the riverbank.

The force fields that precipitated North China’s rural economic bankruptcy now directly surface with high-speed industrial mobility, leaving the broken land in its wake, where propaganda bullets are substituted for seeds of grains, vegetables, and other produces. The “boundless fields where the short seedlings were a light green” are run over by such motions and turned overnight into a glaring scene of gendered violence. The bodies of the land and its inhabitants are seized as objects for the gratification of a modern militaristic apparatus of a Japanese brand. Mother Wang urges Golden Bough to run away to Harbin or run anywhere really, since “the Japs in the village are slitting open the bellies of pregnant women to counteract the Red Gun Society [that are fighting them].” Driven into madness by the scattering pieces of female bodies and fetuses, a man kills two Japanese soldiers and hangs their heads on the tree at the village entrance. Taking this act as evidence of the “sick [nature of] the Chinese barbarians,” the conquerors swiftly turn the village into a hill of common burial-mounds. In the chapter “Do you Want to Be Exterminated?,” Zhao San, Mother Wang’s husband wanders through the burned down woods and reaches its edge:

Spread out before him were small thatched isolated houses, some left only with sections of walls standing in the sun, and some with the roofs carried off by bombs, while the main parts of the houses remained intact. Zhao San
puffed out his chest and inhaled the fresh air of the fields. Not wanting to leave, he paused at the edge of a barren field where wheat had once grown. But after a while he grew morose as he recalled his own wheat field, which was destroyed by gunfire. Under the Japanese occupation, it would never be re-cultivated. He carried the sadness of the wheat field with him as he passed by a melon patch. The melon grower was absent from the patch, which was now overgrown with weeds, but the little hut where the keeper kept watch was still there. . . . It was such a desolate wilderness that even the wild dogs stayed away. . . . He continued on until the western sky glowed with color and he found himself, with a heavy heart and misty eyes, in front of the graves of his youthful companions. Having brought no wine with which to pay his respects to the dead, he just sat silently before his friends. This Zhao San, who now lived in an occupied country, missed his brave dead comrades.43

The eliminated here include male and female Chinese peasants, as well as their lands, harvests and animals, amounting to a constellation that reveals such violence whose legitimation can only be found in the inherent “uselessness” of the eliminated as “the sickly” that stand in the way of the ascending “strong” and their “modernizing” drives. When Zhao San sits before a burial-mound as part and parcel of this constellation, his “dead comrades” and other fragments of shattered lives around him double his forlorn shape. This conjures up the village women’s struggling bodies soaking up blood as the defining figure of the Chinese peasantry in a time and place where life and death went hand in hand amid the accelerating motions of acquisitive and indeed predatory modernity. In the light of such a figuration of a female-marked but not female-confined mutilated world, the “oath-taking scene” rises as an inherent and compelled extension of the once female-specific rallies mobilized around brutalized female bodies:

[The farmhand] Li Qingshan stood tall and erect in front of the table. “Brothers, what day is today? . . . Today is the day we dare to die . . . It is decided . . . Even if all our heads swing from the tops of the trees throughout the village, we shall not flinch, right? Isn’t that right, brothers?”

Response came first from the widows. “Yes, even if we are cut into a million pieces!”

The shrill, piercing voices stabbed painfully like an awl at the heart of everyone present. For a brief moment, intense sorrow swept through the crowd of bowed heads. The blue sky seemed about to fall . . . . The concentrated, indiffusible grief caused even the trees to bow down. Standing before the red candles, Zhao San knocked hard on the table twice. In unison, the crowd directed their supplications and tears toward the blue sky. The whole crowd fell to weeping and wailing.44

The villagers were pledging to resist the Japanese aggression and occupation. It is decisive that the widows responded to or in effect cried out the call to arms
first, then “the whole crowd fell to weeping and wailing.” “Weeping” and “wailing” that shake the heaven and earth, the specific female genre of public action in Chinese sociocultural tradition, is hereby enacted across the boundaries between male and female, young and old, precipitating a scene of kinship that exceeds the order of familial clans and kin formations as they had operated for centuries. Opening up to all who would join as participants, such “weeping” and “wailing” motivate and concentrate their reciprocal rhythms into movements of female-levered revolutionary potential. The significance of such mobilization for resistance across the gender lines appears most compelling in the moment when the Japanese military forces decimate the resistance movement. When the men fighting with sickles and axes are mowed down with machine guns and cannon fire, the village women end their children’s lives first and then their own. In the aftermath of the decimated resistance movement:

Golden Bough wanted to become a nun.

The red brick nunnery was on the other side of the hill. She tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Flocks of sparrows were pecking in the center of the courtyard; the stone steps were over-grown with green moss. She questioned a woman next door, who told her [that] “after the occupation the nun disappeared . . .”

Where should Golden Bough go? The temple on which she had set her heart had long been abandoned.

The question of “Abandoned Child” returns, “I want to walk on the land, but where is the land?” Golden Bough finds herself virtually erased on a re-arranged land of the dead. The strangled old granny and her toddler granddaughter “hanging from a roof beam and swinging high like two skinny fish;” the mute Mother Wang passing amid the ruins as if a passel of disquiet bones; the frozen gaze of a pregnant woman terrified of being raped by soldiers; the remaining village folk who are sent by deaths around them into “an epidemic of lost minds.” Without the movement of resistance, death materializes its reign. The movement of resistance then not only links the villagers beyond the ancient book of kin-defined relations; it is life-giving kinship itself in the making, where an ontological impetus of humanity seems to find and mark its matrix and sources.

In a 1938 short story titled “Full moon over the Fen River” (“Fenhe de yuanyue”), such a kinship and its calling appear in the shape of an elderly and blind woman. When her son died in the war of resistance, her daughter-in-law also disappeared, leaving a small boy named Xiao Yu in her care. Losing her mind and yet existing as a bundle of indestructible bones, the old woman plants her body on the bank of the Fen River, which was the key area of the region of so-called seesaw battles, the region which frequently changed hands in the war between the resistance forces and the Japanese occupation army. In the light of the full moon, she seems to merge with the earth of the bank holding up the silently moving river leading to the Yellow River, the cradle of China:
The Fen River was always so lonesome, murmuring and flowing, under the high city walls, with a stretch of sandy beach in its middle. . . . Along the suspension bridge made of firewood over the river, there were footprints in the sandy beach left by the soldiers who marched during the day. The sky was vast and far, so high, unreachable, behind the full moon and hung over the city walls.

Xiao Yü’s Grandma sat at the bank of the river, her knees bent, as if she was about to talk about her son again. Then she heard dogs’ barking, and applause. She did not understand what applause was and could not recognize the sound it produced; she thought it was the deafening noise made by the frogs.

A theater troupe of resistance movement began to perform in the village.

Xiao Yü’s Grandma was still sitting at the bank of the Fen River, the full moon anchoring her thickening shadow on the earth.52

The mad Grandma had no place to go; she had lost all including her mind. Merging with the earth that was ravaged by violent forces, her placelessness connotes the footprints of resistance forces and the theater troupes working to rally all sorts of ravaged lives into movements, thereby giving a body to such resistance movements in the making as female-leveraged mobilization of life-giving kinships.

One encounters such connotations and embodiments in variously dispossessed lives in Xiao Hong’s early and later works. “An Old Mute” ("Y a laoren,” 1933) depicts how a mute grandpa lost the source of his minimum supply of food – his granddaughter – to a whipping by her forewoman at a Japanese factory, while he was caught in a fire in a beggars’ shelter: “As his nebulous state of mind shifted, a smoking spark fell from his pipe and set his heavy and tangled beard on fire. His granddaughter had died, other beggars were not in, he was mute, deaf, ill; the paper stuck on the broken window could not cry for help, and the old man was rolling in fire, his long beard were shaking in the smoke, flowing white.”53 “Seeing Kites,” (“Kan fengzhen,” 1933) tells of an old man whose son has disappeared. One day, leaning on a walking stick, he is looking at the kites that children are flying over the fields. As hope to see his son again rises in him like the kites in the sky, he hears the news that his son has been imprisoned for organizing peasants and laborers to “do something.”54 “Bridge” (“Qiao,” 1936) is about a mother who is hired by her master’s family as a wet nurse on the west side of a river and leaves her own little boy in her hut on the east side of the river. Whenever she gathers some leftover food, she packs it tightly and throws it over the river for her boy. “There should be a bridge in your fate, my child” she thinks, when the leftovers land on the east side. One day, a bridge is built. The hungry boy now runs to the west side over the bridge whenever he can escape his father’s constraining hands, for “ma has food.” One day, while running, the boy falls from the bridge and drowns.55 A multitude of the “weaker species” were caught up in economic brutality and social disintegration amidst colonial occupation, as Xiao Hong intimates in another early story, about a homeless dog,
“this is everyday routine, frozen to death, starved to death, beaten to death, death in the grips of dark forces, this is everyday” (“Xiao heigou,” 1933). “Qingchen de malushang,” (“On the streets in early morning” 1933) opens with a scene wherein “a human world that slept on the streets” in the severe winter of 1933 wakes in the early morning “as if from death” to the sounds made by children selling tobacco. Along the pavements and among others like him, Old Wang, with one arm left, sets up his place by the sewer to sell soybean juice. “A world of beggars emerged; with no shanks, they walked on both their hands and thighs as multi-feet men” (duojiao de ren). A car was speeding toward a multi-feet man. In the wake of the car and in the middle of the street, there was his dirty hat, run over and “broken like a smashed watermelon.” Old Wang uses his only arm and hand to retrieve the hat. The multi-feet man, holding his broken hat, explains to Old Wang that “it would be just fine if it was stitched up a little”; “He still wanted to live, so he was living by crawling on the streets; if he wanted to die, he would die in unknown holes.” This is one of the better days for the “human village of the streets.” “Little Six” (“Xiao liu,” 1936) follows the life of a girl toddler named Little Six. Working from dawn to night but still unable to pay their rent, her family is driven to “move” constantly from one corner to another in a large city. The day dawns again, they “had to move again. But where could they move? To the ocean? [Little Six’s mother] seemed crazed; her eyes were shot with red. . . . She took up her little girl and kept smashing and smashing her own body and the girl at the stone walls, howling; she was trying to jump into the ocean.” In the novel Tales of Hulan River (Hulan he zhuan, 1940), a range of women, men, and children are wanderers on earth. Second Uncle You’s only possessions consist of his bedroll set that, if slightly touched, would unravel and come apart “like a living map of China with its provinces one after another cut up and separated by rival powers.”

All those placeless bodies or unraveled lives seem to gather in “A child’s speech” (“Haizi de jiangyan,” 1940), among many other short stories, where one encounters Little Wang Gen, a boy whose home has been occupied by the Japanese army and who has lost all his biological kin. Joining the Frontline Service Corps, he manages his first public speech for resistance at a meeting. He is so small, and the sight of him in a large military uniform makes the audience laugh at every word he attempts to utter. Then the crowd gradually quiets down as he proceeds in disjointed sentences: “People’s breathing in the large hall was barely audible. The lit candles on every table were enlivened. Some bit their lips; some bit their nails; some turned their eyes away and, across the dense row of heads, looked at distant things outside the windows. The large groups standing at the back of the hall, all in gray clothes, were bulky, heavy, rough, like figures in woodcuts, they were another kind. Their eyes were deep and silent, like the sky reflected on the oceans, bottomless, unfathomable. Outside the windows stood the still more sober and silent moon. . . . In the spring of 1938, the moon was moving over a certain city in the land of Shanxi Province, just like in every spring of every year. Yet tonight, the moon lived to be a great listener of a small child . . . who had to become one of the real soldiers.” Such was how those “sickly Chinese” turned out to be in
Xiao Hong’s writing in the spring of 1938. Old or young and women or men caught up in the midst of disintegration and liquidation of their former kindred world, they had to turn and were turning into moving and motivating sites where broken bodies and social relations were remade into an empowering human kinship that were to unleash a latent lava of human transformation.

Lu Xun once wrote that, when a person is brutalized by violence and is trying to escape such violence following close on her heels, she is bound to lose some belongings on the way such as parts of her body, “things or blood, pieces or collections of her creative writing.” Such indeed seems the case not only for the lives occurring in Xiao Hong’s literary landscape but also, significantly, for her own life in the actual world. She began her writing as a homeless female (when she wrote to Arts and Literature for help). From the moment she started publishing as a writer, she had been fleeing from one place to another, often only weeks or miles beyond the reach of the Japanese military operations. Around the pains of such a life of flight, she left pieces of writing on the way “wet with blood,” where gathered and engendered a certain kinship whose reverberations collapse the hierarchy of Chinese traditional kin-order and invalidate the modern science of Western bioethnic politics. From the beginning of her cohabitation with Xiao Jün, which was also the beginning of her literary writing, she found herself connected with a group of young writers and artists in Harbin involved in the anti-Japanese resistance, led by underground CCP members such as Shu Qín. Shu Qín’s personal support resulted in the publication of her – and Xiao Jün’s – first collection of writings; other friends who were arrested by the Japanese occupation forces fueled their writings with urgent poignancy. When it became clear that she and Xiao Jün were also in danger as their work gained notice, she fled Harbin with Xiao Jün and arrived in the city of Qingdao on Shandong Peninsula in the summer of 1934, where Shu Qín, who had arrived there earlier, again supported them and other members of the CCP underground in the resistance. Both completed some of their most important works in the few months they spent there. In August, Shu Qín was arrested by the KMT police, along with all the CCP underground members working in factories, schools, and the navy for the resistance movement in Qingdao. When it became clear that Qingdao was about to be attacked by the Japanese military, the young couple fled again, this time for Shanghai, where they contacted and met Lu Xun and, through him, the Shanghai circle of artists, writers, and publishers in the resistance. When Xiao Jün’s affair with another woman resulted in their separation in July 1936, the woman was no longer her former self whom the “chivalrous Liu Sanlang saved:” Zhang Naiyin had developed into the most noted woman writer of the late 1930s and 1940s, Xiao Hong. Having published a range of works including, most significantly, The Field of Life and Death over the course of only two years, she had found herself among an intensely motivating human matrix and was thereby transformed into a vital presence in the formation of modern Chinese literary culture of the twentieth century.

Xiao Hong’s literary writing and the course of her life were thus crisscrossing and mutually sustaining, not as a solitary pursuit of a nebulously defined “female
self” but as an integral part of a constantly brutalized, dispossessed, fragmented humanity that was also constantly re-gathering her resilience through varying and unprecedented kinships in the making. Such kinships, made by mobile bodies amid spreading violence, are life and death struggles of the “weaker sex”-cum-“weak species” to alter their “destinies” putatively assigned by the teleos of modern history. After a short stay in Japan in 1936, Xiao Hong returned to Shanghai in 1937 and found herself again having to move from one place to another, to Wuhan and then, Shaanxi, and back to Wuhan, all in the course of a year, and always under Japanese air bombardment. In September 1938 when Wuhan was about to fall to the Japanese, she found herself pregnant with Xiao Jun’s child. She went to Chongqing, stayed there for a year and half, and gave birth to a dead infant. She began to cohabit with her second common-law husband, then a minor literary writer. As Chongqing soon became the target of Japanese air raid also, the couple relocated to Hong Kong in 1940. Xiao Hong entered the final two years of her life. As she arrived at the center stage of modern Chinese culture, so she would leave it: a ruptured female body in a flood of worldwide violence. When Hong Kong was attacked at the end of 1941, her body seemed also precipitated into an ultimate crisis. The American-run St. Mary Hospital in Hong Kong misdiagnosed her condition, and their treatment caused her physical collapse. She was then sent to Chinese-run Yanghe Hospital and misdiagnosed again, this time as having throat cancer. Throat surgery went so wrong that friends took her to St. Mary Hospital for a second time. The doctors there decided that she did not have throat cancer but trachea problems, and performed a tracheotomy on her only to find that they were wrong again. Three days later, Hong Kong fell to the Japanese. St. Mary Hospital was occupied by the Japanese military and she was driven out and sent to the American St. Stevenson Girls’ School where the Red Cross had set up a shelter. She died the following morning, with her throat and trachea still bleeding. A multiply ruptured body, Xiao Hong in her death uncannily evokes the figures of raked Little Golden Bough and smashed Little Spring in her best-known novella, as much as the other broken lives that appear in her writings from her first fiction to her last novel, stirring up unyielding questions: “What is this existence about? Why must there be sights of such ruins and nights of such desolation?” “She wanted to leave the small boat tossed on violent flood waves and walk on land, but where was the land?”

Answers seem to lie in her lifelong yearning for an alternative land where life could continue, and in her lifelong evocations of mobile scenes of life-giving kinship, at once random and defining, in writing and in living. While her second common-law husband was often not with her when she underwent multiple mal-surgeries, Cao Jinhua, a well-known literary figure, helped her to find a hotel in which to stay and Liu Yazi, a senior cultural leader, came to visit her, literally amid bombs and fires and across the lines of life and death. Luo Binji, then a young leftwing literary man, had met Xiao Hong in 1937 in Shanghai briefly and encountered the woman writer again in 1941 in Hong Kong. He stayed with her to the end of her life. “We were as if brother and sister,” he wrote of his encounter with Xiao Hong. Xiao Hong’s last novella, “A Tale of Red Glass”
Figure 5.1 Xiao Hong, 1940 in Hong Kong
Hong poli de gushi,” 1942), was an oral account set down from memory as a commemoration by Luo Binji, a year after Xiao Hong’s death: “That night when she was telling me the story, the cannon-fight across the sea between the English and Japanese armies was raging on. And yet the storyteller was in a world of her own, and the listener also felt as if he were outside of the flames of war. It was a pity that, before it was completely told, the nearby building was hit by six bombs, the thundering sound shook the place as if a body was broken and its bones split, while waves of the smell of sulphur were everywhere in the air.”77 Such friendship, utterly random and most profoundly intimate, was indeed no less than a resilient kinship in and as the life-death struggle of those living in their otherwise unalterable doom. The story is about a Mother Wang whose daughter repeats her life as the widow of a living man, since both of their husbands have to work as migrant laborers. The agony of such a life is crystallized when Mother Wang sees in her granddaughter’s hand a kaleidoscope containing fragments of red glass and remembers how she herself also grew up with such a tube that produces worlds of enchanting colors out of broken pieces of glass, as did her daughter. “And now it is the third generation. Mother Wang feels as if the little girl still cannot run away from something like a fate – marries a man but husband vanishes, all alone all life . . .”78 For the hundreds of millions across China since modern times descended among their midst, such is the case of their real life. A century long crisis featuring their gendered, class-marked, bioethnically naturalized homelessness – “something like a fate,” a breaking up of the old order without alternative viable ways of material living and psychic belonging. It is indicative that the story was never finished, its incompleteness a stirring trope of Xiao Hong’s unyielding yearning. The ending of the story cannot be known. What can be and is known is the fact that Xiao Hong never planned to stop her writing there. She was struggling to go on living by writing even when her “body was being broken” in an actual sense, like the building next to her shelter hit by six Japanese bombs. Similarly indicative, such writing was engendering yet another live scene of kinship in an imaginative co-authoring across genders, a scene of actual kinship that affords a literary landscape for the homeless to inhabit even in the middle of piling up debris.

It is in the light of the above discussed that I conclude this section by a brief revisit of Xiao Hong’s final major work, the novel of Tales of Hulan River (Hulan he zhuan, 1940).79 Xiao Hong began to draft it in Wuhan in 1937 and finished it in Hong Kong in 1940, on the eve of Japan’s attacks on the island. Such a temporal duration and spatial distance with which the novel is produced register an immense scope of social displacement, physical destruction, and psychic rupture, not only in terms of the author’s world of imagination but also the passages of her actual life. The novel, in this sense, appears to be a literary and material witness to the magnitude of a life journey attempting to overcome the immense destructiveness involved therein. It speaks of Xiao Hong’s efforts to keep the life of a land and its inhabitants including her own in the public view when they were in the midst of being bombed, ravaged, raped, and massacred. Evoking a land prior to and against its colonial occupation, Hulan River as a “series of ethno-
graphic paintings and a series of haunting folk songs” amounts to something more than a talented woman’s autobiographical gesture of nostalgia for what she refused earlier, namely, an ancient regime and its cornerstone the male centered hierarchy of the kin-defined family, after her long sufferings and at the end of her short life. It is also a monument to an unbreakable yearning for life that must never be given up and for land that must never be lost. It is indicative that, of seven chapters that bring about variations on invariably broken lives, Hulan River begins and ends with two contrasting scenes of the land. The opening scene depicts how, “after the harsh winter has sealed up the land, the earth’s crust begins to crack and split. From south to north, from east to west; from a few feet to several yards in length; anywhere, anytime, the cracks run in every direction.” At the end of the novel after multiple enactments of struggling rural folk and their endings, a different scene of the land is summoned: “The butterflies, grasshoppers, and dragonflies that were in the garden may still return year after year; or perhaps the place is now deserted. Cucumbers and pumpkins may still be planted there every year; or perhaps there are no more at all. Do drops of morning dew still gather on the flower-vase stands? Does the noonday sun still send its rays down on the large sunflowers? Do the red clouds at sunset still form into the shape of a horse, only to shift a moment later into the shape of a dog?”

Resting with a final and suggestive sentence “these are things that I cannot know,” the writing itself assures that the scenes of such recurrent morning dews, sunlight and sunflowers, the red clouds at sunset and green vegetables amid butterflies, grasshoppers and dragonflies, all persist as the very fabric of an indestructible land. They always recur in the midst of the winter that “has sealed upon the land.”

Such evocations of the vital land amid deadly hours, a signature feature of Xiao Hong’s writings, are always evocations of its inhabitants leveraged in the bodies of the females. One encounters such double-bodied or inter-animated evocations throughout her works such as The Field of Life and Death: “In the vegetable plot the red tomatoes were quietly ripening. Young girls picked the bright red fruit, filling their baskets with it. Other girls were picking turnips and carrots. Golden Bough headed toward the river, while the basket that hung from her wrist swung from side to side.”

“The village was flooded with sunshine; stalks of grain swayed in the gentle breezes. Summer had returned and with it the leaves on the trees. If flowers could bloom on trees, then the trees would have been blossom-laden. . . Inside the woman was exhausted by childbirth. In the green world of the fields everyone was bathed in sweat.”

“It was morning, and the rain had stopped. In the east a long rainbow hung suspended in the air. Wet-smelling clouds passed overhead. Above the sorghum in the east the sun trailed behind the clouds, sparkling like red crystal, like a crimson dream. Off in the distance the sorghum stood somberly, looking like a small forest . . . Mother Wang, dressed in a short jacket with wide sleeves, came out onto the threshing floor. Her hair was disheveled and snarled. The morning sun was on her, and her hair looked like the tassels of the ripening corn, red and curly.” Such real and imagined land vibrates through working female figures as its defining
textures of existence, just as a laboring humanity embodies the land into a female-leveraged growing constellation of its “fresh and bright” kinships. Recurring in Xiao Hong’s works as resilient flows of life in and beyond the force fields of death, they constitute the unending movements of the earth and humanity in inter-animated dynamics. The momentum of such an inter-animation finds a trope in Xiao Hong’s glimpse of the Yellow River and its unique quality of fluid vitality: “The singular feature of the Yellow River,” she wrote in the war-torn 1938, “is that it is a vast flow of the many layered yellow soil rather than watery currents. Solemn and stirring, multilayers of the earth are moving along the north bank, reaching into the far distance and turning silvery.”88 The trope seems to also crystallize Xiao Hong’s life and her writings as inter-animating movements, through which sites of modern kinships as mobilizing matrix of the Resistance, stirring in the grips of modern bioethnic politics of violence as an ontological impetus for and of life itself.89

Wang Ying: Cross-embodiments of Transformation

Such modern kinships exceeding modern violence, for Zhang Ailing, a major woman writer in the 1940s, seem the tricks of a naïve imagination. “To make it as a human” in this modern time beyond its dictates, as she put it in 1944, involves “strenuous efforts” that lack ontological intelligibility.90 In another piece about a literary woman friend, she further wrote: “When young, I was forced to read the Bible and encountered a passage that I still remember though its meaning still remains a bit obscure. It seems to say that God’s servants receive their respectively allocated shares of money from the Almighty with which to mind their own businesses. The one who has more originally can have still more; the one who has little cannot even keep it. God commands the poorer to return the money and, in addition, punishes him.” “It feels so unfair . . . [and] life is cruel,” she concludes, for the destiny that has been fixed on the “original poorer” is unalterable, first as a necessity and then as a punishment.91 What is left for “those of us to do,” logically, is to work within whatever is originally given, each by and for him/herself, sadly of course and badly in most cases as indicated in a range of her literary figures. Hence she once cited a poem in the Chinese classic The Book of Songs (Shijing) as the “most moving of all poetry” – “stranded across [the difference of] life and death, I am with you; holding your hands, I am aging with you” – just to grieve over its ontological impossibility: “As if we could control our lives.”92

Naïve as it may very well be, the imaginative impulse to alter the punishing destiny that the cruel life twice fixed on the “original poorer” and their modern version the “inherently weaker” recurs in a range of Chinese women’s works and lives throughout the twentieth century, and in the 1940s in particular. It seems that “sophistication” as an opposite of naïveté, whatever it means, does not necessarily in itself give rise to high value, literarily or otherwise, at least in those women’s writings and lives. And a naïve imagination wherewith to alter their “original” state, for the “weaker sex-cum-weaker species,” seems to require
constant invention. Wang Ying, another noted writer and one of the most prominent stage and screen women performers in the 1930s and 1940s, insisted on the workings of such imagination as needing to be bodied forth amid changing dramas of human society by activating its latent potential. Such bodying forth far exceeds the “strenuous effort” troped in the female figure whose drives to “fare well” within her “original” state of being always already indexes her human bankruptcy as in Zhang Ailing’s worldly scenarios of an ontological desolation. It also connotes, as discussed earlier, Xiao Hong’s recurrent scenes of modern kinships as indications of a different horizon, namely, the horizon of an alternative humanity.

It is noteworthy that Wang Ying’s first unfinished short story, conceived when she was eleven years old, is about an orphan girl running alone on roads in darkness, wondering how she can find someone to help her or find her some place to stay. Such a running in darkness recurs about three years later in Wang Ying’s first stage performance. She was then a student at an American-run nursing school in Changsha, Hunan Province. When the Northern Expedition Army arrived there in September 1926 and the whole city was boiling with excitement, as life and history would have it, she encountered a former teacher of hers who had become one of the leading members in the army’s cultural communication office. With the encouragement of this teacher and others, she, then named Wang Keqin, joined a students’ theater troupe and was voted by the troupe to play the leading role in one of the dramas they were producing. Titled The Maid servant (Haoshen jia de yatou, 1926) by unknown authors, the play dramatizes how a young woman from a peasant family is sold to powerful gentry household as a maidservant; how she endures daily abuse; and how one night she runs away from her misery without knowing where to go. When Wang Keqin started attempting to embody the role with her gestures, voice, expressions, and movements, she felt such a psychic resonation with the leading female of the story that it was almost violent in its intensity. So agitated was she by the acting, she was often unable to control herself and had to stop in the middle of rehearsals while she sobbed.

Something was indeed stirring in her, a young woman from a gentry-family who supposedly had nothing in common with a peasant maidservant and her misfortune. Born in 1913 in Anhui Province and named Yü Zhihua then, she spent part of her childhood in the city of Nanjing where her father worked as the deputy manager of a branch of Asia Bank and had a nightlife involving various affairs with socialites. When Zhihua’s mother, an educated woman and music teacher, died of gastric cancer in 1923, her father was said to have genuinely mourned, though he married again soon afterwards. About six months after his second marriage, he sent little Zhihua back to their home county Wuhu in Anhui and enrolled her in a school for girls run by an American Catholic convent. After four severely disciplined years there, Zhihua took the entrance examination for Wuhu Normal Women’s School and came out number one among four hundred candidates. The prospects of further education soon faded when she found herself caught in a “normal” yet, for her, harrowing social script
arranged by her father. He had made a deal with the Xüe family, one of the most powerful and wealthy families in Wuhu, committing Zhihua to the Xües as a bride-to-be or, more accurately, a child-bride in the Xüe residence. In return, the Xües agreed to sponsor his new projects involving a number of transnational financial speculations. After unsuccessful struggles to resist this arrangement, Zhihua ran away from the family and muddled through a long and complicated journey to Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, to appeal to the wife of her deceased maternal uncle, an educated woman who had founded an elementary school there. It was with the support of her widowed aunt-in-law that Yü Zhihua changed her name to Wang Keqin and enrolled in the nursing school where she encountered the Northern Expedition Army and its theater troupes.¹⁰⁰

The pain of being a child-bride and the struggles to refuse her “originally given” – “fate” – at the age of fourteen were her deeply kept secrets, as the Xüe family was still searching for her.¹⁰¹ Such secrets were brought out by and into her first acting, which served as a process where an unspeakable abreaction found its public articulation. Such articulation was multiply mediated, for the acting was not a process of natural identification. True, acquired by the Xüe family as its lowest ranking female member (the servants constituted a different category), she had to carry a heavy load of domestic duties including a large share of needlework, and to participate in daily rituals of obedience. But she was treated as a daughter from a “good family” with a proper identity and allowed to continue her education at the Wuhu Normal Women’s School.¹⁰² Her pain was precipitated rather by the impossible chasm between her cloistered existence and her growing desire to be a woman active in society, and by the fact that every small attempt she made to read, write, and think beyond the behavioral order of the Xüe family was carefully and relentlessly foiled.¹⁰³ The memory that supplied a direct source for her acting and helped her to enter the role of the peasant girl in the play was of a young maidservant named Xiao Lazi (Little Candle) in the Xüe family. The youngest of all their maidservants, Xiao Lazi was relatively close to her as both were in their teens. It was Xiao Lazi’s small body, strenuously working from dawn to night each day that haunted Wang Keqin as she acted in the play: “I wanted to tell everyone that there were really many young women like the character I played.”¹⁰⁴ At work in her resonation with the character, then, was not only her own hidden pain but also her memory of another woman and a budding consciousness about their different but related sufferings. “I read extensively at the time,” she noted later, “I devoured almost all the new publications such as New Youth (Xin qingnian), Guidance (Xiang dao), and Creation Weekly (Chuangzao yüekan), following the political debates about rural economic crisis, peasants’ movements, women’s predicaments, urban social turmoil and the national revolution, all of which charged me with a desire to imagine change. I yearned for change.”¹⁰⁵

Wang Keqin in her first acting role then brought about a new mode of social existence that I call cross-embodiment. She bodied forth her own personal pain and others’ suffering, fueled by multilayered memories, experiences, and thoughts while crossing the divide between real life and fictional story. She was and was
not the maidservant she played; was and was not her former self “the run-away child-bride” or “Xiao Lazi” in her memory; was and was not those “really existent women” evoked through her acting. Such performance as a multibodied reverberation amounts to a female-levered site where separate abreactions were dislodged from their respective repressions and brought into a living constellation – a cross-embodiment, opening up a public space where different but related pains gathered into resonating impulses not only for but also as change. This means that the audiences’ participation was integral to such cross-embodiment, as was noted by a critic at the time when she observed, “Wang Ying enacts the normally unnoticed scenes of a small life with such nuance, intensity, and momentum that she turns into a new space in the vibrancy of which a range of audiences are moved to rediscover something hidden in themselves in an interactive way” (my italics). When they re-encountered themselves in the presence of such a public acting, in other words, something residing but unseen in their “normal” existences was touched, opened, deepened, and intensified in momentums that gradually erupted. The play reached its key point where the maidservant was finally running away, chased by her master’s militia, amidst pouring rain at night. The audience was moved to practically join the performance by shouting out from where they sat or stood in the assembly hall – in seats, on stairs, or at the windowsills – to publicize and share their views to support the fugitive on stage with a mounting, interanimating impetus for change: “Run, girl, you run fast! Run for your life!” Intense impulses for life are here revealed as being inherently energies for change when they are brought into an inter-animating dynamics of bodily existences. Such dynamics, once set in motion, may very well spill over the dictates issued forth by the powers and power relations that be.

This story about the maidservant, filtered through a particular ideological lens or indicative of a political position, may or may not be “truthful” about maidservants in life. What is central to the event and to my discussion here is how the performance of the story as a process of cross-embodiment activated and altered the involved actors and audiences. Putting their bodies to work as a space where otherwise separate lives are inter-animated, Wang Keqin the actor and her audiences went through such a performance of a fictional story and came out of the process changed people in their real lives, each in their own way, of course, and to different degrees. “I could have continued my training and then my work and life as a nurse,” as the young actor herself noted later; but “my life journey was thereby altered.” Months after her first performance, the Northern Expedition and the social movements it enabled were crushed by the Nationalist military power. The White Terror staged in Changsha by warlord He Jian and his army on May 20, following Jiang Jieshi’s coup in Shanghai on April 12, turned the city into a ghostly land and Wang Keqin into a real life fugitive. A time when women were executed merely for wearing “ducktail hairstyles” (i.e. bobbed hair), as He Jian dictated, women actively participating in the social changes and upheavals were targeted with particular cruelty. On the second day of the May 20 massacres, however, Wang Keqin was still walking all over the city amid corpses and bullets to deliver messages to three revolutionaries...
as her former teacher had asked her to do, thereby saving their lives. By the
time she escaped Changsha and arrived in Wuhan, her name was on He Jian’s
list of those to be arrested immediately, while her former teacher was already
imprisoned. When Wuhan was plunged into another scene of the spreading
White Terror, Wang Keqin escaped again and, with the help of a CCP member
in the Northern Expedition, traveled southeast in disguise. After a period of
hiding in areas near Shanghai and working as an elementary school teacher, she
appeared in China’s largest semicolonial metropolis in the spring of 1929. She
was sixteen years old and renamed herself as Wang Ying.114

Wang Ying’s first but unpublished story, mentioned earlier, is titled “Qing Er in
Distress” (“Qing er luo nan ji”) and has an end that feels also like a beginning. The
little girl named Qing Er who was running in darkness on roads sees a glimpse of
lamplight from a distant hut. Finally managing to reach the hut, she sees an old
woman sitting next to an oil lamp, mending tattered clothes. Qing Er knocks
hard at the door until it opens. Did the old woman and little Qing Er become kin
and live together as granddaughter and granny hereafter – like Little Ring and
Aunty Wang in Xiao Hong’s early fiction? No one can tell since the story did not
continue. But its author, Yü Zhihua-turned-Wang Keqin seemed to continue the
story in her real life as she found herself after her long journeys living with two
women in an apartment in Shanghai. Three biologically unrelated women
became close as kin and began their lives as “three sisters” in a severely repressive
and policed metropolis.115 The repressed, as it often happens, returned to haunt
the scenes of repression through various venues including dramatic perfor-
mances. The founding of the Shanghai Society of Artistic Theater (Yishu jüshe)
in 1929 was significant for young leftwing artists who felt lost in the aftermath of
the crushed first national revolution.116 With the support of her newly found two
“elder sisters,” Wang Ying attended Fudan and Guanghua Universities and at
the same time joined the Society.117 Her theatrical debut in Shanghai is in a trans-
lated play titled Miners (Tankenfu, 1930), in which she played the daughter of a
coal-mining worker in northern Germany, dying of a black lung.118 Wang Ying’s
embodiment of this character produced a physiognomic configuration that
crossed national and cultural boundaries. Its provocative effectiveness on Chinese
theater stage and in public cultural memory can still be seen in the stage-photo,119
where the daughter (right, sitting on the bed) was both a Chinese woman and a
German character, and her bodily evocation crossed the boundaries set up by
bioethnic politics of modern power relations. Here was a cross-embodiment
again that, this time, not only brought the Chinese and the “foreign” or “Asian”
and “Caucasian” into a constellation, but also doubled the invisible body of the
real urban poor with the theatrical visibility of the actor. Its potency lies in its
working as a female-fleshed center of gravity around which a wide range of
pains, thoughts, feelings and impulses were gathered, compelling interactive
reverberations among audiences across multiple modern boundaries. Those audi-
ences included literary critics and prominent artists themselves. While Chinese
dramatists such as Tian Han, Hong Shen, and Ying Weiyün wrote about the
performance with passion, international journalists such as Agnes Smedley of the
U.S. and Ozaki Hotsumi and Yamagami Masatoshi of Japan enthusiastically reported on the production and Wang Ying’s acting in English and Japanese newspapers. Similarly noteworthy were the large audiences of varying social identities ranging from students to workers. They waited each night after performance at the back stage door and surrounded Wang Ying when she came out. They exchanged with her their thoughts about the play and issues including the urban poor, workers’ conditions, various kinds of social injustice, and women’s sufferings in China and in the world.120

The events that unfolded around the performance of All Quiet on the Western Front (Xixian wu zhanshi, 1930), produced by the Society of Artistic Theater, constituted another major case in point about the gatherings of critical energies around such cross-embodiment. Murayama Tomoyoshi scripted the play in 1930 just prior to Japan’s invasion of Northeast China, adapting the 1929 novel by German writer Erich Maria Remarque written on the eve of the ascendancy of Nazi Germany. The Chinese production featured Wang Ying as the protagonist’s sweetheart who is forced into prostitution during the war. As reviews and commentaries indicate (no stage-photos are extant), Wang Ying’s acting was once again pivotal in its success.121 As the Nanjing government then considered that “internal agitations” for resistance were “threatening” the “stability of society,” organizers of the Society could not find a theater in the city for the premiere until they secured a private Japanese-owned theater over which the Chinese government had no control. In the middle of the play’s onstage rehearsal, however, the Japanese consulate general with his armed entourage abruptly appeared, demanding its cancellation. The Society presented the legal argument that the Japanese consulate general did not have jurisdiction over the site of the theater since it was not in the Japanese concession, and the performance took place.122 Attended by a group of international journalists and receiving ovations from the mostly Chinese audience, the performance was reported in Chinese and European newspapers as “an event of international significance.”123 Wang Ying’s performance here is both a process of cross-embodiment and an occasion for the making of more cross-embodiments that exceed bioethnically posited cultural and national boundaries with critical energies. Such energies soon spilled over to the streets. A week after the performance, the Society of Artistic Theater – housed in a small building in downtown Shanghai – was raided by the Chinese military police: A hundred or so armed men seized stage props such as wooden guns, paper bullets, and army costumes as “evidences of a plotted insurrection” and arrested five artists. The Society was outlawed by the cultural police of the KMT government. In response, those young dramatists published in newspapers a protest titled “A Public Letter to Shanghai Audiences against the Illegal Arrest of Anti-War Artists.” Receiving immediate support from Chinese and international organizations and individual letters from audience members of different identities and nationalities,124 they pasted all they had received on the street walls across Shanghai, turning the city into their stage where their violently erased public presences reappeared as sites for gathering new energies precipitating critical change.125
Wang Ying’s literary writing was formally launched amid such on and off stage cross-embodiments in the battlefield of social presence and erasure. Her essay “Several dramas that cannot be shown” (“Jici yanbuchu de xi,” 1937) delineates the events that led to the outlawing of the Society of Artistic Theater, offering glimpses of what was thereby erased: “Those funds for production at the time came entirely from many people’s pocket money or the money for food they saved. Some gave up their jobs – which they needed for their basic livelihoods – to participate in the work for All Quiet on the West Front. We were all very poor and it was normal for us to go on for several days without food. Yet we were so deeply immersed in our efforts to mount the performance that we forgot the pressures of material lack. . . . When the performance was cancelled and then even the name of the Society could not exist any more, the blow and pain that we felt at the time were beyond words.” Yet words were what Wang Ying employed to register what was erased on the public stage and the pain pulsing therein, at a time when such “blow” and “pain” recurred in the struggles of those young artists, whose art and life seemed to have no place to be in a society caught up in compounded crises and deepening uncertainty. The mobilizing impetus of the cross-embodiments on stage disappeared only to appear in words in print, it seems, as its audiences were dispersed only to re-gather as readers. The inter-animating energies of such boundary-crossing impetus, in other words, were never really liquidated; they always returned in different mediums, through different venues, in different configurations. The founding of the League of Left Dramatists in 1930 was an important historical event in that it prefigured another return with a widening scope of social effects as China’s doom to become a colonized land of a sub-human or “weak” species was made immediately real in the turns of political events in the early 1930s. This began with the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in the winter of 1931 and was followed by the KMT’s tightening of its controls over “any elements” agitating for resistance for fearing the CCP’s activity and growing influence. The inter-animating energies that would alter the living conditions of those targeted by the prevailing violent forces were intensified and felt in various public arenas. Wang Ying, as a live site of and for cross-embodiments of such energies, figured prominently amidst those drastic turns of events and their consequences – this time in the medium of the silver screen and among its much wider audience.

The Chinese film industry at its inception in 1905 was commercially oriented, and based its production on the urban residents, many of whom were not socially active as were the audiences of modern Chinese theater spearheaded by spoken dramas, particularly in Shanghai. Japanese bombs ravaged the body of the city as much as they shook its residents into a different state of mind and turned to films fueled by politics for resistance and social change. Higher quality sound films, as the owners of the film studios recognized, were also gaining more audiences. Wang Ying became one of the earliest female actors appearing on the silver-screen at this juncture of history. She worked in Mingxing (Star), Lianhua (China federation), Yihua (Arts China), and Diantong (General cinema) film studios, and quickly attained the influence of a “female film star” (“nü mingxing”). Her performances included an indentured woman worker in Women’s
Call to Arms (Nüxing de nahan, 1933), a struggling young peasant woman in A Tale of Red Tears under Tyrannical Land-rent (Tiehan honglei lu, 1933). She also appeared as an educated woman re-encountering her husband amidst the resistance movement against Japanese invasion in Shared Sorrows (Tong chou, 1934), and as a woman activist in the 1924–1927 First National Revolution in Goddess of Freedom (Zizou shen, 1935). The rising “female film star” Wang Ying shaped a visible site of female-levered impetus that evoked memories across a wide range of historical events, and thereby appealed to a wider spectrum of both the educated and the popular audiences. The inter-animating energies such screened visibility stirred, however, were more mediated and complex than the live cross-embodiments on theater stage, at least in Wang Ying’s case. Literary writing came to her aid again at this turning point in her work and life. In one of her prose works titled “Daughters of the City of Xian” (“Xian de niurmen,” 1934), Wang Ying came to terms with the paradox of her cinematic visibility. She recollects there the eagerness of the young women in the ancient city of Xian to meet her as a “movie star” and how they confided in her their secret thoughts that were socially motivating and heartening: “We hate it that many girls have their feet bound,” “we hate those who smoke opium;” and “we don’t like it that the streets are dirty.” And yet such thoughts were mixed with other elements as well: “We want to quit school and go to Shanghai to make movies like you” since “we like film!” They came again at dawn to see her off, with transparent trust in her as their “elder sister” for she was “such a film star.” After the parting scene, Wang Ying’s writing ends with an equivocal sense of heaviness:

The wheels began to move, while those shapes of innocence were receding in the rising sand and dirt stirred by the motion of the wheels. My heart, as if stuffed by something, was growing heavy. On my long way back to the south, . . . I remembered those innocent faces, those trusting eyes, and, those words that I wanted to tell them but did not, those words that would be incomprehensible to them – my heart felt the pain of something like guilt.

The untold were the hidden scenes in the real lives of the highly visible female film stars. Flourishing in the aftermath of the White Terror and its anti-feminist hysteria since the late 1920s, the film business with its market-centered mechanisms packaged female bodies on screen as commodities, while the social force fields and power relations of a much-corrupted political regime, of which the film business functioned as entertainment affording glittering pleasures, consumed live female actors off screen. The changes in the social ethos of a country sliding further into total crisis did not affect an immediate shift or transformation of such a matrix long in the making. Some became its casualties. Two prominent female actors, Ai Xia and Ruan Ling yu, committed suicide in February 1934 and March 1935 respectively. And Ai Xia was Wang Ying’s close friend. Decades later, Wang Ying remembered those years of being a “female film star” in semicolonial Shanghai with an undiluted sense of horror.
and anger: “I have walked on and through many difficult paths. As if a small boat without sails floating at sea, I had few peaceful days yet endless nights caught in pernicious storms. But if I were asked when was the most difficult and unbearable time in my life, I would point to those years in Shanghai as a ‘film star’... even though those years were not wasted and were in fact spent in useful ways for we did make successful progressive films.”

A bulk of the more lyrical writings that Wang Ying produced from 1932 on registers her efforts to re-process her “most unbearable time” into critical thoughts. A prose work for instance titled “Spring Rain” (“Chunyü,” 1933) evokes and embraces the rain in spring that washes away “those faces wearing false masks,” “those words that are a tissue of lies,” “those hearts that are dark, cold, sinister and crafty.” Other well-known pieces such as “Irices” (“Jian qiuoluuo”), “Reed” (“Luwei”) and “Crescent Moon” (“Shang xüanyüe”) depict another world where tranquility and human warmth are tangible; and “Innocence” (“Tianzhen,” 1935) mixes the feeling of a returning spring with memories of her youth in the high moments of the Northern Expedition. Other more socially anchored writings worked “untold pains” into grounds for political convictions amidst an otherwise destructive force field. Of Ai Xia’s death, she wrote: “Why, you have so much courage to do what normally people dare not to do, Ai Xia, why have you lost the courage to go on living?” The series of her writings sent from Tokyo where she stayed from March 8, 1934 to December 11, 1934, were more explicit. “Throwing Away a Five-Colored Outfit” (“Xie qü le yijian wuse de waiyi,” 1934) nails the “film circles” of a semicolonial Shanghai as “a field of darkness” and the fame and status of a “film star” as an “imprisoning outfit” to be dismantled. “Travel East – A Week Spent In Illness” (“Dongdao luchen – bin de yizhoujian,” 1934) recollects Ai Xia’s struggles in a world where “bodies are fattened and souls are starved” and dialogues with “my elder sister” who is “the light in the dark night when I am flowing at the sea of life”: “My elder sister, you once told me that I must not live as if I were a delicate flower; I want to let you know, loudly: ‘I have tempered myself in life’s trials and tribulations into a piece of iron.’ I have always stood upright and on my own feet.”

“My elder sister” here referred to those two women who lived with her when she arrived in Shanghai in 1930; both of them were members of the CCP underground. Wang Ying had been one herself since 1930 when she was not yet seventeen years old. And she had been active in the political arena by delivering wartime information to the CCP underground members and hand-copying many of CCP’s pamphlets advocating resistance. Being simultaneously visible as a publishing writer and film star and invisible as an underground political figure, Wang Ying was literally and figuratively a cross-embodiment of multiple critical energies for social change. It should help us to probe such multilayered energies by a brief visit here of what has been called “the most famous dramatic mime and most emblematic silent film” in the history of modern Chinese performing arts, the so-called “blue gown incident” in Wang Ying’s life. In the film circles of the 1930s it was the norm that “female film stars” were sexualized decorations at glamorous banquets and ballroom dances among the KMT elite.
circles. Such “pleasure events” were regularly organized by the bosses of film companies for governmental and financial VIPs to secure the status and spheres of their businesses in the volatile power relations of the metropolis, even amidst the raging wars across the country. As a rising “female film star,” Wang Ying was pressured to be in attendance at those occasions. After repeatedly improvising excuses in order to avoid performing such a function on such occasions, Wang Ying was one night ambushed on her way home by Mingxing Film Studio’s staff, by a car driver waiting outside her door. Cornered, she said that she needed to change her dress and went into her room. She then emerged and went with the driver in the company’s car to the nightclub where the ballroom dance, in honor of a political VIP from Nanjing, had been going on for hours. The host and owner of Mingxing Film Studio was at his nerves’ ends until the promised “bite” – the “exquisite beauty” Wang Ying – was announced to have finally arrived. Taking off her overcoat, Wang Ying appeared in a blue robe made of crude cloth without any make-up in the full view of the brightly lit ballroom. What followed is one of the frequently cited strips of live film in Chinese cinema history or, more accurately, in the making of the cultural memory of modern China. As a scholar writes:

All the “female stars” floating around were wearing sophisticated make-up and wrapped in fine silk hung with dazzling jewelry and diamonds; one appeared more appetizing than the other. Yet Wang Ying in her blue robe made of crude material sat there in chilly silence. No one dared to turn and meet her eyes; except for a few friends who looked at her with astonishment, reproach, or uneasiness. Ai Xia was the only one who had the nerve to walk up to Wang Ying, and exchange a few words with her under the gaze of all. This is the famous dramatic mime and the most emblematic silent film titled “a blue cloth robe for ballroom dancing” that has been orally passed around in the circles of the film industry ever since.148

Here was a real female film star who was at the same time most decisively not one. A woman whose multilayered meanings were embodied in such a highly visible way that at the same time unsettled all her high visibility along with the social categories about what constituted a “modern,” “Chinese,” “famous,” “professional” “woman.” The results were multiple and multiply meaningful. The pulp film magazines began to call her “a nun.”149 Astute critics who had long noted Wang Ying’s work on stage and screen as well as in print began to articulate “a paradigm of the performing art and the performing artist” that they named the “Wang Ying paradigm” (“Wang Ying xing”), representing “hope” for modern Chinese culture still in the making.150 Similarly cognizant of “something different” about this young actor in her twenties, the KMT’s secret police harassed Wang Ying repeatedly, particularly during the filming of Goddess of Freedom in 1935 and when she appeared in the marches on streets protesting “Japanese imperialism.”151 For Wang Ying, it seems, screen, stage, streets, grand halls of ballroom dance, prison, print, or really anywhere she encountered other
members of society, were sites for stirring up social events of critical implications with her cross-embodiment or her embodiment of boundary-crossing, transformative impetus.

The transformative effects can be traced in the eruptions of inter-animating energies of otherwise separate lives, which were already at work in Wang Ying’s first acting in 1927. Her audiences and readers in the 1930s responded with similar resonance. From 1935 to 1936, she was jailed by the KMT secret police four times without legal justification. Each time she was released under the public pressure mounted by a wide range of Shanghai residents who loved her as a writer, a dramatist, a “film star,” or a silent woman sitting in a blue gown of crude cloth at a high function of the high power elites. “The Sai Jinhua Incident” as theater historians call it, which occurred in the winter of 1936, is a good example of such inter-animating energies of substantial consequence enabled and released by her performance. A ten-act historical drama in which Wang Ying played the leading female, Sai Jinhua revisits the story of its title character, a Chinese courtesan, who lived in the final years of the Qing dynasty. When the Eight-Power-Allied-Forces occupied Beijing in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, she was used by the Manchu court to gain a peace agreement through her intimacy with a German general, the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces. Implicitly criticizing the KMT leadership as the present-day equivalents of the Manchu elite frightened by aggressors, the performance was meant to, and did, stir up angry feelings in the public to pressure the Nanjing government to mobilize resistance against Japanese invasion. The success of the performance in Shanghai in the freezing November of 1936 showed that the audiences knew well what “the courtesan”-cum-“the famed film star”-cum “the woman named Wang Ying” was doing on stage and what they were doing in the theater. They crowded in for its twenty-two performances, thereby staging, in effect, a twenty-two-day public demonstration. When Wang Ying and her follow artists brought the play to Nanjing the capital and performed it at Nanjing Citizens’ Theater (Nanjing guomin da xiyuan), an incident happened. Decades later, those who lived it remember the “Incident” with an indelible sense of its eruptive and transformative power:

The play’s premiere in Nanjing was a huge success. And its second performance the next day was in still more demand: with all the added seats and standing spaces taken, there were still many people gathering and waiting at the entrance of the theater. When the play was in its fourth act where [Sai Jinhua sat in silence while] a Manchu official pleaded and kowtowed to the Commander-in-Chief of the Eight-Power-Allied-Forces, the audience showed their opinions by shouting out angry insults and roaring in laughter at the Manchu official. Suddenly, Zhang Daofan, the [KMT’s] top man in charge of cultural affairs, jumped up from his seat at the front row and howled. Immediately, his hatchet men sitting around in the theater responded with yelling and cursing, throwing heavy things onto the stage and at the actors including very conspicuous spittoons! Wang Ying and other
actors had to retreat backstage and the performance stopped. Meanwhile, the audience was in total uproar, all were shouting at Zhang Daofan while some seized his arms and legs and dragged him toward the theater entrance. Zhang Daofan struggled and his men fought for him but they were basically pulled and pushed out, getting quite a few kicks on the way. . . . The man who owned the theater knew that Zhang was a man of capital importance and authority and hastened to offer him a chair with profuse confused apologies. The performance resumed; the audience was now completely participating in the process by applauding, shouting, stamping their feet, and laughing at all the right moments during the development of the play, which effectively prevented Zhang Daofan and his men from risking another entrance in the theater. When the play ended, the audience’s ovation lasted for six to seven minutes; Wang Ying and her fellow artists answered the curtain call as many as twelve times. 

The usual divide between life and fiction, the historical and the theatrical, the past and the present, and the individual and the collective were crossed and re-embodied hereby into a powerful dynamics of transformation, as all the parties involved therein were transformed, at least in the thick of the moment and in its remaining effect for memory and remembering. Such transformation involving many bodies, brains, and hearts in turn sustained Wang Ying as a multilayered presence of critical impetus unyielding to the otherwise overwhelming forces of violence; its energies soon went beyond the limited urban settings and reached the actual majority in rural China. One month after this “Sai Jinhua Incident” in Chinese theater history, the Xi’an Incident in Chinese political history occurred. The second coalition between the Nationalist government and the Chinese Communist Party for a united front became possible. Six months after the Xi’an Incident, the Lugouqiao (the Marco Polo Bridge) Incident on July 7, 1937 announced Japan’s all-out war on China, hastening the process of the coalition’s formation, and precipitating the mobilization of armed resistance across the country. A week later, Shanghai Dramatists Association held an emergency conference where it reorganized itself as “All China Dramatists Association.” Wang Ying was one of the founding members. The day after the Japanese military attacked Shanghai, Wang Ying, along with twelve other artists, founded “Shanghai Second Performing Troupe for National Salvation” (“Shanghai jiuzhang yanjü erdui”), and started her life and work as a member of a mobile artistic collective that traveled to the frontlines and performed across China amid military traffic and complex military campaigns. Their performances took place at hillsides, public squares, temples, streets, and any open fields. The actors, dressed in local-style clothes, struck gongs and drums to signal their arrival until folks of various kind gathered around the troupe. Then the performance would start as if it were a scene in real life. A biographer recorded the scenes of one of their performance as follows:

After the third round of the gong and drum, the audience’s attention was focused on the old man and the young woman who they thought were
street-performers. Jin Shan played the old man, wearing a worn padded cotton robe and a torn hat, with a straw rope tied around his waist as a belt. Wang Ying played the young woman named Fragrant Sister (Xiangjie) with her hair made into a long braid, wearing a torn padded cotton jacket and blue trousers and sitting on a chest with a carrying pole, thin and pallid. The old man did his opening routine of the street-performance – boasting about Fragrant Sister’s “theater skills,” then urged her to show such “skills” as jumping, kicking, bending, doing the splits. All of which gained praise from the audience as was usually the case in Chinese folk culture with street-performances except here the praises were more actively offered with the help of troupe members mixed in the audience. Then, the old man asked Fragrant Sister to sing a widespread new folk ditty called “On September 18th” (the day when Japan invaded Northeast China): “The leaves of sorghum were still green, / when Japanese soldiers came on September the 18th... / killing and burning so violent / oh so violent were their killing and burning...” Her singing went on like a repressed weeping and an appeal, and some women began to weep. When Fragrant Sister tried to sing the second segment with a high pitch but could not manage, some audience members were making sounds of sympathy, saying that she was too tired. A troupe member in the audience then said loudly: “Let’s go, she has no real skills, just cheating us for money!” Some others who were also troupe members went along with him. Seeing that the performance was about to be ruined, the old man hurriedly put down his musical instrument and pleaded with the audience to be kind and stay; then he urged Fragrant Sister to show more difficult “skills” and forced her to turn somersaults. The young woman made strenuous efforts to do well but collapsed onto the ground. As the audience seemed about to disperse, the old man, desperate and furious, grabbed his whip and beat the young woman. Fragrant Sister, neither trying to avoid the whipping nor uttering any sound, took the beating with her face covered by both of her hands. At this moment, when another troupe member in the audience was about to jump out and stop the old man, a real audience member whose face was red with anger ran to the old man and shouted: “Put down your whip – You, put it down!” The old man shouted back: “This is none of your business!” The crowd now was all agitated. Women were protesting angrily, some men tried to stop him, while troupe members in the audience urged them on: “Beat that unreasonable old man!” A villager then indeed pushed the old man down and snatched the whip from his hand. Surprising everyone, the young woman cried and pleaded with the crowd for mercy on the old man. When many asked her: “Why? He is using you to make money and treats you so bad, why do you protect him?” Fragrant Sister answered: “He is my real father.” The women around became angrier: “How can there be such a father in this world? Beating his own daughter like this?” In a moment of pause, Fragrant Sister then began to slowly tell her story: How her father was a quiet soul; how his temper became vile as life became unbearable. “But why”? The audience demanded. She continued:
how the Japanese came to their land; how they lost their home; how her mother was killed; how the father and the daughter had to roam on the streets to sell their “skills” to survive. . . . As her story unfolded and the audience’s eyes were gradually filled with tears, the old man lost his self-control and beat his head asking for forgiveness from the audience and his daughter: “I am mad! I am a beastly! Heavens! I have been beating my own flesh and blood! My child, forgive me . . . ” Fragrant Sister broke into tears and weeping: “No father, this is not your fault . . . .” . . . The discussions that followed the performance were charged with stirred-up strong feelings and often resulted in actions taken to join the resistance movements.157

A glimpse of the scenes mounted by Shanghai Second Performing Troupe, the play in this narration featuring Wang Ying as the daughter is titled Put Down Your Whip (Fangxia nide bianzi, 1930s). Co-written by “a group of dramatists,” it was one of the most frequently performed plays in the resistance movement and a defining memory of modern Chinese cultural history.158 As a familiar figure of the rural female street performer, Wang Ying-cum-Fragrant Sister altered her/their movements and gestures as well as narrations of her/their “real story” with improvised details befitting different regions where the troupe traveled. The name of her “homeplace” destroyed by Japanese military was each time changed to adapt to the names of the geographical places where they performed. Her physical features were also delineated differently to adapt to the local human environments ranging from cities to small towns to villages including Nanjing, Anqing, Xishui, Shangchen, Huangchuan, Hunan, Hankou, Wuhan, Guilin, and Chongqing as well as all the named and/or nameless places in between. Such performance drew a live map of mobilized resistances as transformative energies, featuring a female-levered cross-embodiment as its center of gravity. It is a live map that redefines art of life and life of art, reconfigures what is the real and unreal, and recasts what is possible and impossible.

In October 1938, the troupe was reorganized and started touring beyond China across Southeast Asia including Hong Kong, Saigon, and Singapore, often with ten thousand audience members present at each performance.159 From July 1939 to August 1940, Wang Ying and her troupe mounted more than seven hundred performances in Southeast Asia and raised fourteen million Chinese dollars of donations for the War of Resistance.160 In order to give a sense of the spirit with which they traveled and performed, I conclude this chapter with Wang Ying’s own words, spoken in the United States at the World Congress of Anti-Fascist Youth and Students:

[We] are now in one same boat, and this boat is navigating a horrible storm of history. In order to arrive at a harbor of genuine safety, we must enable each other by using all we have, our lives and our brains and our hearts, otherwise we will sink to the bottom of the sea. This is a painful and arduous task, the task of life. We must keep the horizon of life firmly in our view, work through and work over this terrible storm of our times.161
Uncannily and yet pertinently, the spinning boat of Xiao Hong’s first piece of writing returns among these lines, along with her multiply cut body in a blood saturated Hong Kong, as many others in other parts of the world. This was a speech delivered by Wang Ying in 1942, the same year Xiao Hong died, and when the war was in its grimmest moment in the China theater as it was else-

![Figure 5.2 Wang Ying as China’s representative to the World Students Congress for Peace, in 1942](image)
where. The woman speaker, still in her twenties, had seen how human life could be and in massive numbers of cases had been, in the image sketched by Xiao Hong, “sunk to the bottom of the floodwater of violence” and in the words of Zhang Ailing, “pinched into ashes in an instant.” Refusing to be pinched into ashes or sunk to the bottom of the floodwaters, Wang Ying put her own body to work for the mobilizations and multiplications of life in various boundary-crossing embodiments. “To be alive in China as an ordinary Chinese,” as she wrote in 1934, “how many hearts and how many brains one must have – to bear the cross of the times!” During a deeply troubling era she had firmly kept such a real and/or possible constellation of many hearts, brains, and bodies in her imagination as much as in the public light, in her above quoted speech, as much as with her many performances of cross-embodiment. Resonating with Xiao Hong’s “stirring Yellow River,” that multilayered earth in silent movement begetting scenes of human kinship, Wang Ying’s live performance gives definition – in the form of a question – to all that is troped in the painful movement that transforms the elements involved therein. “My dear friend,” she wrote to a woman friend in 1937 on the eve of a full-scaled war with Japan, “[in this world] there are those who are hit down and yet struggle to rise by changing their given conditions, the ways set up in society that produce such conditions, as well as themselves. There are also those who seem the born owners of present society with their given power, claiming inherent superiority to the hit down. Which one – the former or the latter – do you think, genuinely constitute the humanly strong (Zhengzheng de qiangzhe)?”
Wang Ying’s question about what constitutes a “genuinely strong humanity” or “the humanly strong” (Zhengzheng de qiangzhe) recurs in many modern Chinese women’s writings and lives including, most of all, those of Ding Ling, the most prominent Chinese woman writer of the long twentieth century. Ding Ling’s literary and political journey spanned over half a century and was shot through with radical shifts, uncertainties, alterations, and turmoil. Looking back at her life and work in 1985, one year prior to her death, she gave an oral account of her “memories” that an assistant arranged as a prose work titled “Songs of Death” (Sizhige). An autobiographical narrative and a historical document worthy of reproduction in its entirety, the first three passages read as follows:

In my earliest memory, what I feared most was the hat used for our Chinese traditional funerals, the kind that has three soft cotton balls hanging at the front. I had a hat of this kind when I was three and half years old, because my father died. Members of my family dressed me in a funeral outfit including a hat with white cotton balls hanging like tears trembling down, which etched itself deeply into my memory. They then put me in the Front Hall that was covered with lengths of white cloth. They wrote elegiac couplets on those cloths that I did not understand; I only saw a lot of disorderly things inscribed there. My mother, also dressed in a white outfit made of crude cloth, was kneeling behind a long black box, and I was deposited next to her. I then cried loud and hard, letting my screams go with all my strength. I was not crying about my fate, I did not have any sense yet about the meaning of this moment as a turning point in my life: From then on, my entire life trajectory was completely changed. I cried because I sensed something in the atmosphere. People removed me from the scene and yet the scene stayed with me for all these decades.

Later I often wondered why I cried so violently then, with such an acute feeling of uneasiness. Was it because I had a premonition that my life of
misfortune was about to begin? And [I felt already] that an era of agony was in effect descending – an era of hopelessness, like a house covered by ghostly whiteness with a black coffin in its center? I still don’t know yet, if that was my first impression of life. Relatives later told me, that was death, the death of my father.

Father died, my mother’s life was doomed; our lives were doomed. Our whole family was doomed. It was the beginning of my nebulous consciousness about life, where I learned the presence of death and its horror. My entire childhood was spent from then on in following my mother and her struggle, each day on the edge of death.²

Registered in this graphic memory of a personally defining moment is the disintegration of a gentry-class household, a specific and emblematic breakage in society where the “old” way of life seems dead and the “new” is not yet viable. At this time, most of the 1890s women activists had disappeared from the social stage that they had endeavored to build. Qiu Jin, the leading Republican woman revolutionary, had just been executed. “The fear of death” palpable in this remembered specific family scene in 1908 in Lilin, Hunan Province, implied a drastically shifted world to be faced, and drastic actions to be taken. Ding Ling’s mother Yü Manzhen confronted the crisis with a series of decisions that radically
transformed her from a traditional gentry wife to a “modern women” of “new times.” The widowed mother of two used her trousseau to settle what was claimed to be her late husband’s substantial debts to his brothers, left Lilin with her baby son and her daughter Jiang Bingzhi (Ding Ling’s given name), and in 1911 moved to the township of Changde county where her brother’s family resided. In the midst of the 1911 Revolution, she enrolled herself in the newly founded Women’s Normal College in Changde as a student and her daughter in the college’s kindergarten. The unheard of sight of a widow and her daughter arriving together at the college caused a public stir.3 A year later, Yü Manzhen went to Changsha, the capital of the Hunan Province, enrolled Bingzhi in a new school for girls and herself in the First Women’s Normal College of Hunan Province where she found several lifelong friends.4 She soon took up a teaching position at an elementary school in Changde County. Bingzhi remained in Changsha under the care of Xiang Jingyü, her mother’s close friend whom she called “Aunty Ninth,”5 and finished her elementary education in 1916. She was only eight years old. In 1918, she entered the Second Women’s Normal Preparatory School in Taoyuan near the place her mother taught.6 Drawn into the upheavals of the May Fourth movement that was also spreading in Hunan, young Bingzhi bobbed her hair, joined the street protests, made agitational public speeches, and taught at the night-schools for urban women workers as one of the “children teachers” (Zaizai xiansheng). A year later, she transferred to the famed Zhounan Women’s Middle School where she began to publish poems and critical essays in Xiangjiang Daily (Xiangjiang ribao).7 Encouraged and sustained by her mother’s support for her to “live independently and differently,”8 Bingzhi broke out of her maternal uncle’s arrangements for her marriage and went to Shanghai in 1921 with her schoolmate and best friend Wang Jianhong whose important role in her life and her writing will be discussed later. When Wang died in 1924 of tuberculosis after an aborted romance, Bingzhi went to Beijing, alone.9 Battling with and caught in the uncertainties of the time, Bingzhi persisted in searching for ways of learning and living as a “modern woman” while her mother persisted in teaching women students, each under increasing hardships.10 When the First National Revolution was crushed in 1927, the “new times” turned out to be ruled by old forces intensely hostile to such “modern women:” numerous activist women lost their lives and more lost their hard-won jobs and means of living. As one of the pioneers in Chinese women’s education, Yü Manzhen was removed repeatedly from her teaching positions and forced into an isolated existence marked by material stringency and social exclusion. “Aunty Ninth” Xiang Jingyü was executed by the Nationalist regime for agitating and organizing women’s labor movements.11 “Shaken to wake up to a world of violent turns of events” and found herself “entirely alone in darkness,” as she herself put it, Bingzhi agonized in silence.12 How to “live independently and differently” seemed an imperative question to which she must respond, with or without the helping hand that her mother extended, tenaciously, to her. “I am a woman who had to go through many deaths;” she wrote decades later, “but I refuse to die. I have lived through those deaths and have come out on the other side of them.”13
What were some of the force fields that she had to work through to “come out on the other side of deaths”? How did such a “living through of deaths” figure in Ding Ling’s work and configure Ding Ling’s life? How did such living and working intimate or even pave out a passage for women writing in one of the most embattled moments in modern Chinese history? Those are the guiding issues for this chapter.

Making Fiction, Making Life

Bingzhi began to work through her silence “in darkness” by literary writing (“in darkness” is the title of her first collection of short stories). As if in dialogue with the elements of that silence and the questions she posed to herself within it, she wrote her first two novellas several months after the crushing of the First National Revolution. Signed with a pen name “Ding Ling”\(^\text{14}\) _Mengke_ (Mengke) and _Miss Sophia’s Diary_ (Shafei nüshi de riji) appeared in the December 1927 and February 1928 issues of _Fiction Monthly_ (Xiaoshuo yuebao), the Shanghai-based leading literary journal edited by Ye Shengtao. The first novella received immediate attention, while the second caused a sensation in the literary circles.\(^\text{15}\) The degree of such sensation is evinced, for instance, in an article in _Women’s Journal_ (Füniu zazhi, 1930): “Ms. Ding Ling . . . has shaken us all with her series of fictional writings; their sudden appearances are like bombs being dropped in this literary world that had been as silent as death.”\(^\text{16}\) A range of critics hailed her as “the most modern of all Chinese women writers.”\(^\text{17}\)

What makes this woman writer particularly “modern” in those critics’ terms are engaged later. My exploration of the “sudden” and “shocking” appearances of her works is situated in the dynamic intersection where her writing and her life disclose, inform and alter each other. The first literary “bomb,” her novella _Mengke_, is often read as a fiction heavily invested with her “real life experiences” – a young woman who moved with her mother from the country to the city in the hopes of making a “modern life.”\(^\text{18}\) Yet the journey of the leading female figure in the fiction named Mengke differs, fundamentally, from her author’s life path. Leaving her widowed gentry father in the country, Mengke becomes a female star in Shanghai while passing through other sites where Republican China’s project of modern nation building finds its institutional articulation, namely, those of “new-cum-modern” education and “new-cum-cosmopolitan” family. She enrolls in a school with some vague ideas about what May Fourth women meant it to be: A place where women gather their strength for revolutionizing their lives while receiving a passport to “modern” life as the skilled and knowledgeable in a “new” time. Soon enough, however, she finds herself in the company of a few females who are abused in a sexualized environment dominated by an all male faculty and administration. Leaving this school in anger, Mengke goes to her aunt’s family for help. Yet soon enough again, she finds herself targeted as sexual prey by her rich, European educated, perfumed cosmopolitan cousins and their friends, emblematic of the semicolonial ethos of Shanghai’s financial world. Fleeing the “family” in fear, Mengke lands a job in a
film company and, with her eyes wide open in horror, watching herself being
devoured by the mechanisms of human commodification and repackaged into a
female-fleshed “thing” for sexualized consumption. An otherwise classifiable
morality play, Mengke disrupts the morality plot for she neither succumbs to nor
rejects the “evil city.” Although “a rising star” in the metropolis Shanghai, she
suffers from her agony where anger, fear, and horror reverberate and intertwine.
However such feelings of suffering are controlled during the “normal hours” of
her days, they surface sharply if not ominously. Once, for instance, as she utters a
muzzled wail alone in a bus at night and another time she collapses in the studio
in front of the gazing camera amid those penetrating lights. She seems to be
drowning in the spotlights of the city without being actually dead or caught in
the thick of it and without in effect belonging to it. The intense reader response
Mengke provoked suggests that it touched on raw socio-psyche nerves and their
implied issues in the heart of the actual Chinese society at the time, and registers
a silent struggle to live in a gendered erasure that was epidemic in an urban land-
scape that designates or actually constitutes a specific form of semicolonial
human objectification. More specifically, “Mengke,” her name, is a Chinese
transliteration of French mon coeur – “my heart.” Ding Ling defines the struggles
of mon coeur as that of “the souls of lonely and unbending women” in the at once
flourishing and precarious Chinese urban scenes of the late 1920s:

My mind at the time was in terrible confusion... until 1927 when the
failure of the First National Revolution, the April 12 incident in Shanghai,
and the military coup in Changsha shook me into a severe pain. Each day I
heard some news about the revolution, about my friends and acquaintances.
Many people whom I deeply respected died; some friends were still
persisting in their fight while some others were wavering. I wanted to go to
the south but it was too late, I could not find any friends there anymore... I was in
such a spiritual agony that I started writing fiction, besides which I really had no friends.
My fiction thus is filled with the lonely feelings of an unbending person who despises her
social environment (my italics).

Layers of implications in this retrospectively written passage deserve lengthy
unpacking, which is however beyond the scope of this section. Suffice it to say
here that the anger, fear, and horror at work in Mengke seem indeed evocative of
certain real pains that the author herself confronted in her actual life at the time,
as did many educated women pursuing a “modern life” in the buzzing metropolis
of the late 1920s and the 1930s. It is known that, before she started literary
writing, Ding Ling, then Jiang Bingzhi, attempted to become an actor in China’s
two-decade old film industry. In the winter of 1926, she met with Hong Shen in
Beijing and expressed her interest in the art of filmmaking. Hong Shen, an
increasingly important playwright and prominent figure in the modern Chinese
performing arts since the early 1920s, wondered aloud whether acting in films as
a profession was suitable to a “young woman” like her for it “involve[d] complic-
cated difficulties.” “Should you want a job to meet your economic needs,” he
suggested, “we may try other ways.” Jiang Bingzhi answered: “Yes I am poor and need a job to make a living. But I want to act in films because I want to use my talents for imaginative purposes!” Impressed, Hong Shen introduced her to the Shanghai Film Star Company (Mingxing gongsi). The film-company hired her with a three-year contract. Yet, after one more appearance at the company, she never returned: “I could not bear what I saw there – the horrors of those fondling men and half-naked women,” as she recalled later. With uncanny acumen, Jiang Bingzhi saw in those highly visible sights of naked/marked femaleness the haunting shadows of many objectified “mon coeurs” in an at once volatile and driven society – the “unbending persons with lonely feelings” embedded in and foreclosed from their living environment. Two years later, the publication of the fiction Mengke ushered in and crystallized the existence of Ding Ling the actual writer.

The writing of Mengke then enabled Ding Ling to both distance herself from those shadows of objectified humanity and confront their predicament, while working through her own traumatic encounter with one of the most powerful modern apparata that enforce such shadows in and as predicaments. This working through constitutes an early instance and exponent of her mode of writing in the making, giving rise to a female-levered cognition that is critically reflective and imaginatively enabling. Ding Ling in her writing, in other words, brings about similarly situated and like-minded imaginary females to populate her actual world where such similarly “lonely souls” were being ghosted and similarly “unbending persons” were literally disappearing in the aftermath of the failure of the First National Revolution. It is also significant that mon coeur is the phrase that Qü Qiubai, one of the early leading figures in the Chinese Communist Party, used in a poem he wrote for his lover and Ding Ling’s best friend Wang Jianhong. Wang Jianhong’s disdain toward her social environment that denied women of independent social status seemed to be accompanied by her sublimation of her romantic relationship with Qü Qiubai, another “unbending soul” to such an environment, into an ontological anchor point of her life. Qü Qiubai was then deeply involved in the CCP radical politics and had been elected as an alternate member of the CCP Central Committee since July 1923. After he left Shanghai for Guangzhou in January 1924 to attend the conference where the CCP and KMT made their first coalition for the First National Revolution, Wang Jianhong fell gravely ill and, in a few months, died in Shanghai. It is difficult to reach any conclusion with certainty about whether Ding Ling ever managed to get over Wang Jianhong’s premature death, or how she actually judged her best friend’s love relationship with Qü Jiubai and his politics, which as a relevant issue about women and the Chinese revolution is revisited later in the context of Ding Ling’s writing and life in Yan’an. Let it be noted here that, when the White Terror, the public execution of Xiang Jingyü, and eliminations of revolutionary women by the nationalist army and other warlords in 1927 set Ding Ling in a process of severe self-scrutiny and social radicalization, the early traumas caused by the loss of Wang Jianhong were also stirred in her again. Ding Ling, then Jiang Bingzhi, titled her first fiction with the
phrase haunted by her best friend while evocative of all those women, all those "unbending souls" that disappeared from her life in 1927 yet stayed alive in her heart and mind. Or really all those disappeared women she needed to sustain her in working through her predicament as a "lonely soul [now] without any friends." Mengke in her first fiction then functions as an imaginary friend that Ding Ling invented for herself and other "lonely souls" to look into their conditions. While metamorphosing into a commodified film star and a shadow of her former self, Mengke at the same time serves a reflective space that Ding Ling opened up for herself and other "unbending ones" to ponder over the ghosted mon coecurs and insist on their yet-to-be found ways of returning to life and meanings. Such literary writing hence is not only an act of imagination; it is also a process of actualizing the impetus engendered in the act that alters, and indeed makes, real life. By such writing, Bingzhi turned herself into the writer Ding Ling with her first income, announcing the material existence of a writing woman, as a site of social signification and a human-fleshed space for critical spirits to inhabit amid the otherwise proclaimed monopoly of a time-regime that stipulated "the modern female" be the evidence of her own non-being. Here, an aesthetic process is also social praxis, bringing forth forms of an otherwise not-yet-existent life and the lifeworld that such forms imply. Making fiction, then, is also making life.

The choice of Ding Ling’s working medium – the literary over the cinematic – does not mean that her battle is with the technology of filmmaking in itself as a priori violence, be it gendered or semicolonial. Rather, it is the social relations that organize and control the employment of such technology and the concomitant human costs that are intensely questioned by her. While the issue of the cinematic apparatus of modern visuality constitutes a large topic in itself, suffice it to say here that the camera which makes images and imaginaries itself can be her ally, just as the print medium can be when she reinvents and inhabits it to map and question the prevailing social genres and their implied rubrics of modern femaleness. Just as well one may mention here that, throughout her life, Ding Ling had an active relationship with the camera and its varying operations, leaving a range of photographs with informative signification and interpretive opportunities. A telling example for the purpose of my discussion here is the physiognomic difference between Jiang Bingzhi and Ding Ling as registered in the photos that were taken of her in early 1920s and after 1928 respectively. In the former, taken before her publication of Mengke, Jiang Bingzhi captured by the gazing camera was girlishly feminine, either in Chinese or Western styles. In the latter taken after the writer Ding Ling came into being, the woman often sits while thinking, with a quietly observing and challenging look behind her light smile that seems not only to take in but also probe into, dialogue with, and contest if not re-arrange the scenes of the lifeworld around her. Those scenes include the lens of the camera in operation.

The title character of her novella, however, unfolds into and ends up as a contrary to what Ding Ling herself sought to do in actual life with her writing:
Mengke is shown to be imprisoned in a socially compelled and induced doom in spite of the authorial sympathy that underlines the narrative to engender her as a struggling female. As the figure of the fictional that speaks of the struggles of the at once exploited and foreclosed, in other words, Mengke keeps running in circles and does not seem to find any viable alternatives. After leaving the modern school and fleeing the cosmopolitan family, as the story goes, she is “falling into an abyss of a veritable hell, as if being driven completely insane, as if having never thought of her future, or ever would again.”

In the final section of the novella, one reads how Mengke signs contracts with the head of the film studio, meets coquettish women and fondling men, visits dubious looking offices, dining halls, shooting studios, and dressing rooms, all the while “feel[ing] that she has been made a prostitute on naked display by those aggressive gazes [all around] that show no shreds of human respect.”

A sense of sexualized brutality hung therein is overwhelming. Such brutality is crystallized in the make-up scene:

... [She] is led to a dressing room where seven or eight men and women sit and are putting grease paint on their faces in front of mirrors. She is placed on the third stool and a young man appears who, evidently instructed by the director, washes her face, puts a layer of pink oil there, and powders another layer of pinkish substance on the pink oil layer. When she looks at the others around, all she can see are heavily painted bright red lips and purple-dark eye circles; she then thinks of her own face. She goes to the large mirror and gazes into it: with the same kind of heavy make-up, she is no different from the street hookers on the Fourth Avenue in the direst condition.

A particular contradiction at work here deserves attention. As an imaginary friend that populates Ding Ling’s world, Mengke pulses and ends with a sense of unalterable doom in her struggle with the horror of her gendered “destiny.” Her ending as a suggestive paradigm recurs in a range if not all of Ding Ling’s early writings, marking women’s attempts for transformation as something of an already losing battle that always ends up with varieties of gendered casualties. In other words, Ding Ling’s impassioned imaginaries are often rendered in such a way that they intimate and/or induce a deep-seated doubt about their real place in actual society. In a preface to a collection of stories edited by herself, for instance, Ding Ling in effect discloses such a deep doubt when she intensely appeals to those with whom she feels she has no real contact, namely, her literary readers and critics. “I have been writing for three years in loneliness and isolation for my own existence,” she writes in 1930, “I of course will continue my efforts and will not be afraid of being destroyed, isolated, or lonely. [Yet] I truly hope that you, thoughtful readers and insightful critics out there . . . allow me to have your real feedback and criticism, [so that] I can continue.” The felt imperative to live differently in the real world by the way of literary writing and a perhaps nebulous but constantly felt suspect of such a way as ultimately fictional
makes up a structure of feeling particular to early Ding Ling’s writings. It is in the light of such a contradiction that Miss Sophia’s Diary (Shafei nüshi de riji, 1928) – early Ding Ling’s most renowned novella – gains its significance for my discussion.

Taken by many critics as a feminist monologue, Miss Sophia’s Diary seems a socio-psychic conundrum that breeds endless interpretations. Comprising a young educated woman’s diary, though, the novella has a simple plot. Sophia is admired by a Chinese student soon to become an urban professional, and desired by a British Singaporean from a business family. After entanglement in a love triangle of sorts, she in the end rejects the former’s marriage offer and eludes the latter’s seduction.34 Drawn to its overt plot, critics focus on how the woman is rendered there in such a way that she is not only intensely aware of her heterosexual desires but discloses such desires in her diary, which was shockingly “new” in the 1920s.35 While sexual desires used in the novella are discussed in a later point, my approach begins with a tracing of Sophia’s astute perception of her dubious modern status that unfolds and intensifies in the novella. Such a status is marked from the very beginning of the story as she starts her morning with the newspaper, evidently a fabric in the print culture that connects her to its “imagined community” – a modern Chinese nation and its implied citizenry. The newspaper indeed brings into her apartment the vibrations of a busy city, and an eventful “nation-family” in relation to a global world:

I start, systematically, with the headlines, the national news, the important foreign reports, variety of happenings in the city, . . . when I’ve finished the items on education, party propaganda, economics, the stock market, I go back to the same announcements I read thoroughly yesterday and the day before . . . the ones recruiting students, the notices of lawsuits over family properties. I even read stuff like ads for “606” and “Mongolian Lark” venereal tonics, cosmetics, announcements of the latest shows at the Kaiming Theatre, and the Zheng-guang Movie Theatre listings. When I’ve finished everything I toss the paper away, listlessly. Every once a while, of course, I find some new advertisements which however are no more other than the fifth- and sixth-year anniversary sales at the fabric shops, and the obituaries with apologies to those not contacted personally36 (my italics).

The texture operative here conjures up a center of urban life as much as a range of multifaceted patterns of human activity that feature the modern world. Clusters of items such as “foreign reports” and “national news” evoke a cosmopolitan flavor linking her city with others around the globe. Sophia’s act of reading through such “sound and fury” of the city, the nation, and the world marks a departure from the female image of an ancient “China” which was putatively an entity all to itself and where women were “properly” cloistered. Yet such a seemingly active reading does not afford her a sense of connection with the events of the modern nation, nor does it give her access to its cosmopolitan ethos let alone resources. The vibrations of the city she reads through the print medium seems to only stir in her a sense of foreclosure, as one of the city’s
numerous and basic human elements sitting behind the closed door of apartment units. Even the “obituaries” are evidence of how the last traces of lost lives cannot be the site for gathering real human contacts. “New things, good or bad, are all too remote beyond my reach,”37 Sophia writes, exhausted by the feelings of being stranded in the midst of nowhere induced by such reading: An urban dweller who is in but does not belong to the city. She does seem to have “friends,” and yet any contact with her friends seems to only underline her isolation and drive her deeper into despair. In her eyes, those friends are going about their daily routines without any sense of their being foreclosed from all the “national events” in the “national spotlights” that make up the imagined national community. Or worse, they are in fact the routines themselves as they marry, eat, sleep, have or prepare to have children, and urge her to do the same. And yet “what infuriates me is [precisely] the daily routines,” Sophia writes, for they seem to disfigure rather than enable what stirs in her, “[which is like] that mirror over the washbasin . . . Glancing from one side you've got a face a foot long; tilt your head slightly to the side and suddenly it gets so flat you startle yourself.”38 Unable to articulate such fury with intelligibility, Sophia defines it as a “passion for life” that plunges her into suffering: “my time is brief, so I love life with greater passion than most. . . [hence] I am wretched.”39 What this “passion for life” connotes never seems clear in the novella – a point that will be taken up again. It is significantly clear, however, that the medium with which Sophia wages her passionate struggle amid her “wretchedness” is writing. Sophia is a writer specialized in the genre of the diary where socio-psychic occurrences of unusual intensity are intimately probed, reflected, and interrogated.

The major occurrence that occupies a bulk of her diary, at first glance, is her quasi-romantic interaction with Ling Jishi, a man from British Singapore. He differs from the other Chinese in Sophia’s world for being self-assuredly “Westernized” and unmistakably “modern.” Yet he is never confused about his “Chinese” identity, no matter how or precisely because he inscribes his Chinese physicality with a sufficient number of stylized “Western” details including his perfect English. Attracted to him while feeling uneasy, Sophia unpacks her reaction through her writing: “How could I be so bewitched by this man from overseas merely because of his indefinable, unwitting seductiveness? It was the chivalric European knights I was dreaming about . . . and he also preserves his special Eastern gentleness.”40 With his supranational fluidity and multicultural packaging, Ling Jishi suggests a living vision of a hybridized modernity, thereby superceding the problem of the “weak” China and the “strong” West. He is an almost actualized promise that mixes the strange and the familiar into an invitation for a foreign adventure that is also a journey of homecoming. Such invitation seems to induce and precipitate in Sophia an eruptive desire, the intensity of which matches the depth of her agony as the erased and disfigured in the thick of a precariously and rapidly forming semicolonial Chinese nation. Yet Sophia is writing with an unflinching look into Ling Jishi’s “bewitching effect,” or really her writing is itself a process of such a look in the making, and uncovers therein a cash nexus logic with operative capillaries extended into the fabric of
social values. “But all he wants is money . . . the Debate Club, tennis matches, Harvard, the Foreign Service, his father’s business in rubber; to be a capitalist . . . that is the extent of his ambition!” While suggestive of how such ambition has an inherent appetite to appropriate and objectify human lives and other resources with ever expanding scopes, Sophia with her writing arrives at a specific disclosure of such an appetite at work in his involvement with her. Ling Jishi not only gratifies himself with what money can buy, such as a wife for his household and sex in brothels. He also romances Sophia, subtly appropriating her into one more female-fleshed object whose function is located somewhere between that of a housewife and of a prostitute. The writing Sophia, or the Sophia in and through writing, turns into a killjoy of such romance. When she receives her long wanted kiss from Ling Jishi, she destroys the supposedly “bewitching” moment: “I screwed open my eyes and looked straight in his face, thinking, I have won! I have won! I finally knew the taste of the thing that had so bewitched me” [and, no longer bewitched.] “I asked him to leave.”

A dramatic moment in Miss Sophia’s Diary no doubt, this scene fascinated critics, as a “shocking psychological depiction” of “the modern female” that “discloses her sexual desire in bold manners” then, as a “feminist demystification of male desires” now. Yet Sophia’s diary does not end where the “female desire” demystifies “male desires.” Such demystification in and of itself clearly does not deliver Sophia from her agony, which sharpenes in the next passages into despair: “I have decided to go south, somewhere no one knows me.... Live without a sound, and die without a trace. Oh, how I pity you Sophia!” Indeed, working through the “magic” of Ling Jishi’s “Chinese cosmopolitanism” in her diary writing with her “eyes wide open,” Sophia not only dismantles his once “bewitching” effect but uncovers therein a bioethnic masquerade that conceals a positional relation to the operative manners and force fields of modern appropriation, all of which has nothing particularly “Chinese” about it. When Sophia thereby dislodges herself from a semicolonial hallucination and writes herself out of the gendered structure of its promise of homecoming, she also exceeds the limit of its implied power relations and thereby undoes the political economy of desire and sexuality at work in herself. Demystification of the “Ling Jishi effect” is really transformation of Sophia herself. And yet in a symbolic time that is featured with the Ling Jishi version of Chinese cosmopolitanism and a real place that buries alive the most brilliant and the active of the first generation of publicly educated Chinese women, such a transformed Sophia and her transformative writing seem to have no place to be, in writing and in life. If Ding Ling attempted to make her writing a mode of actual living and a form of critical cognition and meaning-production to unmask and exceed the conditions of Chinese metropolis in the aftermath of the failure of the First National Revolution, writing for Sophia in Ding Ling’s fiction complicates such a function and its efficacy. If “Mengke” is a figurative friend through whom Ding Ling tries to find readers to whom she may speak of the disappeared in the real world, the issue of finding the readers and indeed the readability of such writing itself is raised in Sophia’s diary as, I argue, the actual defining question. In the entry dated “March 22,” the fictional Sophia writes:
In my mental confusion I've managed to force myself to keep this diary. I initially started it because Sister Yün repeatedly wrote and asked me to do so. Now even though Sister Yün has been dead for a long time, I can't bear to give it up. I suppose I'll go on forever, writing the diary in her memory as a testimonial to all the things she told me while she was alive. However much I'd rather not, I always feel I have to scrawl a page or so.45

Sophia’s writing, importantly, was initiated with a reader “Sister Yün” who, however, is barely traceable in the diary. It is noted in one entry that she was an embodiment of “passion for life,”46 and another entry dated the night of March 21 mentions that she “was still alive one year ago.”47 One reference to Sister Yün indicates that she was well versed in Chinese literature, as Sophia recalls, “[the] nights I spent lying on the grass in French Park listening to [her] singing Peony Pavilion.”48 The evocation of Peony Pavilion, which is a love story in the Chinese operatic genre produced in the Ming Dynasty, may lead and have lead some critics to imagine Sister Yün as a woman of Chinese traditional ideas or, rather, a female-fleshed entity of the tradition itself against which Sophia asserts her modernity. Yet a closer look at Peony Pavilion cautions us to question such a binary. Peony Pavilion is a play about a young woman who dies of longing for an imaginary lover and returns from death to actualize her love. A drama of passion that bursts all the boundaries between life and death, real and unreal, possible and impossible, this world and beyond, it is hardly an illustration of Chinese tradition in the sense of a set of ready-made ideas concerning rational humanity, codes of behavior, and social order.49 The “French Park,” where such a drama of transboundary passion is re-vocalized, compounds its connotation still further. A foreign site on Chinese soil, the “French Park” on one hand affords a space for what is deemed by the canonical Chinese tradition as the excessive or unruly to appear. On the other hand, it is also a material enforcement of the extraterritoriality of colonial concessions, where anything Chinese is by definition a lack of modern intelligibility and legitimacy.50 “Sister Yün” stands as a body of passion that is inherently present to, and yet her intelligibility is denied by, both social spaces and their symbolic paradigms. That such an at once present and denied passion is central to Ding Ling’s Miss Sophia’s Diary and Sophia’s diary writing is certainly significant, so is its abrupt cancellation. Sister Yün’s death occurs suddenly with intimation concerning its gendered causes. Commenting briefly upon such a violent cancellation of the initial and central source of her writing, Sophia writes: “If she hadn’t been tricked by God into loving the ashen-faced man, she would never have died so fast.”51

Significantly, such a gendered disappearance occurred in a semicolonial metropolis does not end the enabling function of “Sister Yün” who continues to sustain Miss Sophia’s diary writing as its activating impetus if not its underlying organization of signification. Sophia started her diary for a living “Sister Yün” and persists in writing for a dead “Sister Yün,” who at once was and is an embodied passion pregnant with the excessive of the tradition and evocative of
the lack in the modern, demanding alternative forms of existence and intelligibility as Sophia’s real reader in the midst of being socially and physically cancelled. For Sophia, writing with and for such a sister reader becomes a battle for life and beyond death. “I’d been dozing,” Sophia writes, “but I couldn’t stand seeing Sister Yün’s picture looking at me from its place on the wall, so I got up and started noting things down to avoid the pain of thinking about her. I have always felt I didn’t want anybody but Sister Yün reading this diary.” Miss Sophia’s diary, it seems, registers an imperative need to write for her real sister reader and a violent cancellation of such a readership that would have afforded her writing a social ground and hence possibilities of producing social meanings and/as social relations. Hence the agony not only continues but sharpens in Sophia particularly after her demystification of “the Ling Jishi effect” which is a self-transformation in itself. Indeed, the potency and significance of such transformation-cum-demystification could very well be emptied and evaporate when and if it remains within the gendered formal closure of an interior-focused diary. Sophia’s diary writing itself, in other words, may turn into a self-referential performative that is inherently self-abortive. Such performative permits neither possible actualization of its own potential signification nor any social spaces in the force fields of the lifeworld for the otherwise canceled life to return and inhabit.

True, making fiction is also making life. But words devoid of worlds, in the case of Ding Ling’s Miss Sophia, seem a discursively elaborate and concealed death trap in terms of both writing and living. With her literary mapping of the hidden horrors amid urban efflorescence, Ding Ling attempted to refuse the coercive routes of gendered and semicolonial erasure proclaimed by the power regimes as the only passages for Chinese women to become modern, and actualized her modern status as a women writer. Yet, much like in Mengke, the premise of imaginative writing as social praxis of making alternatives is at the same time constantly interrogated in her fiction, which haunts the woman author as if a specter of herself in the actual world. True again, imaginative writing is always relational and material. But the materiality of social relations is not reducible to imaginative writing in itself. If the appearances of Mengke, Miss Sophia’s Diary, and other writings as material products afforded Ding Ling ways of exceeding “Mengke’s predicament” and dealing with “Sophia’s agony,” Ding Ling seemed acutely aware of the limits of such exceeding and her unresolved precariousness as a “woman writer” in the times of a similarly precarious Republican China. Her choice of working in the terrain of the literary as her way of being in the world is haunted by her doubt of its cognitive efficacy in relation to the social arrangements of such a world. As Ding Ling says elsewhere, this was emblematic of a historically conditioned contradiction specific to a time and place where “passion for life,” as figured in “Sister Yün” and her death, is trapped if not eliminated by the deadly force fields of “old” and “new” power regimes.

Such “death traps” are not made absolute in Ding Ling’s writing though, for “Sister Yün” keeps returning in Sophia’s diary, live or dead, as an evocation of the possible readability and hence social intelligibility of Sophia, her demystification
of semicolonial allurements, and her transformative writing. The two female figures in *Miss Sophia’s Diary* ultimately double one another into a constitutive co-authorship in the attempt to invent a world of their own, a world that is alive and yet is rendered unreadable by their fraught environments phrased in similarly fraught discursive terms. In Sister Yün’s words noted down in Miss Sophia’s diary: Such is “the passion of all love, all life [that] has turned useless.” The passion is real life itself that is made hauntingly unreal. The passion for life is the real that haunts its own social foreclosure as the unreal. Indeed, the act of writing *Miss Sophia’s Diary* and its publication occurred in a moment of twentieth century Chinese history where, as discussed earlier, the necessary conditions for activist women to exist and for their existence to be socially intelligible seemed to have been eliminated. The real blood of women revolutionaries killed with particularly gendered cruelty in 1927 seemed glossed over by a recasting of the city in so-called cosmopolitan styles that induce the brand term “modern Shanghai,” featuring images of lipsticked, permed hair, high-heeled femininity. Such glossing over announces the ascendancy of a not yet quite consolidated or effective and therefore all the more coercive time-regime premised on the erasure of not only women revolutionaries but also revolutionary desires. But “passion for life” stirs on in Ding Ling’s writing of Miss Sophia’s diary with and for the dead Sister Yün. Driven by those erased souls, as it were, Ding Ling maps out Miss Sophia and her ghost sister Yün as registers of the central feature of the post-revolutionary China in the late 1920s: a moment where the violent intensity with which women activists were forced into their psychic isolation, social marginalization, and political elimination was matched by the similarly intense furies to burst the violence of such moment. Ding Ling’s fictional writing, doubled by her doubt of its cognitive efficacy, amounts to an intensely inhabited relationship to the violence in the heart of her actual environment, as a tension-ridden insistence on the imperative existence of those revolutionary women, those “ unbending” souls of the ghosted sisters.

**Bodies of the Metropolis**

This intensely inhabited relationship to the violence of a time-regime is often interpreted in psychologized terms. *Miss Sophia’s Diary* was hailed by many at the time as a novel portrait of the “tumultuous psychological interior of the modern female sex;” while later critics would see Sophia as a heroine imported from European literature, feminine hysteria intact. Without refuting either, I find it striking how the figure of Sophia is imbricated with a certain specific physicality of urban China in the late 1920s and the 1930s. The tuberculosis that Sophia suffers was not merely a stock feature of European literary heroines borrowed to suit a Chinese counterpart or a floating signifier devoid of human bodies. It is a chronic illness that was widespread in China and claimed numerous real lives. Tuberculosis in China, as in Europe, was an experience close to home for many readers, often threatening to suspend the boundaries between the fictional and the real or the educated and the illiterate under urban impoverishments of
varying degrees. Throughout days and nights, Sophia “lies in bed and coughs; sits on the stove and coughs; goes in front of the table and coughs.” She lives behind the closed door of her small apartment, “waiting, dragging out each day, every day, only hoping that this winter will be over soon,” wearing worn slippers and tattered mittens, living without regular income and struggling to write. In Ding Ling’s early writings recurs the figure of the modern writing woman as an educated female turned lone pauper, often in the grips of an urban epidemic. Her insistence on working through such gender-specific social shadows, one may argue, is featured by an impulse to bring their bodily materiality to the center stage in her literary landscape. The story published in the following year titled *A Diary of Suicide* (Zisha riji, May 1929), for instance, reports the daily routine of a writing woman named Yisai in the city of Shanghai, sick and alone. One day, after managed to entertain a “romantically inclined” man with a strenuous performance of feminine charm while evading his physical advance, Yisai gets back to her bed and begins her writing. Struggling with “words that have gone all wrong,” she finds herself attacked by sudden glimpses of what is hidden in her “wrong writing:"

I really do not need to worry [about his disappointment or his desires or his fantasies]. I am not a prostitute am I; I mustn’t go through such daily entertaining motions for these people. . . . Yet I can’t; I can only blame myself. To make someone momentarily happy or allow them keep their fancies, I lie; and I seem to feel that I should lie since I seem to hope that, when those people are pleased, I might have a bit of chance to achieve some ease with myself also, might I not? Yet all these are empty words. What I really truly mean to write down here is only one line, one line only: He has promised that he will bring me twenty dollars tomorrow (my italics).

A brutal truth sharply and momentarily surfaces between the flux of “all empty words” and the “one line only” that suddenly puts a full stop to it. Yisai’s writing is made possible by what she “has been doing” with her life but keeps out of her writing, for her writing seems an almost lyrical lamentation of the lack of meaning in her life and amounts to a repetitive contemplation of plans to die. While such contemplation precisely postpones her real action of suicide as if an endless ending made of “wrong words,” glimpses of simple brutality attack again in the final scene of the novella, where a gravely ill and penniless Yisai is pressed by her landlady to pay her rent debt:

Yisai pleaded to the landlady for a few days’ extension on the accumulated rent, and the old woman escalated her whining into a still more tearful tone. Yisai was at the end of her tether and looked with desperation around the empty small room. Then, she saw the diary book. She said:

“Get that for me!”

The old woman did not understand what she meant. Yisai then made a gesture with her hand, and the diary was brought to her. She tore down the
nine pages that had written words on them, rolled them into a tube-shape, and handed it to the old woman, telling her to go to several places where Yisai herself had been to before. She attached to the set of papers a note:

“Due to an emergency situation, need to exchange this for a few dollars, please, no matter how small amount it would be, give the money to the carrier of these words.”

In contrast to what Ding Ling the author attempted to make of her writings in her actual life, writing in Yisai’s world is unpacked not only as a process that discloses a gendered degradation and destitution. Yisai is no Sophia either in that her writing is not even her way of holding onto her precarious existence or insistence on existence. Involved in objectifying herself (“am I a prostitute”? to sustain her physical life in and as writing, Yisai comes face to face with her situation in which her writing in and of itself can be and turns out to be an exponent of her objectification. While struggling to cope with gendered degradation in order to gain means to write, Yisai’s writing is in and of itself part and parcel of the production of her degradation and destitution. The feelings of having no way out of such social degradation and physical destitution, which Yisai specifies, give definition to the figures of various suicidal writing females who rove across early Ding Ling’s literary landscape. They are at once fixed (they are always confined to their small apartment units) and floating (they are already in deep debts to their landlords and can be evicted out of their units at any moments) in the human geography of urban displacements. As palpable and shadowy bodies of such evocatively foregrounded human geography, their struggles amidst a peculiar volatile immovability register such a permeating sense of paralysis that threatens to wipe out possible alternative meanings of their life and collapse any cognitive efficacy of their writing.

The pain of such physical, psychic, or social paralysis, like the economic wealth and poverty in modern times, seems produced and distributed unevenly among its various carriers. As if urged by her own renditions of its different female carriers, Ding Ling paid increasing attention to such unevenness as she searched into the magnitude of such a pain inscribed onto and growing in widely various bodies. In April 1929, she published her short story *Sun (Rì)*. It begins as follows:

*It dawns.*

This is a metropolis bustling with noises and excitement, a semicolonial land, a place that is governed by some men and their imperialist countries as well as inhabited by a massive variety of peoples. As the East Sea reflects the first thread of sunlight, this place begins to emit its different and extraordinary colors; such distinctively different colors are stirring rhythms of different lives, under the one single blue and pale morning sky.

A short story again about urban life, the focus of its telescoping seems to begin with the eye of the lone figure of a woman behind the closed doors of a small
apartment writing “words [that] have all gone wrong.” The initial spatial-temporal framework of “one single . . . morning sky” is however immediately branched into the multiplicity of the city as the following passages bring about its differential temporalities of human geographies. There are luxurious apartments with stylish furniture that “[has] traveled across several oceans, handled by many hands of different skin-colors, and made with natural materials from the East and human labors in the West.” In those apartments, morning is a “soft rest” from nightly feasts, accentuated by “wine cups, dishes, cigarette stubs lying about in disorder” and the “languid men and women who [produce] such disorderly debris lying about in their silk quilts.” Doubling such a morning is that of “Chinese female streetwalkers” [who] “return with tottering legs to their unseen holes.” Extending from such apartments and their shadowy doubles, a larger geographical and social terrain is activated with the juxtaposition of “white men in formal hats,” “yellow men with bodies excessively nutritioned,” “women of white or yellow skins wearing same expensive make-up,” and “drunken navy men from remote places beyond the ocean.” Apart from but not far from such motley of protagonists emblematic of the foreign concessions in the metropolis, stand “broken and chaotic shelters” wrapped in thick smoke “from giant chimneys,” where hundreds of thousands of “Chinese people live.”65 As they “rush to work at the factories,” the night shift emerges from those same factories. “Several hundred factories – owned by white men, yellow men of non-Chinese nationalities, or Chinese men – are all whistling out sirens. The heavy doors of those factories are thrown wide open as huge crowds are coming out who, after their night shifts, are dirtier and more ragged than those coming for the morning shift. They are the ones who keep factory machines running day and night, working themselves to death.”66 Those “ragged” bodies make up “the Chinese territories” of Shanghai, segregated from and contiguous with the spheres of foreign concessions. Caught between these two places and peoples that divide the time and space of the metropolis, is “another place which is governed by the white race yet inhabited by the yellow ones; even the poorest white foreigners carefully skirt the place.”67 Here Chinese urban dwellers of limited means adapt themselves as much as they can to the social patterns of the Western-style material and psychic economy as they insist on their “middle class” status with their “normal families.”68 The “time” that “dawns” on the metropolis multiplies into scenes of contiguous and segregated human lives under the reign of a spatially arranged hierarchy.

For the first time in early Ding Ling, Shanghai of the late 1920s as the image and imaginary of modern China appears with physically organized and differentiated specificities, featuring a complex range of human bodies as a constellation of tensions and contradictions between the powerful and their varying “positional inferiors” and “social non-entities.” Historicizing such tensions and contradictions in a semicolonial city, Ding Ling’s female figure in “Sun” as a lone shadow is not only made by but also constitutive of a larger social context. Her dwelling in the midst of the “Chinese middle class” is marked out as a physical feature of her relationship with a particularly ordered lifeworld: A terrain
between the high-rises of the foreign concessions and the crowds of factory laborers and their hungry families. Her agony over her own state of being as a socially paralyzed human non-entity at a social “no-where” begins to show its specific contents indicative of an actual society. Much like other female figures in early Ding Ling, such contents do not seem to enter her own awareness, as “Sun” ends with her sinking into “muddled sleep” which again dissipates any possibility for her to work through such contents and, instead, conjures up a specter of death generic to all of Ding Ling’s sick, alone, furious, and suicidal females.69 And unlike in other stories by early Ding Ling, such contents enter or really engender the world of the literary in this fiction where the leading figure’s bodily location in the city rephrases the specter of death that haunts her into an index of her historically conditioned relationship with the city’s physiognomy. As the “upper layer” within the bioethnically marked, dominated species, they denote “the other place administrated by the white race yet inhabited by the yellow ones; where even the poorest white foreigners carefully skirt.”70 The real and distinct boundaries of this “other place” seem registered in the peculiarly abortive or uneven form of the fiction “Sun.” The magnitude of the physically differentiated, divided, segregated city, and the single shadow mapped out in its “upper layer” of the dominated, read like two stories knocked together with the result that neither is developed let alone completed. Yet it is precisely what is involved in this “knocking together” that is the key for the shaping up of what I call the Ding Ling story and the deepening of her significance, in writing and in life.

In a sociological sense, early Ding Ling the writer inhabited this “upper layer of the dominated species” or the terrain of “the urban Chinese middle class” indexed by her own invented literary figure here. Publishing a series of attention-arresting innovative works in the late 1920s, she was gaining an income while becoming part of Shanghai’s literary scene. In the winter of 1928, she was indicatively invited to attend a banquet hosted by a well-financed bookstore where “well-known writers” and owners of well-established publishing houses gathered. The editors of a commercially successful journal (Zhenshanmei) made a point of approaching her with an invitation to contribute to their special issue on “famous modern female writers.” “The work can be in any form and any length, we offer high advances, and all the contributors are the leading female authors since the May Fourth time,” as they put it.71 How Ding Ling responded to such invitation is discussed later. Suffice it to say here that, at least in the late 1920s, Ding Ling had landed in a situation where a literary career with a sustainable income was possible. Ding Ling did take such a possibility seriously, as evinced by the speed with which she published more works. One of her stories about women writers, “Yecao” (Yecao, May 1929), depicts the female title character who refuses to play the role of a “romantic heroine” that “modern Shanghai” assigned to its young and educated women. Instead, she concentrates on her work as a writer.72 The prospect of such a successful literary career is further rounded out in her novella “Shanghai Spring (Part One)” (“Yijou sanlinnian chun, Shanghai, zhiyi, 1930”), in the figure of the male protagonist as a prosperous writer.73 In the light of such a prospect, the high-rises of foreign concessions
seem reachable although often remain remote, while the Chinese shantytowns are kept securely away although not altogether out of sight. Ding Ling herself wrote later: “[In the 1920s,] I was already noted in the literary circles and was a writer of some fame. I could use this fame to get closer to some of the rich and famous, find a job with fine income, slowly climb up the social ladder, and finally crawl into elite society. Among my friends, there were some who did so.”74

The route for the upwardly mobile in the markets and/or force fields of the metropolis was then not a priori closed for the female sex. In fact, “female” as the sign of the sexualized feminine was not just on the market but constituted a market itself. That Ding Ling was eagerly invited to contribute to the “special issue” of a profitable journal evinces as much. This detail informs us how the players in the volatile and flourishing literary enterprises at the time noted Ding Ling as a profitable object for investment, her response to which indicates how critical she was of the gendered nature of that market. Deeply uneasy with what she felt as a market-driven move to capitalize on “feminine” writings that “have nothing to do with real effort to speak for women or address the woman question,” Ding Ling declined the invitation. When the editors persisted, she cut them short: “I sell manuscripts, but I do not sell on the word of ‘nü’ (female sex).”75 In Ding Ling’s eyes, to achieve upward social mobility by “selling the word of ‘nü’” is to inscribe an institutional scenario of gendered complicity in a semicolonial hierarchy and its grounding bioethnic politics that naturalizes its power relations posited on the foundational “natural” binary between the male and the female. Mengke, her first imaginary female friend, has long intimated Ding Ling’s take on such feminized-cum-sexualized “upward mobilities” as ghosting routes.

Ding Ling was not alone in recognizing the gendered casualties required as the premises of such scenarios of “fame and success.” Many women writers attempted as well to unpack such scenarios and the intricate implications of female complicity in such scenarios. Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Bai Wei, Wang Ying, and Yüan Changying, as discussed earlier, were among those who posed the question with what today may be called de-essentialized and hence all the more developed feminist insights in various ways on different occasions. Ding Ling was more noted at the time perhaps for her deployment of arrogance shown, for instance, in her abrupt rejection of the invitation to be included in “famous female writers.” Decades later, she recalls the event as an instance of the general conditions of society for women at the time and reflects as follows: “I still believe that such a bit of arrogance I had then is a good thing. If I did not have that bit of arrogance, I the poor and powerless – a young girl who by definition is socially weak – easily could have been muddled by the temptation to be in a ruinous limelight, and lost my way amidst multifarious corrupting and exploiting forces in the glittering fury and sound of Shanghai.”76

What distinguishes early Ding Ling from many of her literary sisters lies in the more radical implication of her refusal of her own “upwardly mobile marketability.” At the center of this female-levered and feminist resistance to the gendering function of the force fields in the service of modern profit, in other words, lies a rejection of their very constitution that objectifies all human beings
into *codes of differential exchange values*. Implied therein, such refusal questions the very premise that accords this socially arranged constitution a naturalness or inevitability that is ultimately “human weakness.” Namely, all human beings are naturally predisposed to be in passive complicity with or actively partake in the organized workings of such force fields where *differential rate of* market values or social worth metered to them might put them in an advantageous position to their fellow human beings. Ding Ling apparently acted “unnaturally” when she refused her own “femininity” that was “more marketability.” But Ding Ling seemed to work through the implication of her refusal with more cognitive boldness and passion than other women writers. She affords such implication a range of literary images and volumes of narrative variations by looking into the variable ways in which the pain of being objectified and exploited *reverberates* among the differently objectified. Her first novella *Mengke* for instance opens with the scene where, when the model hired for the fine arts class on oil painting of female nudity is sexually exploited and abused in the classroom, Mengke with her “higher status” as a woman student feels her own predicament in the suffering of the female model and protests against such abuse. At the same time, however, Ding Ling the author pinpoints a concealed “weakness” in other students through Mengke’s eye, “the *cowardliness* and *indifference*” as she puts it in the novella that is “hidden” in the response from other students toward “this incident” – “their ‘outrage’ [about the sexual abuse occurred in classroom] that is dramatically expressed after all has been concluded.” Namely, after the female model is fired, whereby Mengke’s departure also becomes inevitable. The interlocking between “indifference” toward a gendered suffering and “cowardliness” made here is significant, and how it is socially made is crystallized at the end of the novella. Mengke by then has already turned into the “rising film star,” yielding huge profits for the owners of the film industry and its chain-enterprises: “In certain kinds of newspapers and magazines, self-appointed great literary critics, dramatists, directors, and their cronies orchestrate praises.” “They all get what they want” by promoting and fixating her as “a national beauty of heavenly fragrance.” Concealed in the body of such “national beauty” is the ghosted Mengke, struggling with the sexualized exploitation that she “endures each day” in isolation. Institutionally and socially repressed, her feelings of pain resulting from her conditions remain hidden, while “she turns increasingly indifferent about herself, and her capacity of doing so is expanding to such an extent that she seems capable of forbearing any insults and humiliations of extreme kinds.”

Here the category “indifference” recurs, indexing the behavior of the “weak ones.” Yet rather than a “natural” behavior of female passivity, *the acting of indifference is designated here as a compelled complicity in the violence done to oneself just as to one’s fellow human beings*. Two detail scenes mentioned earlier, one where Mengke utters a muzzled wail alone in a bus at night; and another where she collapses in the shooting studio, *discloses how this “indifference” is a socially coerced “cowardliness” that makes one to disassociate oneself from one’s own sensorium about what is humanly valuable and fulfilling, and facilitates one’s disappearance into “the death trap” of the phantasmagoric upward mobility*. In Mengke’s case, such a death trap is her silver-screened visibility.
that renders her a sexual commodity first and defines her as an in effect sex object on glamorous display. “To die is easy,” Ding Ling once writes elsewhere, in what might have been a comment on just such a human casualty, “to live is difficult and hence is the real challenge.” Such “living death” as the state of being of the “weak ones” appears in many shapes, figures, scenes, and urban or rural landscapes in Ding Ling’s early writings. These range from the “millions of numb masses” working from dawn to night in Sun to the rural woman-turned-urban prostitute in A Small Room in Qingyun Lane devouring a bowl of her hard earned noodles without showing any feelings, and to the educated writing woman whose being collapses into an openly admitted cash-nexus transaction.

All such enforced and induced actings of indifference toward the horror of the force fields that equally objectify them into differential functions and exchange values, for Ding Ling, intimate, register and expose the defining feature of the force fields that objectify human lives and the true signification of such objectification: An absolutely equal indifference toward the differential human effects, consequences and casualties of such objectification, and an ultimate indifference toward humanity. Impulses and acts that refuse to internalize such same indifference as humanly natural, then, not only recur in her writing and life but also recur in such a way that they inherently gain a connective impetus toward differentially objectified human lives. As evinced in Ding Ling’s “arrogant rejection” of the invitation to be part of the “upward crawling” (as she puts it) scenario discussed earlier, such refusal in the very process of its activation engenders a female-levered impetus that connects a feminist struggle and passion for life with other different human effects, consequences, and casualties of an utterly indifferent operation of the force fields that objectify humanity. “Passion for life,” at work throughout early Ding Ling’s literary world as much as her life passages, refuses indifference while stirring up connective pain in differently objectified, brutalized human lives. True, the material destitution that the majority of urban poor suffered in real life is different from the agony evoked and troped by Ding Ling’s female figures in her fiction, and its actual magnitude points up the largest scandal in China’s largest metropolis in the 1920s and 1930s. For Ding Ling, however, it is the constitutively same indifference of an operative semicolonial hierarchy toward its different casualties that is “infuriating” (as she puts it in Miss Sophia’s Diary), in a personally cognizant and ethically pregnant way. It is from such a fury that what I call “the Ding Ling literary sensorium” intensifies to such an extent that it touches on and brings about an internal linkage among otherwise separate human bodies in pain, ranging from those of the materially dispossessed to those of the socio-psychically erased amidst the metropolis of indifferent violence. It is in the light of such sensorium that what Ding Ling evokes repeatedly in different moments of her life over the following decades can be better understood. “One’s discontents and pains should not remain as only personal,” she wrote in 1946 for instance, “expressions of such pain and discontent [hence] are not about venting one’s own spleen [either].” Ding Ling was of course not alone in gaining such a sense of a yet to be articulated linkage among different lives and struggles. Literary critics and social
theorists at the time invented various categories to give the linkage a socially intelligible shape. One of them, appearing in an essay published by Women's Journal (Fünü zazhi) in its August issue of 1924, defines those struggling ones of irreducible difference as elements of China’s emerging “wujia jieji,” or “the classes without jia.” The Chinese word jia connotes not only the site of effective family but also a sense of psychic belonging, a feeling of being present or at home in a social space. Indeed, one may argue that various female figures without “jia” in either or both connotations in modern Chinese literature point to and evoke the mobile “classes” of temporal displacements and spatial erasures in a deeply divided society. They body forth the problem of an objectified, exploited, displaced, or humanly placeless humanity that underlies modern Chinese history as the undeniable presence of the unseen, the painful rhythms of the unreal. The figurations of the “class” without “jia” in Ding Ling’s writings though quickly grow more elaborate than in works by many other writers, articulating in turn the lives of both those who literally lack a place to live such as basic shelter and those who suffer from a psychic sense of social exclusion.

From late 1929 on, Ding Ling began more explicitly to work through the irreducible contents of those different pains, degradations, and destitutions, with an imaginative energy that precipitates her “female furies” to connect themselves with a widening range of social struggles. In the light of such materially grounded imagination charged with a connective ethical impetus, the “women’s question” as the problem of the bioethnically marked “weaker sex” becomes the problem of the violence in the heart of the socially arranged force fields and their variable operations that claim differential human casualties. The problem of the “weaker sex” is the problem of such casualties required by a predatory time as its inherent preys, the problem of the “weak ones” coerced into being by the indifferent violence of a semicolonial metropolis and doubled by recurrent furies that are their own ghosted mon coeur.

Feminist Constellation, Feminist Passage

The making of connections among different “weak ones” entails and indeed requires transformations of all the involved through political practice and formal innovation in literary writing, as explored in the next chapter. Immediately important to note here in my discussion is that such connections among the different occur in Ding Ling’s life earlier than in her writing. Her relationship with her first common-law husband is a defining instance. When Ding Ling, then Jiang Bingzhi, encountered Hu Yeping in Beijing in 1924, she saw in him not only a young man also from Hunan Province aspiring to be a poet. As she puts it: “I was deeply stunned and then moved by his boldness, passion, persistence, optimism, and sheer poverty.” The two began to live together in 1925 with little or no money but a passion for literary writing. For the rest of her life, Ding Ling remembered how Hu Yeping supported her writing as a “meaningful life” itself. “He went out in thin clothes to find work during the day and stayed up late at night to write commercial fiction to spare me of the burden of worries about
livelihood,” Ding Ling recalls decades later. When Ding Ling “asked him to put aside his commercial writing” and proposed to write for income herself, Hu Yepin did not listen:

\[\ldots \text{[since]} \] he did not want me to write for money. It had always been the case from the outset of our life together: When we needed money, he would himself write commercial things. The moment I started writing, he would do anything to make our life a bit more comfortable, or quietly pawned a few things of his, so that I would not have to feel the pressure of our poverty and lose my literary mood. To this day, I cannot help but think of Yepin when I produce a piece of writing; thinking of his respect for my literary labor, the care and nourishment he offered me with his heart and capability. The fact that I have continued writing, particularly during that early and most difficult period, is really due to such cherishing as I received from Yepin.88

As with all memory, hers here is no doubt selective.89 The fact remains however that Hu Yepin was probably one of the most revolutionary among his contemporaries in terms of his idea of love, his relationship with Ding Ling, and his support for the women’s movement. An emerging young poet, Hu Yepin went much further than many of his friends in his refusal to accept the “signs of reality” in the aftermath of the failed First National Revolution.90 His short story titled “In the north wind” (“Beifengli,” 1928) uncannily evokes and indicatively resonates with the female figures in early Ding Ling writings. Its leading figure, a young man, wanders in the winter of North China without a sense of social belonging or psychic destination, food, shelter, or enough clothing. All he has is an unarticulated determination to confirm life.91 When the young couple arrived in Shanghai in 1928, Shen Congwen, a literary friend from their early days in Beijing and an admirer of Euro-American liberalism in the post-revolutionary Shanghai, observed of the literary life that Hu Yepin and Ding Ling were co-making:

The visibility that the leftist writers enjoyed [in the First National Revolution] now has become passé due to a combination of factors.\ldots No clever person would attempt to join the “fun” again – “The literary left” was simply no longer a fashionable noun. That these two picked this subject up at precisely such a time probably surprised everyone who knew them\ldots They placed what the others viewed as a passé at the center of their concern, their study, and their endeavors. They did so because what moved and motivated them was nothing other than their own conclusions about the social phenomena that they had been observing and probing over the cause of several years. They do not begin their endeavors by calculating whether a certain set of questions is permissible or profitable to explore, but by deciding whether such questions are worthy of exploration\ldots They understood that, for real change to occur in a society or a country there must be some people who fulfill their responsibilities with effort, tenacity, courage, and self-sacrifice. Without hesitation, they took this somehow untimely task in their hands, and from then on would never let it go.92
The memoir provides clues about the connectiveness of the couple’s literary works, social imagination, and political propositions. They were persistent in their literary evocations of the “weak” as nothing given but socially enforced, in a time-regime where the impetus of social Darwinism was gaining momentum. That they seemed to put themselves in an impossible situation was clear to Shen and most of their literary friends. The First National Revolution was over; “the government no longer allowed businessmen to make money out of ‘proletarian literature’ even if it had good markets.” Formerly inviting journals now bypassed their works. “They gave such reasons as ‘the works were a bit too substantive about life,’” as Shen Congwen records. Works for “women’s movements and emancipation” logically sounded “outdated” precisely because such movements were being violently erased and more urgently needed than ever. It was a time when the substantially relevant works were radically incommensurable with the time-regime, its protocols, and its induced or coerced patterns of cognitive, moral, and social behaviors. Ding Ling and Hu Yeping’s insistence in producing their untimely works is also then their insistence on their life’s imperative timeliness.

Such insistence makes their relationship profoundly unrecognizable in the terms of heterosexual economy and its stipulated gender roles in the 1920s. As early as in her 1928 short story, “A Moonlit Night When an Intruder Came” ("Qian laile ke de yüeye"), Ding Ling sketches out “a lack of money” that makes it a struggle to keep not only writing but life going. The youthful tone in the piece does not clear up the ominous implications of the situation. By early 1930, the situation was worse than what the fictional pieces registers and discloses. Ding Ling was pregnant and then in November she gave birth to a boy. Hu Yeping had to pawn his overcoats and other items to provide the necessities for “my young mother” as he called Ding Ling. When there was nothing left to pawn, Hu Yeping took up a teaching job at a high school in Shangdong province. There he was exposed to Marxist ideas more systematically and became a leading force in the Marxist-oriented student movements. The provincial authority soon issued a secret order to jail him, the president of the student union, and others. Hu Yeping escaped to Shanghai via Qingdao with many students. In Shanghai, as a member of the League of Leftist Writers (founded in March 1930) and the CCP underground, he finished his major work, the novel Light is in front of us (Guangmin zai women qiantao, 1931). Yet just as his writings had no print space wherein to appear, his life had no material world wherein to exist in the crisis-ridden metropolis. On the 17th of January 1931, Hu Yeping was arrested by the nationalist government along with several other members of the League of Leftist Writers: Poets Rou Shi and Yin Fu, novelist Li Qiushi, and woman poet and writer Feng Keng. On February 7 – though the date cannot be definitively verified due to the secrecy surrounding the event – the KMT military police executed them all in the night. The placeless females in Ding Ling’s literary landscape were embodied in the real blood shed by male and female together, the blood of the untimely lives that carries most timely imperatives.

Ding Ling’s first common-law marriage was then an impassioned but socially placeless connection made between two different lives. The real and yet impossible
connectivity at work therein survives the violent erasure in the form of Hu Ye's death and keeps returning in Ding Ling’s life and work. The physical elimination of such a connection at the moment, however, was devastating for Ding Ling. Shen Congwen’s *On Ding Ling* (*Ji Ding Ling*, 1934) depicts how this turn of events nearly destroyed the woman writer. Ding Ling’s own story – “From Midnight to Dawn” (“Song yewuan dao tianliang,” April 23, 1931) registers a physical and psychic crisis in her life and a life-and-death turning point in her writing. For a month, Ding Ling was in the grip of a frantic effort to “find” Hu Ye. On February 10 she received both the news of his death and his letter written during the day of February 7 in which “utter optimism and vitality were still palpable... I read and read... from this letter I looked back at his life, remembering his vigor, tenacity, passion, and devotion, he was a person with such strength! He searched for a way out throughout his whole life, he endured all the rammings, bumpings, hardships, he was finally discovering his path... and yet they did not allow him to be... My heart was broken for him. I wailed uncontrollably and couldn’t stop myself... I knew I must do more than be heart-broken. ... I did not know what to do.” What she did was the impossible and imperative, namely, to continue her writing, by the way of insisting on the connectedness between her lifework and that of Hu Ye, for all those similarly disappeared friends and their recurrently haunting memories.

For Ding Ling and like-minded writers, the early 1930s perhaps constituted one of the worst moments in modern Chinese history. Among the “weaker sex” trying to maintain their hard-won social space since the May Fourth period, Bing Xin was by then unable to write due to health problems, Lu Yin, pauperized and exhausted, was soon to die giving birth to her third and last child. Chen Hengzhe, Ling Shuhua, and Feng Wuanjun had all stopped literary writing by 1928. Shi Pingmei had died in 1928 at the age of twenty-six. Prominent women writers of the 1927 revolution did not manage well either. Xie Bingying, after leaving the dismantled women’s regiment of the Northern Expedition, returned to the family from which she had fought to escape in the first place. Bai Wei was battling with daily hunger and ruinous illness. Lu Jingqing, Shi Pingmei’s closest friend, was under KMT police surveillance. The conditions of women are indeed a vital index of the conditions of humanity as a whole. It was only logical that, while the women’s movement for liberation was made to disappear in life and in writing, writers of various ideological persuasions including Euro-American liberalism found themselves without a venue to publish their literary writings let alone air their social views. The KMT police closed down journals such as *Budding* (*Menya*), *World Culture* (*Shijie wenxue*), *Cultural Struggles* (*Wenhua douzheng*), *Mountain Balti* (*Bati shan*), *Pathbreaker* (*Tuohuang zhe*) and others. More lives, and writings, were not only weakened but also literally endangered.

As she lived through those days, Ding Ling’s continued writing branched out to reach a wide-ranging body of the politically silenced, socially erased, or physically eliminated. She accepted the League of leftist Writer’s invitation to be the editor of its journal *The Plough* (*Beidou*) in 1931, a dangerous job that might well have cost her her life. The cover of its first issue was a print of a woodcut titled
“Sacrifice,” in which a stony faced mother with large frozen tears holds in her extended arms the dead body of her child. Its author Kathe Kollwitz was an East Prussian woman who lost her two sons abroad to the First World War she opposed, and who spent all her life in urban ghettos, working with her husband – a medical doctor – and trying to save young and old lives more from human-made poverty than “natural” illness. Ding Ling received the woodcut print from Lu Xun, who was himself at the time under constant harassment from the police. He had lost his close friend Rou Shi among the “literary five,” and was in a few years to succumb at the age of fifty-six due to a harsh life and wretched health. “This female figure makes us want to leave this place that is not like a human world;” he wrote of the woodcut; “yet all the while she urges us to hold onto our life, for perhaps better days.” Evoking a range of transgender, transcultural and transnational connections with its gender-specific and female-levered figuration, the woodcut and Lu Xun’s words must have appealed to Ding Ling in a most personally felt but not simply personal way. Ono Kazuko, one of the Japanese pioneers in Chinese women’s history, gives an astute articulation to the significance of such connections decades later. For the Chinese revolutionary women, she states, “the woman question” as that of equal rights for men and women was never only a gender-confined question, for it was connected both to the reality of men’s [denied] rights and to the essence of political and economic equality of all people. One may regard early Ding Ling’s acumen about the implication of her refusal of the humanly indifferent metropolis and its gendering function as an intimation of the given material grounding of such connection. One may then also see in Ding Ling’s continuing effort to work with a range of writers in the aftermath of Hu Yeping’s death an indication of how, specifically, the transboundary connection is also made by her as a woman writer, both in writing and in life. This transboundary connection in the making suggests how a certain female-leveraged connectivity, as Ono Kazuko and other contemporary scholars observe, operates in Chinese feminist mapping of Chinese society and the world while giving an ethnical definition to its imaginative dynamics. It is such a connectivity that features key political strategies of Chinese women’s movements.

Such connectivity takes particularly foregrounded shape and dynamics in Ding Ling’s writings from 1931 on. A cluster of her stories appearing between 1931 to 1933 gather different social aporias and human erasures with forceful imagination. Her extending constellation of differently ruined human lives and denied existences reaches its epic scope with stirring power when it includes figures of ninety percent of the populace in the 1930s – the Chinese peasantry – in her novella Water (Shuì, 1931). Water was serialized in The Plough from September to November in 1931 and often cited as the beginning of “later Ding Ling” turning away from her “early feminism.” As a novella, it foregrounds the endangered land of rural China and its human inhabitants in a time of extreme violence: the time of a recurrent flood that attacks multiple provinces, village by village, leaving in its wake miles of piling up wreckage, human and otherwise. The organizing figuration of the novella indeed drastically shifts from
those of the young and educated females center-staged in Ding Ling’s early writings; yet it never allows the bodies of women out of its enacted human geography in the grips of a temporal tyranny. In fact, the novella begins with a scene set in what is physically bodied forth by and socially marked as the female terrain: a thatched shelter as a rural domestic site, where a group of village women have gathered in intense silence. Carrying small children in their arms, they are holding their breaths while listening to something: “The wind is sending certain sounds that make one very uneasy, uncertain sounds, perhaps, perhaps it is just the wind itself that is walking through the tips of thick trees and their branches?” A few of them start talking in low voices, as if fearful of their own sound. A deaf granny, toothless and hairless, cuts through the tense air and the low mumblings with her “dry and trembling voice” as she begins to talk to herself:

Heavens! The fortune-teller says that this year is my threshold. If the flood would not chase and get me, I would live. So many disasters in my life, I have survived all. This time, I don’t know. I am not afraid of death, I am afraid that if I die like this, how about all those children and children’s children of mine. My old bones matter nothing; but how about my children, and children’s children, my children . . .

A specter from the past and a shadow of the present, the old granny seems also to intimate a world losing its future time – the time of all her children, and children’s children. Time is indeed crucial here. Able-bodied men, young and old, including teens, are all at the dyke of several miles long, adding soil and bags of stones. The flood has been running through neighboring villages and breaking everything on its way, so they must hurry up and win the time and make their dyke strong before the floodwater attacks. Suddenly, before anyone actually sees it in the dark night:

The floodwater [appears], and with its long and stretched legs it runs fast as if it is flying, dashes fiercely toward [them, their dyke, and their] land, roaring like thunder, becoming huge volumes of darkness in the night. Crazed people, losing their senses, screaming in despair whose intensity tears up the universe, are tumbling toward [their] dyke that is being breached; they are running from all sides and miles and miles of distances, holding torches in their hands.

The dyke, the material entity constructed to regulate unpredictable forces and the symbolic mark of a human organization of life, is finally broken and then collapsed. Hundreds and thousands of human bodies are plunged instantly and then disappear into the flooding water without a sound. From this point on and in the following chapters, Water traces every turn of the nightmarish motion and indefinable magnitude of the flooding, from village to village, from area to area, from province to province, unstoppable in its violence and endless in its reign. In
its wake, miles of wasteland emerge covered with dead bodies of humans or animals, in pieces. Then here and there some shadowy things begin to stir amid the dead, rising as if skeletons returning from the unknown: Those are the human survivors. They begin to look for food, bark, guanyinta, anything, to eat. They search for their families or kin or fellow villagers. They gather in small groups, in large crowds, and covered with mud and in the grips of hunger, as a multitude they move toward the county town in the hopes of finding lifesaving help from those who govern the land, its granaries, and its institutional resources. Yet official announcements are issued, disallowing them to enter the county town, and warning that anyone who agitates “mob behavior” is to be punished. In a novella of only about five thousand words, such a scenario repeats, as recurrent rhythms of an unchanging time and its denied humanity:

Time crawls, . . . marked by suffering, starving, despair, and struggles; water still occupies the lower parts of the land, some human and animal corpses, floating and shifting on the water and then sink again. A few higher places turn into islands with some signs of living humans, remaining to be saved from the looming shadows and actual teeth of death . . . [Now] on the land in full sun [again] and under the blue day sky, next to the trees whose green leaves are all eaten and on the big rocks that cannot feed any lives, there gathered large groups of people. They are living horrors. Their torn clothes are hanging on their dirt-covered nodes of bones, their hair is very long, and in their dark faces are animal-like, crazed big eyes driven by starvation (my italics).

Time is not theirs. As “living horrors” made by such a time, they are inscribed as horror itself. Newspaper cameramen emerge to take pictures of such “horror” and dressed-up ladies in high-heels pay its scene a visit with curious and frightened looks and startled sighs. Officials from large cities descend there and gather around official banquets to make sure that “the horror” of those “living horrors” is prevented from breaking into the county town and ruining its normal order of social arrangements. As natural time moves in circles in Water, in other words, the socially structured content of the time remains unchanging, fixing the destiny of the “living horrors” on the wrong side of the time as it were, rather than behind the time. Illuminating thereby how the natural disaster is compounded by human made violence, Water fundamentally questions the logic of such violence in the light of which human catastrophes so compelled are simply natural selections of the doomed and the useless:

Time is slowly crawling; water is also slowly receding in some places, exposing wet mud patches here and there. Scattered around are the human corpses that were not washed away by the torrents, or that somehow floated from other places and got stuck here. The limbs and trunks of humans and animals are now decaying, attracting legions of flies while crows are circling above. The heat of the sun is accumulating. The wind of summer captures the smells of the dead bodies and sends them in all directions. Epidemic
comes after the flooding, following people on their heels long with starvation. Refugees of various kinds linger there; their number increases each day as more arrive there each day and they also decrease each day as more die there each day – the god of death seems to have settled in the place and the rule of its time unchanging. First gone are those babies who are not weaned yet. Hanging onto their mothers’ shriveled breasts, they die in their mothers’ withered arms. Then the elderly stop breathing. The next would be once able-bodied women, lingering on with their last bit of tears . . . and finally men whose muscles and flesh are disappearing . . . . If they remain here and now – the place and time where and when their miseries are made and their labor as misery deemed no use anymore, they find themselves standing next to death itself without exit\textsuperscript{118} (my italics).

Scenes of human catastrophe evoked here, recurring throughout the novella, did recur in the decades of modern China’s actual history. Ding Ling is certainly not the only writer who, in non-fiction prose, delineates her memory of such scenes of flooding and mass deaths across the land that she saw “with her own eyes.”\textsuperscript{119} From 1928 to 1932, in particular, the havoc caused by the Yellow River floods occurred at least every other year, each time claiming twenty to thirty million lives while most severely affecting Hunan, Shangdong, and Hebei provinces. The Yangtze River also flooded, as did Huai River, affecting Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, and Jiangsu provinces with no less destructive effects. The U.N. sent a range of specialists to China in the midst of the 1946 Yellow River flood to work as an international relief team. They turned informed witnesses of the magnitude of its human toll, less as the result of natural disasters and more as an index of socio-organizational failures and systemic collapses.\textsuperscript{120} The recurrence of such disasters with increasing frequency and widening scope and without institutional containment or effective mediation, indexes a fraught and fragile human geography that could be sent into unraveling by any extra disturbance.\textsuperscript{121} And such systemic unraveling precisely reveals the connection among its different bodies as inherent casualties in a structural and structured state of constant emergency. Indeed, the problem of the massive numbers of human bodies being made repeatedly superfluous is not new in modern world history. What is particular in Ding Ling’s writings lies in their potency in bringing about a constellation of the different yet resonating or connective embodiments of the suspended, doomed, useless, and superfluous. In her early works, the time-regime of the modern once “dawns” as a promise of new social openings for young and educated females. Its gender-specific operation however repackages the women into commodities for semicolonial consumption. In her other works such as “Sun,” such a time-regime is disclosed as being premised upon the segregated human worlds ranging from foreign concessions, shantytowns and small apartments of “the middle class” Chinese. Now, in Water, its operation seems to show its true historical scope as it requires yet another collection of human casualties. A massive proportion of rural, propertyless humanity must be flooded away if they are deemed useless for and in the way of the modern time regime in its ever-
expanding motions. A crisis occurs in the heart of the legitimizing premise of the modern that hinges on the promise and claim of a better place for the majority of human beings to be in the world of a future temporal. The multitude in Water invalidates such a premise by disclosing not only how “the [able-bodied men’s] labor” is their source of misery, but also how even their “misery” is periodically and repeatedly made useless and hence placeless in the tyrannical flux of the modern temporal. Such invalidation transpires most pointedly when human access to any future temporals is lost first for “the babies” and their “young mothers.” Without babies, humanity has no future. And modern promise is all about the promise of a future temporal. The logic of producing “horror of the living horrors” are then in contradiction with the life of humanity, and yet in accordance with the so-called “laws of nature” propounded or rather established by modernity itself for and as its foundation of natural normalcy. “How about my children, my children’s children, my children,” hence the hairless and toothless granny repeats in the opening scene of the novella “like an incantation”:122

“It was decades ago, I was small, seven years old, just in Long Er’s age. I ate bark, guanyintu, wandered in many places, following others, in large groups, many people at first, but then more and more disappeared, famine, epidemics, corpses lying everywhere, who would or could manage to give them proper burials, wild dogs ate them, crows fed on them, too many too many died. My elder sister, my baby brother – he was not yet weaned and died before my sister, my aunty died after her, followed by my uncle, ... I was seven years old, a little girl with big life chances, I dragged on living, I dragged on and came here, I was a little beggar wandering for long long time, I was sold later as a maid servant to the Zhang’s estate, and I did not die though I was beaten every day ... Sixty-five years ago, like right in front of your eyes when you think of those things ... I was just about Long Er’s age, seven years old, I had a small plait, like the tail of a little sparrow ... that was the first time I saw flood, floodwater ... flooding, ... and later on ...” Long Er, her grandson, does not like to hear his name mentioned by grandma, he is a bit afraid as he listens to that intermittent sound from her dry voice, something ominous feels about to get near and near ... 124

As if a haunting vibrant from and through historical nightmares, it is not incidental that granny’s graphic scene refers to the mid nineteenth century when modern China “dawned” in violent traumas. Indeed, modern time is a time of structural violence that structured a century-long state of emergency in China from its “dawning” on the Chinese horizons. And its concomitant great power politics inscribed the bodies of the Chinese as embodiments of “weakness” itself, which registers a major chapter of modern world history where structured emergency is naturalized as a bioethnical destiny of the human casualties bioethnicized by such time-regimes. Center-staging the lives that are dispossessed and displaced in such time-regimes in the figure of old granny, the novella Water
cognitively maps and ethically evaluates such structural violence in its variations with graphic imagery and connective impetus, brings about a defining event in the making of the modern Chinese feminist imagination. Ding Ling’s ethically charged cognitive figuration of such a structured violence and structured emergency, in short, is female-levered in its key bodily shapes and significations. In Water as in elsewhere, such figuration conjures up the agonies of her early socially erased females in connection with the struggles of the materially dispossessed multitude, across the urban and rural as much as the male and female divide. In the structural context of a country where the majority of women resided in rural areas as the economically most impoverished, any feminist claims that are made without the bodies of the rural and the propertyless are phrases emptied of living human content.

The old granny in Water is caught in the often fatal attacks of flooding since her childhood. Ding Ling the actual woman knew such fatal danger in real life for she had been “walking on the edge of death” with her mother since her childhood. After Hu Yeping’s execution, she was caught up in a series of political flooding of explicitly ominous implications. She was increasingly under the tightening surveillance of the KMT’s policing apparatus and mounting pressures of economic poverty, and her life as a woman, writer, and mother was barely sustainable. In spring 1932, she went to Hunan and left her child with her mother while concealing the news of Hu Yeping’s death from the aging woman, and returned to Shanghai alone. There she began her writing about her mother in her third novel Mother (Muqin). It is indicative of both the time in which the novel was set and the time in which Ding Ling the novelist lived that the writing of Mother was cut short, as if pointing to the similarly cut short history of Chinese women’s revolution upon which the Republican era was based and consolidated. Ding Ling stopped at chapter four where the leading figure, mother Yu Manzhen, and her best friend Xia Zhenren as well as other women students, organize a political society to discuss China’s possible future in the modern world and the future of a possibly different modern world. The novel seems unable to complete its textual body just as it seems unable to actualize its story in history. The KMT kidnapped Ding Ling in Shanghai on May 14, 1933 and immediately transferred her to Nanjing in strict secrecy. Three long years of house arrest thereby began, which registers a gendered choice on the part of the power regime under the mounting public agitation for her rescue. Liangyou Publishing House’s speedy publication of the unfinished Mother was an integral part and a direct result of such public agitation. The manuscript was sent to production one week after Ding Ling’s disappearance and its first print appeared three months later, on August 20, 1932 when it was believed that Ding Ling had been executed like her literary and political partner Hu Yeping and others.

The incomplete or cut short body of Mother evokes numerous similar instances in modern Chinese women’s writing lives, of which Qiu Jin and her Stories of Jingwei Bird constitute one of the earlier cases. A rupture in both material and symbolic senses, it points to the predicament of Ding Ling’s existence and of
those women whose lives she was re-enacting. As a life cut violently short, it also intimates the abortive nature of the 1911 Chinese bourgeois revolution, laments the far-reaching consequences of the failure of the 1927 revolution, and indicts the anti-woman character of the Republican era in the 1920s and the 1930s. And as an unfinished painful impetus, it embodies and tropes a gender-specific and female-levered “struggle to live against and on the edge of death” in the brutal climate since the late 1920s. Mother haunts like an imperative for the variously cut short texts in print and denied bodies in life to return and re-inhabit the world. The impetus of this imperative recurs throughout Ding Ling’s writings and life across the otherwise much noted divide between “early Ding Ling” and “later Ding Ling,” thereby evoking a Chinese feminist passage that is an insistence on and praxis of transformation for the cut short and denied lives to actualize their yet-to-be actualized stories in and as histories.
Facts do not necessarily amount to what is real.

Ding Ling, 1940

Ding Ling and her writing disappeared in April 1933, together, as if an inseparable pair made of a real woman and her imagined sister. The KMT secret police who put her under house arrest saw the value of her literary fame and offered rewarding scenarios whereby she would either go abroad to study or continue to write at home, in return for which she would be expected to “stay away from politics.” Ding Ling refused both scenarios and would neither write nor publish from Nanjing, the seat of the KMT government and the capital of Republican China. Such writings and publications, whatever their claimed social orientation, would in her view render the identity of “Chinese woman writer” into a symbolic capital for the prevailing regime as an effective concealment of its policing violence. Here lies a basic feminist message: The inseparability (alongside irreducible distinctions) between the artistic and the actual, the discursive and the physical, the imaginative writing and the material living, which are always bound up with larger contextual issues of social conditions and political connotations. It was literary writing that led Ding Ling to the critical mapping and ethical evaluation of the conditions uninhabitable for her female figures. And yet such conditions in real life worked to render her writings unpublishable and hence what I, by way of evoking a range of contemporary theorizations on modern politics of visibility and disappearance, call unreal. Concomitantly, if her imaginative writing gave rise to a critical impetus to change such conditions for society and humanity to develop modern forms, such changes were urgently in need of being made not only as the preconditions for but also as constitutive exponents of her life itself in writing. Ding Ling needed to do something to bring about such changes and, surviving some of the most agonizing hours in her life and several failed attempts, she succeeded in taking the first step. After a life-threatening bout of typhoid fever, Ding Ling began to write again. Some months later, on September 18, 1936, with the help of leftist literary friends, Ding Ling escaped from Nanjing and arrived in Shanghai. As the woman who went to meet her at the train station recalls, she
was wearing a qipao made of brown velvet and a Western-style overcoat of fine wool. By mid November and after a tortuous journey, Ding Ling reached Baoan, Shanxi Province, where the CCP leaders resided. On 22 November, the

Figure 7.1 Ding Ling in Yan’an in 1938
All China Association in Arts and Literature was founded in Baoan and Ding Ling was elected to be its director. As the actual woman joined the Chinese revolution at its base in the Border Regions, another collection of her literary writings titled *Unexpected Collection* (*Yiwaiji*) was published in Shanghai by the Liangyou Publishing House. The long vanished Chinese woman writer thus returned to the scenes of literary world and the world of the living.

For the disappeared to return, in print or in life, profound changes in terms of her living conditions have to be imaginable if not actually occurring. And when the disappeared is indeed returning, such changes are in the making in the spheres of social relations or even in the forms of human existence. Qiu Jin’s drama of the mythological bird Jingwei, whose recurrence reconfigured her own shapes and the meanings of her world discussed in Chapter 2, intimates as much; and the scenes of Ding Ling’s literary world and actual life imbued with the spirit of Qiu Jin’s “Jingwei drama” shall be visited later. Suffice it to say here that Ding Ling’s reappearance in Yan’an and her subsequent work and life throughout the 1940s amounted to no less than a revolutionary turning point in the history of Chinese women’s writings, the implications of which are explored in this chapter.

It is worth noting that, in late 1936, Ding Ling caused a stir in the KMT-controlled areas as well as in the CCP base of the border regions. Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhang Wentian, Bo Gu and other CCP leaders personally welcomed her arrival, while newspapers and journals of large circulation in the KMT-controlled areas carried her photos in and for their headlines. Ding Ling, putting aside her *qipao*, now donned a uniform made of crude gray cotton, with a matching hat that settled “on her rather large head with very short hair.” The reconfigured image of the famed female writer from Shanghai was at once sharply foreign yet uneasily familiar to many eyes within and across the CCP and KMT divisions, as if a sight of the unsettling times. Only a month after her arrival in Yan’an, the Xi’an Incident took place. On July 7, 1937, the Lugouqiao Incident formally launched Japan’s full-scale invasion of China. The following succession of drastic turns of events altered the political horizons of the Republic era and soon led to the Second Coalition between the CCP and the KMT as well as the subsequent mobilization of the country for the resistance. China and its inhabitants of divided social and political positions once again found themselves caught up in a defining moment of their crisis-ridden lives in the twentieth century, amidst the unfolding Asian theater of the century’s Second World War.

On the literary front, some key leftist theorists led by Zhou Yang in Shanghai quickly responded by proposing the concept of “literature of national defense” (*Guofang wenxüe*) as the guiding principle for writers. Others led by Lu Xun differed, as they saw in the mobilization of the War of Resistance a momentum that could not be confined to the category of “national defense,” and proposed the alternative concept of “a literature of and for the ordinary people’s social activation in the resistance against Japanese invasion” (*Dazhong wenxüe*). An intense and politically charged debate followed. On July 7, 1940, a statement by a group of artists titled “Our Faith” (“Women de xinnian”) appeared in the Singaporean publication *Nanyang shanbao* (*South business daily*) and began with
Wang Ying’s line on the “double nature” of the Resistance: “This war of resistance is a war for national liberation in terms of its international positioning and external campaigns, and it is a war of social revolution in terms of its domestic programs and internally transformative goals.”11 Wang Ying and her fellow artists, while performing to mobilize overseas support for the resistance, apparently concurred with Lu Xun’s view and regarded the War of Resistance not simply as a Chinese military expression of bioethnically posited modern nationalism.12 According to its date of publication, Wang Ying’s “Our Faith” was written after Mao Zedong had intervened in the Lu Xun–Zhou Yang debate on behalf of the CCP leadership in Yan’an and, through Feng Xüefeng, a major literary critic and Lu Xun’s close friend, had conveyed his support of Lu Xun’s proposal. Yet Wang Ying’s articulation of such a view was no mere repetition of the CCP party line: she had devoted her life to work “for the transformation of Chinese society” since the 1920s as a literary writer, dramatic performer, and political activist adamant about women’s demands to undo traditional or modern systems of social gendering. Earlier than Wang Ying, Xiao Hong had articulated her thoughts on the resistance movement, as if anticipating Wang Ying’s characterization of its “double nature.” Choosing to review in 1937 – the timing is significant – the autobiography of her woman friend and American national Agnes Smedley, Xiao Hong emphasizes the idea of and the need for China’s social transformation as an integral part of its war of “national defense:” “What is the purpose of the national resistance movement if not the transformation of China? If the resistance did not simultaneously bring about the social transformation of our country and women did not think better, know better, and do better as a result, any so-called victory of the war would have no genuine meaning.”13 Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Bai Wei, and other women writers published prose works that resonated with Xiao Hong’s.14

Under house arrest, Ding Ling had not participated in the debate. Her stories in Unexpected Collection (Yiwai ji), however, afford the reader glimpses of her convergence with Wang Ying, Xiao Hong, Lu Xun, Feng Xüefeng (who was also her close friend), and others. The short story “Evening gathering” (“Yehui,” 1931), for instance, depicts a group of workers of Japanese owned factories converging to learn about and mobilize themselves for the resistance, their critical impulse for change moving beyond nationalist sentiment.15 After she arrived in Yan’an, one of the poorest regions of rural China and the center of the CCP-led movement that eventually led to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Ding Ling’s activity of a simultaneously artistic, social, and political nature engages and bodies forth what Wang Ying called “the double nature of the resistance” in terms of what Xiao Hong envisioned as “simultaneous social transformations.” It is in the thick of the CCP-led movement that her imaginative work and stormy political life made her the leading woman writer of twentieth century China and the Chinese revolution as much as a principle instance of the intensely contested problematics of the revolution. A yet-to-be deciphered and variably revisited female monument to a revolution whose vital,
intricate, conflict-ridden dynamics and multidimensional connotations are by no means rendered transparent in the world chronicles of modernity and among innumerable theories of modernization. It was known that, in Yan’an, Ding Ling was investigated for her “Nanjing past” as early as in 1938 and severely criticized for her present writing during the Rectification Movement in 1942. These investigations, looked upon retrospectively, seem to foreshadow her troubles in 1955 and then years of trials and tribulations from 1957 to the early 1980s. Her at once fluid and persistent politics of art and aesthetics of life in the 1940s, traceable in her early passages and remaining vibrant until her death in 1986, amounts to what may be called the making of a story central to the histories of writing Chinese women, the Chinese feminist imagination, and the Chinese revolution. It is what I call the Ding Ling story.

The Art of Performing Agency

Recent scholarship on Ding Ling in Yan’an tends to foreground the discursive signification of her writings and the controversies surrounding or political pressures underlying such writings. It is worth noting though that her artistic activity in Yan’an began as organizer, director, playwright, and performer of the Northwest Front Service Corps (xixian zhandi fuwutuan), for which she wrote extensively as a major part of her work and life in her Yan’an period. Led by Ding Ling, the Service Corps was organized in August 1937 and was intensely active until October 1938. Performing plays, skits and improvisational pieces, the Service Corps toured Shanxi Province across the divisions between the CCP and the KMT that still persisted within their wartime coalition. Traveling through a wide swath of the countryside, Ding Ling found herself working and performing among primarily rural people and soldiers, types whom she had barely encountered before. No longer physically removed from her readers, Ding Ling put her body to work to gather their energies. In this, Ding Ling, as much as the other members of the Service Corps, seemed to be also mobilizing her own change through dramatic and public performances in the immediate presences of the radically new audiences she encountered under profoundly new conditions.

Human performance on or off stage involves a critical negotiation between “a doing” and “a thing done,” and between the meanings of the involved bodies and the social conventions of making such meanings. The process of actually embodying someone else scripted in a play, in the physical presence of an audience and in the midst of operation of social signification that comprises both the performer and the audience, involves social and personal stakes as it unsettles any givenness of the identity of all involved in the performing process. As early as 1922, when Ding Ling had just arrived in Shanghai, she had already encountered the challenges inherent in such unsettling states of being in performance. Some women students at Shanghai University, those more daring than many of their contemporaries, had decided to stage a spoken drama about women’s movement for social change. They invited Ding Ling and her best friend Wang Jianhong to join the project. While all expressed their enthusiasm for the project,
a “small difficulty” occurred in the role-casting process, “everyone wanted to act the leading role or the important supporting roles [speaking for women’s causes],” Ding Ling vividly recalled sixty years later in 1982, “a good deal of quarreling followed. In the end, all roles were taken except for those of the two maidservants. So Jianhong and I volunteered to perform the maids [that no one wanted to play] – I had a few lines, Jianhong did not have a single word.”

Misleadingly light and humorous in tone, Ding Ling’s remembering registers in effect an astute political sense of how “performing” someone other than oneself in a play is intrinsically bound up with the issues and stakes of role-taking in life and position-making in history. Mostly coming from gentry families, those “modern females” (Xiandai nüxing) aspiring to “women’s equality” could not bring themselves to perform women of lower class, which discloses their own respective or particular embeddedness in a social hierarchy and its psychic-cultural effects. Not in so many words, Ding Ling here subtly but precisely points out how they re-inscribed a regime of power relations based on human classification in the midst of their attempt to change it. Their desires for “women’s equality” are woven with a deep-seated sensitivity and its concomitant social attitude marked by their class privileges, not unlike what Chandra Mohanty and her fellow “third-world feminists” have argued in the late twentieth century and halfway around the globe about the internal problematics of what they define as “white, upper and upper middle class feminism.” Ding Ling’s remembering however brings about a complex dynamic, pregnant with much more than a critique of such internal problematics of her female fellow students and performers earlier in the twentieth century. First, she did not spare herself of the problematic sensitivity and attitude. After all, she volunteered to play the maidservant who “had a few lines,” which is contrasted by Wang Jianhong’s choice to embody another maidservant who was further less valued in the script since she “had no lines at all.” Ding Ling seems to intimate that Wang Jianhong, the woman who never declared herself as a “revolutionary feminist,” is much more genuinely free of the social arrangements of the power relations and human hierarchy than all the young women including Ding Ling herself involved in this performance for “women’s equality.” Ding Ling seems to also indicate that, as a woman who had never understood the Marxist politics of the CCP and died of physical illness as much as emotional devastation after her lover Qù Qiúbài left her to take his prominent role in the CCP’s preparation for the First National Revolution, Wang Jianhong’s choice of her role in this performance in effect places her among the real revolutionaries. Coming from a high-ranking gentry official family, her act to put her body to use for the public appearance of the mute maidservant is a personally embodied trans-class activism that not only bursts the monopoly of the social space by the reigning class but is also a transformation of her own given placement in the class hierarchy and ends the myth of the “naturalness” of its existence. As explored later in this chapter, Ding Ling here marks out a defining problem in her own lifelong struggle to shape her relationship to the spirit of the Chinese revolution that aimed to put an end to such a hierarchy. Her lifelong writing never lets go of the question of how such a revolution and revolutionary
spirit live and can only live in personally embodied acts of transformation as constitutive of structural changes of the world and indeed of life itself.\textsuperscript{24}

More immediately relevant to my discussion here is the fact that, coming to terms with her first experience of performance decades later through her writing, Ding Ling touches on the double effect of a certain performance of cross-embodiment that unravels the structural arrangement of social relations and de-configures the performer’s given placement in the arrangement. A transformative impetus engendered in such cross-embodiment in performance was visibly at work again in Ding Ling’s second acting attempt in a place radically different from her first in Shanghai: namely, Yan’an. In Master Wang (Wáng lǎoyé, 1937), a play produced by the Northwest Front Service Corps, Ding Ling performed a woman from the CCP-led Eighth Route Army working for the Second United Front, persuading an old gentryman to donate some of his fortune to support the resistance.\textsuperscript{25} Biographers or historians describe her acting in this play as a performance of “her real self” for she was indeed then a leading woman in the CCP-led resistance.\textsuperscript{26} Having recently arrived in Yan’an from Shanghai, however, Ding Ling in her “real life” had just learned to put on the Eighth Route Army uniform and carry a pistol in addition to a pen.\textsuperscript{27} An evident shyness, captured by a late 1936 photograph of Ding Ling, suggests how much she was in the process of “getting used” to her newly configured or really still reconfiguring existence.\textsuperscript{28} Bidding farewell to the qīpāo, Ding Ling “the modern female writer” was rewriting her bodily shape and meanings, the complex profundity of which summons up the re-makings of the bodies of Qiū Jīn and her female friends.\textsuperscript{29} In the midst of such a radical transformation of her actual physiognomy, Ding Ling in the above mentioned play therefore simultaneously was and was not the seasoned woman warrior of the Eight Route Army that she played. She was performing on stage what she was inventing off stage; both processes were mutually precipitating and equally inventive. The dynamic combination of the realness and un-realness in her performance were not lost on the Yan’an audiences. The large crowds both laughed and applauded as she stepped onto the stage and as her performance went on a transformative moment transpired on stage and in life at once, co-authored by the inventive player and the imaginative audience.\textsuperscript{30} Photographs taken of Ding Ling in the following years register a similarly inventive and imaginative although by no means readily intelligible bodily shift and fluidity in the actual woman and her image, whereby an increasingly assertive presence second-writes the shyness with which she first took on this role.\textsuperscript{31} Mediated by the techniques of photography and published in newspapers and journals in both CCP and KMT controlled areas for different specific political purposes, they nonetheless afford glimpses of a multilayered and suggestive process by which a cross-embodied signification is wielded to generate a transformative mode of female living. The series of photographs can be read as evocative of the history of writing Chinese women and the contents of the popular mobilization of the wartime resistance, where the real and the invented were activated into a transformative impetus that featured the Chinese revolution. Indeed, cross-embodiments in public performance as revolutionary
processes constituted the key dimensions and effects of the work carried out by the members of the Northwest Front Service Corps, as they, led by Ding Ling, performed among and with various and growing rural audiences in and beyond Yan’an areas. Lengthy as it is, Ding Ling’s report about “the preparations” undergone by the Service Corp in the summer of 1937 is worth quoting:

During our preparation period in Yan’an, we decided that our principles for action are the following: To reach as broad a range of people as possible by employing as many forms of the folk performing arts as possible. We organized ourselves into a group and set about to learn to perform in a variety of forms that most of our audiences would enjoy. Each form was re-worked and tried out for and with the Yan’an audiences. We created four new items in the form of Dagu (versified story sung to the accompaniment of a drum and other instruments) . . . ; three items in the form of kuaibaner (rhythmic talk or monologue to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers) . . . also [a range of] new items in the forms of shuanghuang (a performance by two persons; the performer who speaks or sings would hide his body behind the other performer, and the other who does the bodily acting would not speak or sing), sihuang (the same style with four persons), and xiangsheng (comic dialogue or cross talk). The contents of those items always change as the situation of the resistance changes, and each performance modifies the previous one.

The most welcomed item in our dance repertoire is called Celebrating Peace and Condemning the Japanese Invaders, which is an adaptation of the grand yangge popular in Northeast areas, and Shangdong, Hebei, and Henan Provinces. This particular genre of folk dance comprised simple gestures; the dancers would swing and turn while singing to the accompaniment of gongs, drums, and suona horns (a woodwind instrument), shifting the patterns of their larger groupings and formations. As men and women danced in varying antiphonal styles and clowns punctuated the dancing with interludes, they mounted an after-harvest carnival of improvisational momentums. We asked those dancers to be workers, peasants, soldiers, and merchants, and named some as Japanese imperialists and Chinese collaborators. They wore exaggerated make-up that marked their identities and professions, and would dance to tell the following story. The “workers, peasants, soldiers, and merchants” had been living and working peacefully (dancers used gestures to delineate daily rhythms in work and in life); then the Chinese collaborators appeared and sowed discord among these peaceful people to make them fight with one another, which turned into an opportunity for the Japanese military to take away their land. Soon students arrived at the scene to provide information about how people of all walks of life should unite, which was followed by a dance that moved the conflicting parties into resonating motions. Such resonating dancing gradually and increasingly involved the audience. Finally the real soldiers and peasants in the audience – in effect everyone present – joined the dance in antiphonal formations, with total carnival spirit. We performed this dance in Yan’an
several times, each time pulling women and men from all over the town, whistling and dancing along the streets, following the initial group of performers in ever enlarged numbers.

We have done something similar with folk songs, [making] songs for the resistance . . . [by adapting] folk tunes [so that everyone could join in singing] . . .

Each time we performed during this trial period as our preparation for the touring, audiences in Yan’an were eager to welcome us. We also had large paintings and posters stuck to long bamboo poles. Raising them high, we paraded the streets in large formations and then put them down at the site of our performance. People crowded around, pointing to the paintings and talking about them and asking us questions; we were so busy explaining those paintings that we often talked and talked until our voices went hoarse and our bodies were exhausted, dripping wet with sweat . . . We loved it all.33

The Dagu, kuaihaner, shuanghuang, sihuang, xiangsheng, yange, folk songs mentioned here were Chinese performing forms previously unfamiliar to Ding Ling and her many colleagues in the Service Corps. Educated and urban, most of them had drawn their artistic resources from European literature and/or the Chinese May Fourth legacy. Now learning from their largely rural audiences who were also participants in those performances, Ding Ling and her fellow artists paid serious attention to and rediscovered the trove of the Chinese folk art and its practice. The folk dance popular in north China – grand yangge – for after-harvest celebration was now at once activated and worked over as a performance of political mobilization; so were the other forms mentioned above. In and through their re-makings of such forms of folk performing art, concomitantly and significantly, the performers involved both brought in and moved beyond their given physical and psychic states of existence in the midst of performing the familiar (the “folk” traditions) that was also being defamiliarized (reworked for the resistance and opened up for more changes). It is certainly vital to note that “performers” here designate not only the members of the Service Corps but anyone present when their performance took place. In its subsequent year-long tour across Shanxi Province, the Service Corps repeatedly drew gatherings of literally hundreds of thousands of people, resonating in their ever expanding rhythmic movements, singing, dancing, whistling, applauding, or laughing, in temples, market places, streets, town squares, missionary churches, school courtyards, or open fields. Their energy is palpable in Ding Ling’s “Frontline Reports,” essays that were often dashed off at night on horseback as the Service Corps went from one place to another.34 Describing one of those performances that drew a huge participating audience, Ding Ling wrote: “the performers and audiences were roaring . . . ; animation lit up numerous faces and transfigured their looks; people onstage and offstage became indistinguishable [in that] they were breathing together the contagious spirit of courage.”35

The connective energies gave rise to impetus of courage amid such performances, which, as Ding Ling saw it, were imbued with certain strong feelings of
being a “Zhongguoren” (“a Chinese person”). The idea of “a Chinese person,” as articulated by Ding Ling, the Service Corp, and the audiences, was an evocation of embodied resistance to the enforcement of the bioethnically defined logic foundational to the invading Japanese forces. This “Chinese person,” in other words, was brought into being by and engendered in the face of the expansionist apparatus of modern Japan, which interpolated the Chinese as a “weak species,” an undeveloped entity of “pre-time” in need of “modern solutions.” Real and invented, conditioned and improvisational, such activated feelings of “being a Zhongguoren” in this sense inherently exceed the bioethnic rubrics of modern nationalism as it first emerged in European history and deployed in Japanese colonial aggression. Indeed, Ding Ling’s Chinese phrase “Zhongguoren” can also be translated as a “Chinese mode” (Zhongguo shi de) of “humanity” (ren), a term which appeared at radical odds with that specific time and place when and where “the Chinese” denoted the inhabitants of a ravished land connotative of “the weak species” of the humanly doomed in modern times. The assertion of its existence as an embodiment of “the spirit of courage” intrinsically questions the modern logic of great power politics and its organizing ideology, giving rise to imaginings of possible forms of humanity and human-made social relations that exceed any bioethnic-defined national identity and the logic of bioethnic politics. The impetus of such a time and place specific “embodiment of humanity” is clearly at work in Ding Ling’s second play Kouchi Ichiro, which was about how the war also ruined ordinary Japanese citizens for the ambition of the colonial Japanese elite. Written in 1938 for the Service Corps and staged by several theater troupes in the KMT controlled areas to critical acclaim, the title character is a Japanese soldier who finally turned against the war and personally embodied the idea and enriched the implications of “Zhongguoren” as a cognitive horizon, political position, and ethical proposition. Ding Ling’s own active involvement in Chinese intellectuals’ protest against the torture of a Japanese Marxist Kobayashi Takiji by the Japanese government because Kobayashi’s anti-war activism, which took place in early 1930s in Shanghai, is a real live instance of similar signification about the making of such a revolutionary humanity across modern bioethnic divides.

The making and practice of a revolutionary humanity that defies bioethnic categories of a naturalized identity, however, involves high stakes and complex consequences, particularly so when its agency has a “natural” “female” body. Another major Ding Ling play, Reunion (Chongfeng), written for and staged by the Northwest Front Service Corps in 1937, is one of the earliest works in her Yan’an period that probe such complex stakes. A one-act play, Reunion tells the story of a young woman in the resistance movement who performs her “natural attributes” as a “vulnerable” Chinese girl, “easily seduced or manipulated” in order to maneuver through the Japanese military police system and gather information for the Eighth Route Army. It is indicative that the most effective or suitable way for her to partake in the resistance is deemed to be the performance of what she “naturally” is (marked to be) and at the same time is not (she is anything but easily seduced and manipulated) in the hidden front of the underground,
rather than being a “straight” soldier on the open military battlefield “like a man.” The complexity of the high stakes involved in her performance is partially intimated in the central event of the play. Unexpectedly, she encounters her long disappeared fiancé in the Japanese military police headquarters. Such “reunion” (hence the title) between the loved ones provokes a profound crisis, for he now has assumed the identity of a Chinese translator for the Japanese and she finds herself in a painful predicament where she must determine what is his real political allegiance which, given the conditions, is undeterminable. In a moment of dangerous uncertainty and confusion, she kills him, only to receive the information she needs from him and discover that he has been working for the underground in the CCP-led resistance. The play concludes with a scene wherein she successfully escapes from the Japanese prison with the information obtained at the cost of a personal tragedy. This affirmative ending, melodramatic at its surface, is hence imbued with an ominous sense of tragedy and, specifically, underlined by the troubling feelings inherent in the central event of the play and its leading figures’ modes of cross-embodiment. As she is to have a reunion with her fellow members in the resistance, the question about her “real allegiance” after her long sojourn in the Japanese military headquarters is haunting, hence the further doubled connotation of the title of the play. It follows that, as sources for making her a revolutionary agency, her performative dynamics are accompanied with a constant anxiety. The young woman who re-enacts her “natural” bodily features to work for the resistance in effective ways, symptomatically, is acutely anxious about whether her fellow members would, as she herself did to her fiancé, doubt her “revolutionary authenticity.”

In the actual history of the CCP-led revolution, both men and women were active in the underground that is often called “the invisible front” (Kan bu jian de zhanxian). The high stakes involved in the question of their “authentic identity” as revolutionaries however were inherently gendered in the ways that they affected both men and women regardless of their actual sex. The double performance of a fundamentally de-bioethical nature required in the work was deemed by all parties involved as more suitable for the female due to the biologically marked attributes that were taken as her “natural” social functions and inherent human features. It was with the same reasoning that a high percentage of the male members of the underground came from privileged socio-economic backgrounds, for their “given” status should “naturally” lead them to identify themselves with the status quo rather than be attracted to radical ideas about human equality and social transformation. One historical record of the practice of such a view shows that approximately one-third or more of the CCP underground members were women, much higher than the percentage of women in the CCP-led movements as a whole; and most of them were educated or from privileged social backgrounds. Ding Ling was one of them in the 1930s. Such a consideration of gendered suitability seemed to have matched the political conditions at the time, as evinced by the immensely complex and effective activity of the CCP underground in urban China among all walks of life including the elite circles. That the KMT did not execute Ding Ling after kidnapping her as its
police forces “normally” would have done to a political suspect, as many argued at the time and over time, had a great deal to do with the public pressure mounted by international cultural circles to “rescue one of China’s few outstanding literary talents” for how such “talents” were treated marked the “modern status” of a body politic in terms of at least ostensibly “civilized” governing. Much less visible and yet no less crucial than such a deliberation of public relations about its modern status was the regime’s estimation of Ding Ling as a female who was “naturally” more containable, manipulatable, and maneuverable on the one hand and would have “naturally” stirred up more sympathy from the ordinary Chinese if she were executed. Shen Zui, the head of the office of general affairs of KMT’s military secret police at the time, wrote as much in his memoir fifty years later. Ding Ling herself at the time consciously and in the end successfully appropriated such a gendered estimation of social effect when she carried out her plan of escape from Nanjing. She expressed that she would no longer be interested in politics in future and wanted to take care of her aging mother and young children, which showed a “typical (and hence natural) female” mind set. The KMT police asked her to write down on paper what she expressed, which she did: “I will return home and take care of my mother, will not participate in social activity. I have not been interrogated or pressured.” The KMT police permitted her final trip to Shanghai when she announced that she was “too bored” and wanted to “go shopping” in the metropolis, a desire that was considered perfectly “natural” for a privileged “female” of means. Such performative acts, while enabling Ding Ling to survive the otherwise unsurvivable conditions and then to further revolutionize her life, took on in many eyes a darker cast (“dubious stains” as Zhou Yang later put it) in what she initially imagined to be a transparently nourishing environment for such revolutionary transformation, namely, in the CCP base, the center of the Chinese revolution. Written only a year and half after her escape from Nanjing, the seemingly simple one-act play Reunion, as if uncannily anticipating such trouble, is laced with not only the feelings of a survivor maneuvering through dangerous situations in the twinkling of an eye but an acute sense of the potential pitfalls involved in such performative survival. In the play, the female body in her series of performances fundamentally undoes any biologically posited assumptions of socio-political allegiance and any expectations of what she most likely or naturally is or must be by performatively engaging and ultimately invalidating such assumptions and related expectations, thereby actualizing herself as a revolutionary agent. The dynamic inherent in this self-performative as performing transformation is rife with tension, intimating high political and personal stakes which become discernable in Ding Ling’s actual life in her Yan’an period.

Politics of the [Un]Imaginable

Ding Ling reached an unprecedented moment of transformative creativity in her work with the Northwest Front Service Corps at the beginning of her Yan’an
years. When she returned to Yan’an in July 1938 after the end of the Service Corps’ tour, she found herself in an environment of high pressure. Externally, the Japanese military had begun to recognize the CCP-led resistance as a real threat to its ambitions. As the Eight Route Army achieved a range of visible victories and established base areas of resistance within the Japanese-occupied territories, the Japanese forces escalated attacks on Yan’an with the aim of eradicating the CCP-led forces and their grassroots support as a whole. Internally, the arrival of Moscow-trained theorists in 1938 caused tensions within the leadership. Such tensions were turning critical as large groups of the mostly young and educated from urban areas converged in Yan’an, in response to the rapid nationwide expansion of the CCP’s political influence. A reconsolidation of the leadership and the inclusion of those rapidly growing and diverse forces were enforced with not only political complications but also personal casualties. Ding Ling soon found herself caught in the midst of such complications. It came as good news when, in October 1938, she was informed that her request to study at the Academy of Marxism and Leninism was approved by the Ministry of the CCP Organizational Affairs. Yet it was at the Academy that Kang Sheng, the Moscow-trained head of security affairs in Yan’an, accused her of having been a “renegade” during her Nanjing years under the KMT’s house arrest. It remains unknown and seems unknowable whether Kang Sheng’s accusation was directly linked with Zhou Yang’s arrival in Yan’an from Shanghai in the autumn of 1937. It is known that Zhou Yang, who took over the responsibilities left by Ding Ling as one of the CCP leading members in the cultural circles of Shanghai after her “disappearance” in 1933, regarded her “re-appearance” in the CCP Border Regions “highly dubious.” Deeply disturbed and angered, Ding Ling went to Mao Zedong protesting Kang Sheng’s “groundless accusation” and requested that the Central Committee investigate her “past.” Mao Zedong reportedly expressed his trust in Ding Ling and suggested that she put her request to Chen Yün, the Minister of the CCP Organizational Affairs. On October 4, 1940, a conclusion based on the investigation was reached. On January 1, 1941, the result of the investigation was officially issued, verifying Ding Ling’s status and identity as a woman “still faithful to the revolution.”

Contemporary scholars of Chinese political history tend to summarize what was involved in this “investigation” and other “criticisms” that Ding Ling weathered through in Yan’an as “the same old fight for power.” These power games corrupt a new political party despite its radical rhetoric, or mark the beginning of an “authoritarian regime” specialized in thought-policing and political purge, prefiguring the culminating destructiveness decades later in the Cultural Revolution. Yet such retrospective readings often run the risk of taking the “past” as clean signs for a predetermined “future” whereby living history is structured with and fixated into a linear process to the exclusion of all its contingencies and immense complexities. The amount of insights such readings do afford, moreover, goes hand in hand with an absence of reflection on a present in relation to which its retrospectivity is latently shaped: namely, a present time where rapidly ascending neoliberal political forces and discourses were rendering the lived revolutionary
history of modern China into “a field of catastrophes” while hailing the arriving “end of history” in the form of the triumphant global capital. What is central to my discussion is less about whether or why “fight for power” and “purging-policing” are defining instances or features of the general CCP history and whether such history is an imminent catastrophe doomed from its beginning. My central concern is how, specifically, through such storms Ding Ling continued her by no means linear life journey as a woman revolutionary for social change, inventing and deploying her sociohistorically conditioned performance with writing and in life, and how such writing and life involve vital implications for modern Chinese history, the Chinese feminist imagination, and the Chinese revolution. It is significant that, in the first round of such storms Ding Ling weathered, namely, in the midst of being investigated from October 1938 to October 4, 1940, her social, political, and artistic activity continued and reached a new level of productivity and an unprecedented scope. During these painful two years, she persisted in and intensified her active involvement in the All China Literature and Arts Association in the Resistance against the Japanese Invasion (March 1938) as well as in the grassroots organizing work among rural women for the resistance. She continued her work among women and as a writer. She was elected to the executive committees of the March 8 International Conference for Women in Yan’an (March 1939), the Yan’an Branch of All China Literature and Arts Association for the Resistance (May 1939), and the Yan’an Women’s Standing Committee for Promoting Constitution (February 1940). She worked as the co-executive officer (with Ai Siqi) of the Association of the Arts and Literature in the Shan-Gang-Ning Border Regions, responsible for its daily activity over three years. In March 1941, she was voted as the Model Woman at the base in the Border Regions. If Ding Ling’s much noted activity with the Northwest Front Service Corps was a “sunny beginning” of her “new life,” her continuing public work from October 1938 on was conducted under the political shadows cast by the investigation about her allegedly “dubious past.” If the “sunny beginning” freed her passion for revolution and momentously turned her into a public force and political figure, the investigation and resulting pressures that she endured in the next two years seemed only solidified her passion into determination to actively partake in the revolutionary movement as a public force and political figure. She seemed to never really waver from such a determination to define herself so and act accordingly, however difficult to maintain such determination, in all the subsequent decades including the years in the Cultural Revolution. A literary woman with political passion was now a political figure who continued in literary writing as a public commitment to a yet-to-be actualized way of life and vision of humanity.

The center of gravity in Ding Ling’s continuing writing is still comprised of the dynamics of cross-embodied performance on stage and in life as sources of revolutionary agency. Her mapping and evaluating of such dynamics of agency however are charged with a new and intensified concern as to how such agency may establish its credibility and be recognized as such – its “real” or “authentic” status. The example of her play Reunion shows how, as of 1938, she took the issue

Rhythms of the Unreal (II) 213
mainly as a matter of necessary, accurate, factual verification. Such agency required verification for the conditions under which CCP underground activity was carried out were extremely complicated and the harm wreaked by renegades was significant and fatal.60 As Ding Ling probed further the question of “the real revolutionary,” she began to shift the focus of the question in a subtle and yet important way. Factual verification about the “realness” of someone’s political allegiance and social positioning, she seemed to have sensed, also involves issues beyond the domain of pure facts and compels a rethinking of what such “realness” involves. For Ding Ling in the late 1930s and early 1940s, just as for Ding Ling in the late 1920s and early 1930s, such “realness” was pregnant with possible or actual transformation always taking place between “a doing” and “a thing done,” between “someone’s body” and “her social embodiment,” which by its constitutive dynamics is an activating process, a process of revolutionizing.

As intimated in her piece on her first stage performance in 1922 that I have discussed earlier, Ding Ling was deeply aware of the imperative for each participant in any attempts for social change to dislodge her/his own variable embeddedness in the very power relations of social history that are meant to be changed. And as evinced by her volumes of writings in and since the Yan’an period, Ding Ling was acutely aware of the profound difficulty for each participant to actually exceed such embeddedness. “Some people seem to have leaped to their complete revolutionariness, as if they were born to be the authentic revolutionary, as if they were the naturals” (my italics). Ding Ling commented once in a conversation with a discernable reference to those who denounced her over and again as a “false revolutionary” since 1938: “I am not so fortunate [as those naturals]. I am slow on my way, so slow that to become a revolutionary for me is a long process of walking through, one step after another, a struggle of revolutionizing myself, very difficult, in a real sense, walking into genuine usefulness, as I am still walking, walking beyond self. Transformation is the key.”61 Fully acknowledging the importance of “factual verification” in the Chinese revolution but going beyond its particular terrain, from 1938 to 1941 Ding Ling paid increasingly intensified attention to the possible or real transformations of various human bodies made wretched by multifaceted violence in a semicolonial China torn by wars, and their intricate implications. She traced how those wretched ones dislodged themselves from their ruinous status and what such dislodging entailed in their shifting living contexts. When they exceeded their own sociopsychic embeddedness within the operations of the power relations, they began to unravel such relations that first wrecked their lives and then marked their very beings as “the vitiated,” “the weak,” “the shameful.” This “exceeding,” for Ding Ling, is the site and process of revolution. If Mao Zedong famously announces that “the measurement . . . of Chinese intellectuals’ genuine revolutionariness” lies in their specific relations with the rural and urban laboring people who are the foundation of their society and the bottom rung of its organizational hierarchy all at once,62 Ding Ling in Yan’an began to map out how the realness of a social revolution lies in the specific dynamics of transformation not only in the life conditions of the so wretched, but in the constitutions of their lives as psychic
economies made of relational human behaviors. It is with and amid such specific transformations that revolutions transpire and revolutionaries are made. The question about what is “the real revolutionary” is hereby recast as a question more about what makes actual revolutions than about what establishes the recognizable “authenticity” of its always varying, transformative and self-transformative participants. As is discussed later, this recasting has far-reaching implications for Ding Ling’s politics of writing and poetics of life as much as it is central to the making of the Chinese feminist imagination. Before delving into such implication, it helps at this point of my discussion to trace the specific loci of her “recasting” by working through some of her key writings after 1938. Here she dislodges the haunting issue of “the real”-cum-“the intelligible” from the commanding category of “authenticity”-cum-“recognizability,” and locates the multilayered fabrics of transformation as the heart of the Chinese revolution.

Of the wretched and their struggles for transformation as Ding Ling mapped since the 1920s, female sexed bodies are central and centrally emblematic. Her major post-1938 writings similarly feature the female body but with new intensity. New Faith (Xing de xinnian), a novella written in the spring of 1939, is a case in point. Depicting how an old village woman, Grandma, struggles to return to her life after she was gang-raped by Japanese soldiers, the story touches on something that was often unarticulated at the time and over time in modern Chinese history. While women who died as the results of colonial assaults could be and were rendered into political resources to stir up public anger and mobilize resistance, the survived and surviving bodies of the raped, deformed, damaged females remained difficult sights to see, approach, confront, and relate to. And it is not due to any lack of, or too much, sympathy. An early scene in the novella signals such a sight in gender-specific and bodily graphic terms:

There was only one living thing moving about on the plain. Then it too collapsed. Covered with snow, had it not begun instinctively to crawl forward again, it would have been impossible to spot. Gradually this living thing moved into the village. It was human. But no one was around in the village, and so the figure fell on the roadside again. It struggled up once more to drive off a curious dog. Weakly it waved its arms, tried to straighten its bent back. Fearfully, listing, it staggered toward a familiar house. The dog no longer recognized this human being. Listless, yet unwilling to leave it, the dog tailed it. A simple desire had brought the thing to Chen Xinhan’s yard, but once there it lay immobile, like broken tile, on the ground. Two greedy yellow eyes gazed down; it was too weak to drive the dog away again, too weak even to cry out. It could only moan and close its dry and withered eyes. Another dog came through a hole in the courtyard wall and barked twice. The first dog leaped forward, barking back. The body on the ground groaned again (my italics).

This is Grandma who, broken, is crawling towards her son Chen Xinhan’s house. After what seems an eternally long time, her children discover her, bring her into the house and, with terror in their hearts, put her in her bed. After a
Ding Ling describes Grandma’s regaining of consciousness as follows: “her lips quivered. ‘Japs!’ she cried in mortal terror... She looked speechlessly at her daughter-in-law and grandchildren, while tears streamed from her eyes; then like a duck with its throat cut, wings flapping convulsively, neck writhing, she bent her head down and sobbed like a child.”

Such an image of the ravished and its pain crystallize the general condition of dehumanization in war and, in this case, a modern war with the Chinese as the bioethnically-targeted. All the villagers feel the intended effect and meaning of the pain branded onto Grandma’s body and their own stakes therein; Grandma’s immediate kin are particularly cognizant of such stakes: “Ma! You can die in peace now,” her son says to her, “your son will give his life to revenge you.” The vow of revenge here is not only about bringing justice to the old woman but also about refusing to be destroyed by the bioethnically driven powers that damaged her. To “revenge” Grandma is to revenge all those similarly targeted “Chinese.” If such reaction is taken as the center of its narrative gravity, New Faith then seems a mere literary expression of a bioethnically marked nationalist impulse. But the story is just set up to begin: Rather than taking comfort in her son’s vow to revenge her and letting herself “die in peace,” Grandma starts to talk and makes it impossible for anyone around her to find any peace. She first talks to her daughters-in-law, then to the village women folk, and then to other villagers, with disturbing if not deranging effects on the listeners. Her daughter-in-laws, distressed, first air their feelings about Grandma who they say is “going mad talking like that.” Her sons feel as if they are falling apart themselves, chocked with silence:

Chen Xinhan was thinking about the day before, when he’d gone over to listen to the old woman as she was telling her story in a crowd. When she got to the part about what had happened to her, Xinhan had felt as though he were the one losing his mind. A son’s blood coursed through his body, yet he didn’t know whether to shout or go over and hug his mother or just run away. He shuddered violently, speechless, just as his mother caught sight of him and stopped telling her story to stare at him. The crowd turned around, but nobody laughed at him. He felt more misery than he’d ever experienced before. He walked over to her, put out his hand, and said, “I promise I’ll get revenge!” Her face was lit up with intense joy and she reached toward him as well, and then suddenly shrunk away. She shriveled up like a cornered animal, slipped through the crowd, and ran away. No one spoke. Heads bowed as though heavily weighted, people in the crowd moved away slowly, with dragging steps. He alone remained in the deserted street. He felt as if all those organs in his chest were torn out and, at the same time, as though he were being tightly choked; he could not breathe.

A particular paradox is at work here. Grandma seems compelled to confront the horror inflicted on her body by telling her kin and other villagers how it happened – an unpacking that is a working through of her ravished life and a re-
rendering of the meanings of her pain. Halting and precarious as it already is, such an unpacking encounters unarticulated resistance among her kin, of which Grandma herself is acutely cognizant. Her sons’ searching glances suddenly stop her when she is in the midst of her “maddening” talk and she “feels shamed,” and her love for her children becomes indistinguishable from the fear of losing them. The physical horror lodged in her body is crisscrossed with another psychic one. In the sorrow of her kin and fellow villagers for her “unspeakable misfortune,” there lies a concealed sense of shame about her from whose grips she herself is struggling to break away. The power relations that have brutalized her physically, in other words, have also inscribed an unwritten and yet indelible mark onto her as “the trashed,” the “weak,” whose existence registers not only a terrible loss of humanity but also the utter degradation of the Chinese. Intensely angry toward the power and power relations that ravished her at one level, the members of her direct family and extended kins are nonetheless embedded in such psychic-ideological inscriptions stipulating that the brutalized bodies be the signs of the weak, particularly when such bodies were of female sex and the brutalization took the form of rape. Grandma’s kin then need and demand her silence or indeed disappearance, to accept a second death as it were, so that their revenge might be carried out on their way to becoming themselves “the strong” without, however, confronting the nature of the power relations that are at work in their need and demand.

Ding Ling’s Grandma refuses this second death. As if waging a war of life and death in a continuation of the one she waged against the Japanese soldier rapists, Grandma continues “shamelessly” to tell and retell her “crazed” story, to her children and grandchildren, to her neighbors in her village and relatives in other villages, and to strangers passing through the region, compelling listeners against the grain of their overt sympathy and hidden disavowal. She journeys far to show “the horror” and, no longer flinching from her sons’ looks and others’ gazes, unravels the fabrics of the unwillingness of her Chinese listeners as much as her own “secret”: the feelings of shame that paralyze the physically targeted, psychically battered, and bioethnically naturalized “weak species.” Gradually, her “shameless” re-enactment gains increasing potency and turns the feelings implicated therein to mounting indignation, with a growing impetus that engenders real value in what would otherwise be a life of degradation: “I am not dead! . . . Don’t pity me! . . . Today you think that I am the only one to be pitied. But, today, if you don’t stand up to those brutes, my Heaven! I really don’t want to see you suffer the way I did . . . Look at you, how young you are! You should go on living . . . Are you born just to get brutalized like this?!?” Increasingly resonating with her “crazed” storytelling, Grandma’s listeners begin to shift in the deepest recesses of their constitutions: They begin to dislodge themselves from their hidden feelings of “shame” regarding the targeted, the degraded, and the ruined, which includes precisely themselves caught up in the nightmares of modern history. As the psychic-ideological operation of modern power relations that endows the brutalizers with superiority and assigns shame to the brutalized is so pried open, its initial victims recognize the “weak” and “shamed” Grandma
as a female-bodied sight and site of human strength. Radically remaking their relations to such a human sight and site is part of their war of resistance on two fronts. They struggle against their bioethnically prescribed doom and confront their own implication in the inscriptions of such doom. “Her listeners forgot what they were supposed to be doing and, caught up by her emotions, would also begin talking and telling other stories.”74 This simple line occurring in the latter part of the novella as a turning point in its narrative designates a far-reaching change, a revolution, in the making. Grandma is mobilizing herself and other villagers not only to re-write the meanings of modern violence physically done to them, but also to work through and over their own embeddedness in the psychic operations of such violence. This mobilization on the one hand summons structural changes of the power relations that victimized her and all those like her, and precipitated specific transformations of the psychic economies of her kin, her village, her world, and herself on the other. Grandma here figures and tropes a momentous empowerment of the socially assigned “weak” ones including herself, which bursts open the continuum of the mutually contingent categories of “the weak” and “the strong,” both as political ideology and military operation. This, one may argue, is the true subject of Ding Ling’s story.

Delineating her female figure as a human rupture that mobilizes transformation, Ding Ling’s *New Faith* affords China’s national war of resistance its “genuine meanings” as a multifaceted social revolution. It is in Grandma’s war to live again that Wang Ying’s view of “the double nature of the war of resistance” and Xiao Hong’s vision in the light of which “societal change as the essence of the national war of resistance” find their powerful embodiment. Such female-levered embodiment of transformation constitutes a recurrence in Ding Ling’s shifting literary landscapes in and since her Yan’an period, intimating how movements and/or revolutions for the wretched of the world require more than general challenges to modern power relations. They are actualized in specific processes through which all parties involved therein work over specific psychic-ideological inscriptions of such power relations that render the structurally weakened and devalued human lives evidence of their own weakness. Grandma’s “dirtied body,” for instance, must be rendered intelligible as a key source of human strength rather than an object for sympathy let alone evidence of the “weak Chinese” or “Chinese weakness.” It is important to note here that such female figures as Grandma are not foregrounded in the early Ding Ling writings of the 1920s, where female sufferings are intensely registered without however a sense of viable possibilities of empowerment. Mengke, Miss Sophia and a range of her early “modern females” are despairing furies. Ding Ling the writer was then herself furious about a time and place where, as she saw and rendered it, the variably wretched persons, groups, cities, and countries were repeatedly inscribed by the forces of violence that wrecked them as temporally and spatially unfit. Furies, stirring figures for change, are not necessarily sites of empowerment. That figures such as the empowering Grandma appear in Ding Ling’s writings in her Yan’an period is not coincidental. It is indicative of how her writing conditions in Yan’an differed from those of her early years and how such different
conditions inscribe Ding Ling’s literary rendition where the empowerment of the twice wrecked “weak” ones become revolutionarily actualizable. As some scholars have observed, in Yan’an and other CCP-led areas, an actual and unprecedented range of rural women like Grandma did in fact appear in public arenas as moving and motivating forces, whose unprecedented real presence in the resistance movement designates their internal psychic transformations and the transformations of their social environments. If discursive changes constitute part of the material changes in actual life as many linguistic-levered contemporary theorists have argued, the socio-psychic changes in a lifeworld enable the dynamics of such changes in discursive writings. The empowerment of the twice wrecked in Ding Ling’s works in Yan’an, in other words, evokes the fury of the suffering females in her early literary landscapes while deepening such fury into imaginative loci for the empowerment of modern humanity.

**Rhythms of the Unreal: The Ding Ling Story and the Chinese Revolution**

Actualizations of such imaginative empowerment often seem too momentary to be real in modern history even, as Ding Ling herself acknowledged decades later, in revolutionary Yan’an of the 1940s. They were historically conditioned and conditional occurrences that always run the risk of being aborted, denied, or repressed, in writing as in life. In her famously controversial essay “Thoughts on March 8th” (Sanba jie yougan) published in 1942, Ding Ling first defines Yan’an as a “new situation” where “women are indeed much happier than elsewhere” in a precarious semicolonial Chinese society, and then goes on to show how such a situation was not a given but made by, and contingent upon, the daily praxis of its participants. Those participants came to Yan’an by breaking away from the prevailing social norms and power relations of Chinese society in various ways, but such breaking away, however radical, could not be taken for granted and would not automatically lead to revolutionary alternatives. The new situation of Yan’an was comprised of profound changes which at the same time also repeat – to varying degrees – the relations of forces operative in Chinese society at large. Commenting on how women with “female failings” were stringently criticized by “male comrades,” Ding Ling wrote with an acute sense of such historically conditioned human continuity in the midst of its profound discontinuity:

I myself am a woman, and I understand the failings of women better than some others. But I also have a deeper understanding of what they suffer. Women cannot just transcend the time they live in to become simply ideal; they are not made of steel. They cannot just resist social temptations and silent oppressions all at once, they each have their own past written in wounds of blood and tears; they all have had lofty emotions and aspirations (whether engaged in their lone battles or drawn into the humdrum stream of life), this is especially true of the women comrades who come to Yan’an, and therefore I regard those women convicted of wrong doings with much
understanding. What is more, I hope that men, particularly those in the leadership, as well as women themselves, will consider the wrongs women commit in connection with social conditions. It would be better if there were less empty theorizing and more discussion of real problems, so that theory and practice would not be disconnected, and better if all CCP members were responsible for themselves in terms of their own actual behavior and cultivation\

For Ding Ling, the socially ruptured female bodies (“wounds of blood and tears”) are once again the living sites of revolution as both historically conditioned and personally embodied transformations. Such historical conditions surfaced sharply in the responses from a number of male figures in the top CCP leadership, who rejected Ding Ling’s comments particularly about “men in leadership” as “back-handed attacks on our generals and soldiers who are fighting and dying on the front lines of the war.” Ding Ling’s political standing was again endangered. While the gendered underpinnings of such rejection have long been explicated in scholarship on China, what is central to my discussion here is a certain important and yet often overlooked condition of recognition that proceeds and conditions the harsh judgment passed on the author and her Thoughts: the shadows clouding the authenticity or realness of her revolutionary allegiance. On paper and in organizational procedures, the investigation that began in 1938 had verified her “claims” and a conclusion had been reached in October 4, 1940. The question of her “realness” as a revolutionary woman however remained. As late as in 1980, Zhou Yang, when confronted by Ding Ling’s son about the issue, replied: “Given your mother’s behavior over the past forty years, the suspected liability of her being a renegade can be dropped. But the political blemish, the dirty mark in her history made by herself cannot be washed away: her note in 1936 stating that she would no longer be involved in politics and just wanted to care for her mother.” The “note” to which Zhou referred here, as discussed earlier, worked as a performative strategy with historically conditioned gender-specific effectiveness. Rather than being recognized as such, it was held by Zhou Yang at the time and over time as an evidence of her lack of real revolutionariness regardless of the “conclusion” drawn by the CCP’s central committee. It is not incidental that Xia Yan, another major figure in the CCP-led cultural circles in 1930s Shanghai, raised the question in 1957 again: “Without the permission of the head of KMT’s special agency, how could it be possible that Ding Ling left Nanjing so easily? I want to ask whether there were conditions attached; were there any assignments involved when the KMT special agents allowed Ding Ling to leave for the liberated base area? I hope that this problem be further investigated and clarified by our organization.”

The persistence of such a thorny question cannot be explained away simply as an effect or manifestation of the personal animosity of particular depth, which did exist between Ding Ling and Zhou Yang or Xia Yan. Given the extremely intricate environment of the CCP underground activity and the extremely violent nature of the armed and political struggles between the CCP and the KMT, it was indeed “unusual” that Ding Ling escaped from Nanjing alive with political
integrity. The conclusion of the investigation committee signed by Chen Yün and Li Fuchun in fact explicitly stated that it was “unusual,” and “usual cases” comprising compromises or turncoats of various kinds are known in CCP history, while the refusal to become one of the “usual cases” required “unusual” struggles. Yin Xiuren, another CCP underground member and also a literary writer, jumped out of the windows of Ding Ling’s residence when the KMT secret agents found him there and attempted to arrest him. He died instantly on the cement pavement below. Zhao Shouxian, a student of the National University and an underground CCP member, behaved with similar decisiveness. To ensure that he would not be rendered a “usual case” after he was imprisoned in Shanghai in the 1940s and tortured by the KMT, he smashed his eyeglasses and swallowed the glass pieces for lack of other means to commit suicide. Not succeeding in this attempt, he jumped out of the fifth floor prison windows and smashed himself into death on the cement pavement below. “Death,” he wrote in a note, “most assuredly keeps what I know from the KMT – they will get nothing from me!” If death was the most “assured” form of such “unusual cases” (Ding Ling’s first common-law husband Hu Yepin and many, many others come to mind), then how assured could it be when “unusual cases” take the form of living on, such as in the Ding Ling story? The question of recognizing their “realness” intimates something far-reaching and more generally significant than the issue of one woman’s investigated credentials or the party politics surrounding it. Indeed, it is normally unbelievable that a newly widowed, penniless, imprisoned and young literary woman refused—and refused successfully—the normally irresistible social and material advantages offered by a power regime that held her life and death in its grip. And it is normally unlikely that an utterly vulnerable woman could foil and foil successfully the police apparatus of such a regime. At the heart of this unbelievability is a deep-seated sense of “realistic normality” in a world where the powerless party caught up in a life and death predicament usually had—or was normally perceived to have—rather small chances of survival let alone the ability to empower herself to undo her predicament. The “weak species,” to use Nietzsche’s words again, is “normally assimilated” and often made to “desire” such assimilation by the “strong species.” Such a sense of normality or normal reality was working in a range of the CCP members who, personal ill will (speculated or proven) aside, had latent and yet persistent doubts about the “realness” of her story. Such doubts were coupled with and constitutive of a discernable psychic economy that links “femaleness” with “natural vulnerability” and hence “unavoidable weakness,” where the “unusual” is conflated with the “unnatural.” Conditioned by historically specific rubrics of human normality and struggling amidst such conditions, those who consciously opposed the “normal” reality of history and aspired to altering its “norms” were not and could not be simply free of its social matrices and institutional apparatus, its enforcements, and the naturalization of its enforced results. Radical social changes, one may venture to argue, can transpire only when its participants dislodge themselves from their own constitutions made, and exceed their embeddedness, in such “normal” reality of history.
Ding Ling tackled such tasks in writing during her Yan’an period with astute reflexivity. Another major novella of hers, *When I am in the Morning Glow Village* (*Wo zai xiacun de shihou*), imbricates such reflexivity with disturbing poignancy. An otherwise old tale common in wartime about a woman gang-raped by soldiers, the novella unfolds to show how, having been raped by Japanese soldiers, the young Chinese woman named Zhenzhen has been recruited by the resistance movement as a spy, whose task is to seduce and obtain information from Japanese military men. At home, instead of appreciation she earns hidden or open censure, regarded as tainted if not vitiated by such associations. Zhenzhen resists any “reasonable” solutions, such as marriage to the young man she once loved and, in addition to that unintelligible refusal, she refuses to explain her refusal. The story ends with a scene wherein Zhenzhen is about to go to Yan’an with a certain anticipatory impulse: “Now that they have approved sending me to Yan’an for medical treatment, I’ve been thinking about staying there and doing some studying. I hear it’s a big place with lots of schools that anyone can attend. . . . I’m doing this for myself, but I’m also doing it for the others. I don’t feel that I owe anyone an apology. Neither do I feel especially happy. What I do feel is that after I go to Yan’an, I’ll be in a new situation. I will be able to start life fresh.” This anticipatory impulse in a literary work was evoked in the immediate aftermath of its author’s “authentic allegiance” as a “real revolutionary woman” in life was cautiously verified: the novella was finished in the end of 1940. The anticipatory ending of the fiction hence has less to do with its writer’s uninformed utopian vision of “Yan’an” than it insists on the literary figure’s desires to see as much as her author’s actual commitment to make “Yan’an” as a “new situation,” where new beginnings in life and in history are, can be, or must be made imaginable and hence actualizable. It is precisely with those who “start afresh” their otherwise permanently wretched lives there, Ding Ling seemed to indicate, that “Yan’an” as a “new situation” in time and place for alternative possibilities of human relations and indeed humanity itself can be and must be imagined and engendered, as the center of the Chinese revolution in the making. Ding Ling chose to publish this novella on June 20, 1941, eight months after the affirmative result of the investigation of her “real” political allegiance was announced (October 4, 1940) and two months after she became and worked as the editor of the Literary Supplement to *The Liberation Daily* (*Jiefangribao*, April 16, 1941). An aesthetic event, the public appearance of this literary work seems also an actualization of her imaginings about what constitutes the real content of anti-imperialist national liberation and the real spirit of social revolution: The slow and painful processes of empowerment of the wretched of the earth, and the imaginative recognition of their otherwise unbelievable, unreal agency.

Mao Zedong was the decisive figure in granting temporary recognition of the “realness” of the “Ding Ling story” in Yan’an, first in 1938 when he expressed his personal “trust” in Ding Ling’s account of her Nanjing years, and a second time in 1942 in the midst of the Rectification Movement when Ding Ling was under severe criticism for having written her *Thoughts on March the 8th*. It may well be the case, as some have argued, that Mao himself was as bound up with the
sense of “realistic normality” or embedded in the “normal” reality of history as others. His move to define Ding Ling’s *Thoughts* as a piece of “comradely critique” rather than “hostile writing” might well have been a political maneuver to induce Ding Ling’s self-criticism for other intellectuals to follow, thereby consolidating the discursive and political hegemony he deemed necessary in Yan’an.91 Ding Ling’s self-criticism in June 16, 1942, where she took up Mao’s categorization and distinguished herself from Wang Shiwei, the author of “hostile writings” in Mao’s definition, may also have been driven by her need for her own political survival.92 It is worth noting that, when in 1958 she tried to refute the accusations mounted against her by the “anti-rightist movement,” and which she had publicly “accepted” a year earlier, Ding Ling invoked her memory of Yan’an in the 1940s: “Under the circumstances [in 1957], the distinction between one’s insistence on what is actual and one’s ‘persistence in mistakes’ was as thin as a sheet of paper. I felt that, had I continued to refute the accusations, I would likely have lost my membership in the CCP. I firmly remembered what Chen Yün once said in Yan’an on the topic of how to develop our party: namely, a political party may move at times in wrong directions and we must stay in the party under any circumstances if we want to make some difference.”93 Such consideration seems applicable to Ding Ling’s self-criticism in 1942.

In the light of contemporary critical theories and in particular performance studies, one may well argue that her “acceptances” of “false accusations” are illustrative “performative acts,” particularly given the fact that Ding Ling revisited those “accepted accusations” over and again to refute them, and did so for the reasons she articulated in the above quote and other places with an acute self-awareness. More substantially important, Ding Ling’s self-criticism in 1942 did concur with Mao’s comments on two important grounds that are irreducible to expedient survivalism or political complicity. First, Mao regarded *Thoughts* as comradely “because it puts forth not only critiques but also suggestions” to change or transform what has been criticized (“You piping ye you jianyi”); while “transformation” was indeed the focus of Ding Ling’s desires. Second, Mao regarded the way in which the critique is put forth in *Thoughts* “problematic.” Although the article advocates transformation, it was composed without real attention paid to the question of how to be effective in its advocacy. “For criticism within the revolutionary movement to be effective,” Mao Zedong said to her in 1942 as Ding Ling recalled, “you must acknowledge others’ merits, then offer them criticism.”94 Ding Ling apparently shared Mao’s expressed central concern about how to transform what needed to be transformed rather than about “one’s own” frustrations or anger over the lack of such transformation. In her self-criticism as in her *Thoughts*, she not only raised the question of how to transform “women’s weakness and failings” under their gendered conditions, but centralized such a question in a way that shaped a de-essentialized feminist positioning. “In this article,” she wrote in 1942, “I encourage women to strengthen themselves . . . and do not blame men [as men] . . . but the article itself does carry a certain sense that we women do not need men and we will bring credit to ourselves. I think this [position] is problematic since it will not be fully effective and women’s thorough emancipation cannot be
really reached if the other half of the population does not participate in the [struggle for] such emancipation." Participation, as discussed earlier, is in Ding Ling's vocabulary the very passage of transformation for the participants. As if evoking contemporary critical notions such as “essentialism” and feminist theories that unpack the problem of essentialism, Ding Ling here dislodges herself from the bioethnic binary between the male sex and female sex. She marks women’s central place in the revolution by center-staging their self-transformation as also embodied paradigmatic for participants in their participatory changes of socially constructed forms of women and men as well as their “usual” relations. Such multidimensional transformations are certainly challenging and often seem unattainable, hence:

Resolution in hardship, perseverance to the end. Being born in this modern time, women of critical awareness must be determined to cast off all rosy illusions. Happiness is to take up the struggle in the midst of the raging storm. . . . If one did not have the greatest resolution, one would easily falter in mid-path. Not to bear pain is to embark on the road of corruption or ruination. The strength to carry on must be developed and nurtured through persistent daily praxis. People without larger aspirations can hardly have such tenacity and perseverance. And only those who have aspirations genuinely for the benefit of the human world and not for oneself alone can persevere to the end.96

Those words were written in March 1942, when the Japanese military was enforcing its “burn all, kill all, loot all” policy across China. Mutterings about “slaves of a perished nation” (Wangguonu) comprising both genders/sexes were in the air. The terms Ding Ling used here, perseverance and aspirations, invoke all in the resistance movements refusing their bioethnically marked destiny as the “weak species.” A month and half later, the sad news of Xiao Hong’s death in Hong Kong reached Ding Ling. Remembering Xiao Hong in Wind and Rain (Fengyü zhong yi Xiao Hong), Ding Ling’s essay of mourning for her literary woman friend, summons the same spirit for and from all those struggling with their “wounds and struggles written in blood and tears” in a time of utter violence: “What is this here-and-now? It is filled with shifting senseless noises; it is made of boneless clouds hung in the air like dirty clothes; it muzzles all the pain while allowing no single moment of truthful quietness. Yet it is here-and-now where one’s task lies – to muster the strength of giants to bear the unbearable wounds of the times and sustain this wounded universe, to exist, to be, without any wavering. Existence itself, in here-and-now, is itself a call to arms.”97 At the center of such “call to arms” is a remembrance of the lifeworks of Xiao Hong and women like Xiao Hong. It is a female-specific but not female-centric and hence Chinese feminist remembrance, where the refusal of the biodestiny of the “weaker sex” persists as a female-leveraged imagination for empowerment of the otherwise natural doom of the “weak species.”

Such imagination underlines modern Chinese women’s literary writings and sustains their actual lives. It continues to move and motivate Ding Ling’s story-
telling as she branched into a range of writings about rural men and women after 1942. Her yangge drama Team-Leader Wan (Wan duizhang, 1943), reportage on “model laborers” such as Tian Baoling and Yuan Guangfa (Tian Baoling, Yuan Guangfa, 1944), and literary biography of Folk Artist Li Pu (Minjian yiren Li Pu, 1944), to name a few, are among her noted pieces on the subject of China’s changing peasantry. The large quantity of such writings with this emphatic subject matter does indicate the degree to which Ding Ling was affected by the politics of the time and place.98 This shift in focus, particularly noticeable in the genre of short fiction, may well lead one to wonder whether Ding Ling had then abandoned her writing about educated women or women in general to follow the party line after the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. Being criticized during the Forum, Ding Ling was indeed under serious pressure to respond to the newly codified theories according to which literature and art should be “of and for the workers, peasants, and soldiers.” Her In the Hospital (Zai yiyuan zhong) in 1941 for instance seems to be a story about an educated woman’s frustration with the problematic attitudes of some peasants-turned “cadres” in Yan’an. Many stories after 1942, on the other hand, appear to be about the “greatness” of “the workers, peasants, and soldiers” who are male and have no formal education. Yet, I argue, those writings also converge with her previous work in the ways that cannot find adequate intelligibility in orthodoxy Marxian vocabulary in particular and in the classifying categories of modernity. They are posited on unusual changes of otherwise naturalized destinies, both within and at odds with business-as-usual kinds of social scenes.

Mao Zedong apparently did not see such convergence and the impetus of inherent mutuality at work therein when he singled out and praised Ding Ling’s reportage work Tian Baoling as a “new beginning of [your] writing on workers, peasants, and soldiers.”99 Ding Ling was at first surprised by the praise. She wrote: “Chairman Mao congratulated me on the publication of Tian Baoling, saying that this is the new beginning of my writing of workers, peasants, and soldiers; but I have been writing about their lives since the 1930s – most of my writings, and my major writings since then in fact.” She then came to terms with her surprise by interpreting the effect of the praise with practical acumen: “I then understand that Chairman Mao was trying to help me to re-begin my life. . . . After the investigation of the cadres in Yan’an [and the rectification movement], the intellectuals and literary people were having difficult time.”100 It is undeterminable whether Ding Ling’s “understanding” is historically accurate as far as Mao Zedong’s intention is concerned. Her surprise, however, is profoundly indicative of her own politics of writing and poetics of life in the light of which the struggles of “the weaker sex” are the struggles of the “weak species” with their irreducible specificities.101 Mao, it seems, bypassed such inherent mutuality that points to the foundational impetus of a Chinese feminist imagination at work in – or really as being – the heart of the Chinese revolution. Ding Ling had long brought the lives of the wretched females into a constellation with the variably marked “weak ones” – the wretched of the earth in China and beyond – through her literary writing and social activism, as she points out in her
initial response to Mao Zedong’s praise. Her writings around 1942 in this sense indicate a complex broadening of her politics and poetics developed since the 1920s. Marking out the predicament of modern China and modern Chinese in various scenes, such a constellation registers the imperatives for all involved to work through their own shares in the predicament, giving rise to usually unbelievable transformations.102 Here is the key to Ding Ling’s modern tales of Chinese women and Chinese feminist tales of modern China. They are specific Chinese embodiments of humanity (Zhongguo ren) not only dissenting from but also transformative of the prevailing power relations and their naturalized laws.103

Such power relations, as discussed earlier, had conditioned KMT controlled Shanghai in the 1930s where and when Ding Ling’s literary writings became unpublishable and her actual life was made impossible. The degree to which Ding Ling and her story appear “unbelievable” in Yan’an, one may then argue, indicates the degree to which the Shanghai of the 1930s and Yan’an of the 1940s were linked, however worlds apart in other ways, in terms of a psychic economy inscriptive of modern bioethnic politics and its double violence. Indeed, whether as CCP rebels or as anti-CCP rulers in the 1940s, those who deemed Ding Ling’s stories as “inauthentic” with their otherwise opposite cognitive, moral, and political authorities converge in denying Ding Ling’s “weak ones” of real or possible transformative empowerment.104 Specifically, most of Ding Ling’s stories were denounced as “propaganda” with “no grounds in reality” by the KMT cultural police and of “little value” by those claiming ownerships of “the real literary.”105 Her literary figures, on the other hand, have at the time and periodically over time received severe criticism and political denunciation from some top CCP theorists on the ground that they reveal “the real [political] color” of Ding Ling herself in real life. Zhou Yang, for one, called “Zhenzhen” in When I am in the Morning Glow Village a “rotten woman like a prostitute” who “was beautified by her author into a goddess.” “Miss Sophia” in Miss Sophia’s Diary is “a useless and destructive woman who indulges herself in inflicting pain on men.” Lu Ping in In Hospital is simply a “self-centered woman” masquerading in the role of a woman for revolution. While all these female figures and stories have “no place” in the “real literature of revolutionary realism,” they are threads of their author’s “internal reality.”106 To the extent of enforcing such a denial of intelligibility and the values of the Ding Ling story, the anti-CCP forces in Shanghai of the 1930s differed from their unexpected counterparts in Yan’an in the 1940s. The former were functions of a state apparatus that physically erased Ding Ling and outlawed her story, while the latter kept interrogating Ding Ling but did not prevent or did not manage to prevent her from remaining an active force in the thick of the political scene and imaginative landscape of the Chinese revolution.107 The unusual resilience of Ding Ling’s fictional figurations and her own actual existence asserts that there is no monopoly on the definition and the living dynamics of the Chinese revolution.108 The Sun Is Shining on the Sanggan River (Taiyang zhaozai sanggan he shang), Ding Ling’s most important novel, completed from 1946 to 1948, affords us a pivotal glimpse of this unusual resilience of the Ding Ling story and its energies. I then end this chapter with a brief visit of the novel and its key rhythms.
In terms of its subject matter, the novel is a depiction of a land re-distribution process taking place in a village in North China. Scholars have often approached it as one of the paradigmatic texts on China’s land reform which marks an epoch-making moment for a primarily agrarian society to break away from its former arrangements of hierarchy with distinctly modern drives. As if prolonged echoes from the writings by women early in the century discussed in Chapter I, such drives at one level appeal to the rights discourse of the Enlightenment and the individual. The principles announced by Sun Zhongshan for a Chinese bourgeoisie revolution find concrete expression here as each person has the right to the land he tills (Gengzhe you qitian). At another level they seem to be manifestations of Marxist class struggle through which the oppressed in rural China fight against their oppressors: the rising peasants overthrow the rule of their landlords (Dadao dizhu jieji). In the established CCP vocabulary, those two levels of signification are combined into an index of the historical nature of the Chinese revolution with its double missions: A bourgeoisie revolution underwritten by socialist drives with a radical leadership and vision. Largely conditioned by the canonization of the novel in the history of modern Chinese literature as a work composed with the “Marxist spirit of class struggle,” much scholarly discussion of the novel begin with and anchor on the “arch-class enemy” Qian Wengui and his signification, whether to support “Marxist class theory” or “unmask” the falsehood of such “enemy construction” as the core of the novel. In the world of the novel, Qian Wengui is indeed a key figure; his maneuvers may serve just as well here as a point of entry for my discussion on the Ding Ling story and its feminist imagination as irreducible to the terrain of “class theory” and concomitant controversies.

Warm Spring Village where the novel is set is at first sight a world of traditional Chinese kinship bonds, a networking matrix of social order legitimized by a long inherited system of behavioral codes. In the vocabulary of this system, the powerful ones who own most of the land are in one way or another “kins” of their tenant farmers and hired hands. The bioethnically defined bonds of such kinship system operate to naturalize and conceal its functions in social domination. The double working of this system as material mechanism and social ideology are particularly demonstrated in Qian Wengui – “Second Uncle Qian” as he is reverently called by the villagers, his close or remote “kins”. He uses his niece Heini as a domestic servant but in the name of providing “the poor orphan” (Heini’s parents are dead) with a good life; he also helps his neighbor Liu to make more money in such a way that he turns the Lius into his debtor while he becomes the owner of Liu’s piece of good land. He is much less economically wealthy than other landlords in the village, and yet is the most powerful in terms of maneuvering kin-defined network of influence, through which he is in command of the human labor and land resources of his “kinsmen” and “kinswomen” as well as their psychic bondage and, in several cases, their chances of being alive or dead. His way of going about his daily business and staying in power in a time of radical uncertainty, significantly, is always adaptable to the shifting power regimes of times, highly malleable and...
most tyrannical. In other words, “Second Uncle Qian” is no mere country gentry ossified amid myriad uncertainties specific to a traumatized China. Formerly he had established close ties with both KMT forces and the Japanese military, and now he is aware of and quickly responds to the fact that the CCP-led resistance movements are gaining substantial following across the country and their land reform programs are pulling the growing support of the peasantry. His two sons and one daughter are his human resources. He marries his daughter to the head of the CCP-led Public Security Committee; he sends his second son to the Eighth Route Army; he allocates part of his land to his first son’s household and rids himself of the chances of being categorized as a “landlord.” Also, he no longer prohibits his niece Heini’s love for Chen Ren, his former long-term hired hand, but rather encourages her to secure Chen’s affection since the young man now is a leading member of the newly founded Peasants Association. With those and other timely shifts in his kinship deployment and power networking, “Second Uncle Qian” remains in good standing with any forces that are or could be in power including, for the moment, the CCP-led forces for land reform.

The depiction of “Second Uncle Qian,” clearly unsympathetic or downright hostile, is hence not a textbook illustration of the notion of “class enemy.” Economically, his class-status is defined as that of the “middle peasant” (Zhongnong) by the CCP-work team in accordance with the statistics-based terms it uses in land reform, certainly not the target of the land redistribution. His identity as the father of a soldier in the Eighth-Route Army (Kangshu) and father-in-law of the head of the security affairs in the Peasants Association links him with the “progressive” camps for the resistance movement and land reform no matter how his maneuvers in his daily business cost his “kins,” “relatives” and “good neighbors” (Zhuqin haoyou) their land, labor, and lives. Qian Wengui is really one of those modern men most capable of adapting themselves to the changes in the force field of power relations as always the “fittest,” here by way of drawing on the Chinese kinship matrix and constantly re-arranging its codification and resulting functions. Indeed, in the context of the social geography and its drastic shifts in rural China of the 1940s and over the course of the twentieth century, the “ancient” kinship system and “modern” power networking were not far apart from each other and were often mutually re-inscribing in their configuration and operation: Both are institutional articulations of bioethnic politics that [re]produce the “weak” as the grounds for the making of the “strong,” through the wielding as well as manipulations of bioethnically constituted categories. Bioethnic codes in other words are internal to and instrumental for such [re]production, while alignments for power are made and remade through strategic and shifting invocations of bioethnic bonds. The result shows then that the components of the powerless and the powerful may vary and change, but the divide itself remains a fluid structure and an unchanging regime, as do the power relations with which the divide-regime is sustained and through which the variably powerful gain their power by appropriating, sometimes violently, their varied “weaker” relatives, neighbors, or kinfolk. Qian Wengui specializes in and personifies the permanence of such operative continuum, under which any possible changes
are turned into instruments for his kind of advancement or the advancement of
the “fittest,” be they instituted under the KMT regime, the Japanese military, or
the CCP-led land reform and peasants’ movement. The prevailing players hence
are those already always adaptable to the new patterns with which are revealed
the same logic of power, and in accordance with which everyone “naturally”
wants to be on the side of the prevailing players. Such is “the way of the world
that had always been,” as Qian Wengui asserts, for it is dictated by “the nature of
humanity.”

In Ding Ling’s fiction, Qian Wengui’s assertion on permanent “human
nature” and its social articulation in “the way of the world” seems to have found
disturbing verification in unlikely places such as the case of Old Hou, another
major figure in the novel. In his youth, Hou had land and high hopes. One
drought season sent him into bankruptcy, and the lawsuits pressured afterwards
by his landlord (Hou Diancai) sank his family. He left the village to work for
merchants in trading businesses but after years of hard labor, he returned to the
village empty-handed. With urban China as a “new” world to which the Chinese
peasants hardly gained real access for livelihood and rural China as an “old”
world on which they were losing their grip, the peasants who tried to leave the
land were doubly penalized. Upon his return he found himself subjected to his
landlord’s more exorbitant demands. Struggling to survive, Old Hou works
himself into accepting his specific predicament as a general “fate” testifying to
“the way of the world” that “has always been working.” There have always been
the rich and the poor, the ruler and the ruled, the appropriated and the appro-
piator, the strong and the weak, the chosen and the doomed in this world, while
the relationship between the two was violently arbitrary and inexplicably
unchanging. Old Hou is not alone in accepting such way of the world. Guo
Bairen, another tenant farmer whose life seems a cyclical series of daily tribula-
tions, appears to have never thought otherwise. When Chen Ren, the president
of the CCP-led Peasants Association visits Guo and suggests that he “has the
right” to the land he tilled, Guo does not quite know how to respond:

[After hearing Guo’s answer that 90 percent of his annual harvest had to go
to the landlord as his payment for the land rent, Chen Ren asked:] “Uncle
Guo, how then is your life?” “So so,” he smiled. His son Guo Fugui stood at
the door looking at his father: “Father! Have there ever been times when we
have not suffered hunger? For four seasons, upon what do you live? Bean dregs,
wheat bran, and husks; none of us can live without them. That straw mat on
our kang is so small that it cannot cover me when it covers you. You still say
your life is ‘so, so;’ animals live better than you do!” “You . . . what are you
saying . . . ,” Old Guo scolded his son, his voice choked, his lips trembling.
“Uncle,” [Chen Ren said], “think about it: every day you go to work in the land when the sky
is dark with stars, and come home when the stars fill the sky again; but where
are the grains that you have harvested? Those who never raise their fingers to
work, sit in best houses and eat white rice and fine flour – is all that right?”
“Hei, the land is theirs . . . !” Old Guo raised his wet eyes to look at Chen Ren.116
Guo Bairen’s “wet eyes” speak volumes of what is unspoken in him and other similarly situated villagers: pains inflicted upon them by “the way of the world” that is premised on a denial of the value of their labor and humanity and their painful acceptance of such devaluation. An imperative to develop a recognition of the humanly inexplicable of such a way of the world is suggested here, with charged emotions: Guo’s acceptance of the denial of his own life is due to the fact that he has taken such a “way” as a given, and never questioned the logic upon which it is posited.

Vital as it is, critical cognition of the humanly inexplicable in itself in Ding Ling’s novel does not lever enough efficacy to dislodge the painful acceptance of such inexplicables among the villagers. Old Hou for instance is fully cognizant of the problematic nature of “the way of the world,” and yet he keeps quiet while “many people [come] to talk to him and ask him to tell his sorrows” as the land of his landlord is redistributed. In effect he returns the one and half mou land he receives from the Peasants Association to his landlord who is also his uncle, thinking as follows:

The reason that the Eighth Route Army offered [about the land reform] was good; yet thousands of years of history taught him, from what he read and heard, that there had never been a time where poor people could head society or have a say about their lives. Zhu Hongwu was from the poor and, when he rebelled against the emperor, he did so in the name of the poor people. Yet when he succeeded, he became an emperor himself who at first still tried in some good ways to make life bearable for poor folks but then dropped the effort after all, and in the end all he did was for himself, for the small group around him; common folks were and are still common folks, having the lion’s share of hardships, pains, and wrongs117 (my italics).

Fully cognizant of how it is the power relations in his village coded in terms of kinship that works for his misfortune, Old Hou seems incapable of imagining any possibility of altering his misfortune or, more accurately, the conditions of the unfortunate ones like him, even in the most promising moments of change. “The way of the world” has always been such that the “strong” appropriate or dispossess the “weak,” as his uncle did to him. Qian Wengui’s shifting network further erases any space for viable alternatives in Old Hou’s mind. He is not surprised at all to see and in fact he has anticipated that Gu Yong, a hard-working and well-to-do peasant, is to be made by Qian Wengui and his camps a target in place of Qian Wengui for the anger stirring among the poor villagers. Gu Yong fulfills the double condition for being a scapegoat: he attracts attention due to his relatively stable economic situation and yet does not have Qian Wengui’s network always in sync with the powers that be. As Old Hou sees it, “power” is what anything about. “Power to decide / Who is to live / Who is to die.”118 The “class enemy” is likely to become yet another classification deployed by the powerful to manufacture substitutive casualties in a time of potentially profound change and empty its potential into a re-shuffling and re-inscription of the same old power relations. Old Hou’s recognition of the workings of the ever new and ever old power rela-
tions is insightful, but something more than an insightful pessimism is at work therein, suggesting the degree to which Old Hou is embedded in belief of the naturalness of such a “way of the world.” As the storylines in Ding Ling’s novel multiply into specific characters, a range of villagers including the leading members in the land reform are shown to be similarly embedded.

Chapter Forty-Five is particularly revealing of not only the layers of such embeddedness but their constitution. It focuses on a meeting held by the leading members of the reform and delineates how they struggle to reach a consensus to “settle accounts” (Qingsuan) with Qian Wengui. Irreducible to an ideologically driven decision-making process on whether they need to single out a “landlord” as an “arch-villain,” it is indicative first of all when an unspoken assumption surfaces among the participants that anyone from the extensive Qian family tree naturally must have been allied with Qian Wengui and his network of power. Bioethnically defined kinship or its naturalized codification is taken as the given ground for social allegiance and of personal identity. Ding Ling’s rendition of the meeting tackles and unpacks the assumption with both nuance and lucidity. Zhang Zhendian, the head of the Public Security Committee of the Peasants Association and Qian Wengui’s son-in-law, for instance, turns out in the meeting to be indeed at the service of his father-in-law’s interests. Yet Qian Wenhu, Qian Wengui’s cousin and the head of the Hired Hands’ Committee in the Peasants Association, goes in opposite direction: “What kind of cousin-brothers you are talking about?” he asks, “you all know I and my family having nothing to do with him, haven’t you see his blood elder brother? That poor old widower, tilling a bit of land to grow vegetables for a living, has nothing to do with him either. . . . I have no trouble about making him accountable for what he has done to the folks!” As such opposites denaturalize the kin-defined or bioethnically posited human bonds into sites of humanly chosen social relations, the “Qian Wengui question” is disclosed as a question of socially made power relations. Everyone involved therein then must work through his/her relation to this question of power and rethink its shifting deployment.

Such working through involves though more than denaturalizing cognition. Half way in the chapter, Zhang Zhenguo the head of the village militia touches on the stakes here when he says: “Who is the real problem in this village? We all know – the one who kills people without the need to use knife. Yet because his brother and also his son-in-law are among our cadres, no one dares to call what is as it is. Some are afraid of offending him and some want to get on good terms with him! . . . Do all those who suffered and died in his hands matter to us?” (my italics). His rhetorical question brings about a moment of opening for a critical confrontation with the naturalized assumption at work in “we all” and with what such assumption inherently requires, namely, an indifference to the others “who suffered and died.” The issue of critical cognition, then, is also inherently ethical in its impetus. Such an ethical impetus in Ding Ling’s novel seems to have little to do with sentiments to transcend the socially made power relations. Rather, it transpires in specific working through of the operative effect of the double
violence of such relations, which includes the embeddedness of all involved in such relations. As the head of the Peasants Association puts it, “Deep down we all have this fear that Qian Wengui may regain or always stays in power (Biāntiān sīxiāng); . . . [N]one of us is free of some self-serving behavior because of this fear.” Such a fear manifested in the “self-serving” behavior designates not only a socially coerced but personally chosen complicity in the violence of this “way of the world.” To that degree, the embeddedness of “us all” in such a “way” was not simply a passive reception of the material effects inflicted by its daily operation. It in effect involves a measure of socio-psychic investment made by “us all” in the “ever old and ever new way” of the power relations: the core of such fear is the embeddedness of “us all” in the logic of the realpolitik, in the putatively natural law of the real world.

Through the prism bodied and troped by the “arch-class enemy” Qian Wengui, Sanggan River discerns and illuminates another “enemy” that the villagers of Warm Springs must confront and work through. This amounts to a revolutionary transformation of their own embeddedness in Qian Wengui’s “way of the world,” in the bioethnic politics that makes them daily scenes of human suffering as historical necessities. It can hardly be over-stressed how central Ding Ling’s illumination is to the formation of modern Chinese culture in and as revolution. As if a long echoing or a recurrent vibration across decades, it evokes what the leading reformers early in the century displayed with their recognition of China as “the weak” and their concomitant drives to make it “strong.” A cognitive acceptance of the “logic of the realpolitik” as the “laws” of the “real world” with pain and indignation of an ultimately ethical nature repressed therein. Indeed, one may venture to argue that the entire history of modern China with its many revolutions has its central contradiction located between the cognitive acceptance of and ethical indignation against such “laws” of modernity and the logic of its legitimation. Chinese feminist writers since the 1890s offer a corrective to such a contradiction with their refusal of the human intelligibility of such laws and logics. A central part of this feminist legacy, Ding Ling’s The Sun Is Shining on the Sanggan River is an impulse to unpack such cognitive acceptance and a product of such unpacking, evocative of the passages Grandma in New Faith or Zhenzhen in When I Was in Morning Glow Village among others have traveled. With its multiple storylines, the novel mobilizes multiple cognitive and ethical working-throughs of the embeddedness of the villagers in “the way of the world” that they struggle against in the land reform. By implication, those “working-throughs” apply to anyone involved in attempts at transforming his/her given destinies and redefining him/herself in the actual world of the twentieth century including the CCP-led revolutionaries.

Carrying out precisely such a working through, the leading members of the Peasants’ Association and the CCP-work team for reform in Chapter Five redefine themselves and engender alternative kinship. As they finally reach the decision to “settle scores” with Qian Wengui, they momentously open social space for hitherto unimaginable ideas to turn into actual scenarios. Qian Wengui is put under detention; a public rally is under way at which members of the
Peasants Association expose what he has done to the folks in Warm Spring Village. A legal trial is to follow. These extraordinary actions are matched by the extraordinary response they entail:

Members of different families went to visit one another, old men looked for other old men, young folks went after other young folks, women found other women; people only needed to give a glance to one another to gather themselves into groups. This one told the other “this thing” (zhejianshi), the other also told this one “this thing;” initially their voices were filled with a sense of incredulousness, trembling in shocked and almost frightened tones, asking one another about the realness of “this thing,” inquiring. They went to ask those close to the cadres that led the reform; some went to ask the militia; and some simply went to ask the cadres themselves. The “thing” was verified. And more news and embellishments about the “thing” were quickly growing.

“This thing” seemed taking a life of its own in the quickly growing “embellishments,” a life of participatory dynamics involving increasingly more villagers. Investing in “this thing” with their “embellishments,” the villagers begin to imagine and materialize its possible contents suggestive of a yet unavailable form of their world and social relations, hence their sense of incredulousness that is also a radically new experience of transformative resonation. This and many other scenes in Sanggan River map out multidimensional moments that at once comprise and require the alteration of everyone involved. Throughout the novel, such moments recur with varied figurations and rhythms. The chapter titled “The Orchard Comes Alive” earlier in the novel is another brilliant example. As the fruit in the village’s orchards owned by few landlords quickly ripen while the process of the land reform is slow to begin, the CCP work team and the Peasants Association come to a precipitated consensus that the villagers go ahead and harvest the fully ripened fruits first. There will be time to decide upon the question of how to distribute the profits of the fruit sales in proportion with the shares of the land that each villager may receive through the reform. A moment of suspension of the earlier ownership structure premised on the power of the few comes into being without, in the terms of novel writing, a priori plot about its substitution. Men and women, old and young, children, join the harvest with a participatory dynamics that redefines the possible meanings of their labor, their relations, and their being as a world in the making:

. . . [A]s the great earth was awakening with the appearing of the faint light of a dawn, clear sounds of laughter floated up from the still, cool orchards. Those village folk’s joy seemed to exceed that of the chirping sparrows, and the small scaly insects that love to flit about in the morning breeze darted uneasily in all directions. Lush leaves were swaying on stretching branches and yet incapable of concealing the heavy fruits in rows that were weighing the branches down. In the groves, there still remained some sparkling dewdrops, like stars twinkling in a foggy night. On the red fruit there was a
downy sheen, or a layer of thin frost, making them look soft and moist. Colored morning clouds were rising and accentuating the thick green leaves with their gold dots; while the groves were catching translucent, faintly purple and light yellow rays. Ladders were put up against the trees, people climbed up and stood on the ladders, fruits fell into the palms of those large, working hands, and slipping into those bamboo baskets, a certain fresh fragrance was floating in the transparent light.\textsuperscript{125}

One of the most lyrical scenes of the novel, the chapter and its imagery float with the weight of the ripening fruits in rows, with an unfamiliar fragrance that yet feels close to the hearts of all involved: “People worked from one tree to another; one wave of laughter after another moved [along with them]; here a group of people just laughed, there another laughed again, everyone turned into good temperament itself. Baskets filled with fruits lined up... rows and rows of baskets filled with fruits... the sunlight danced on the tips of the leaves... The orchards were still bustling with noise and excitement when the sun was gliding down on the West; even old women were arriving with their canes. Such unheard of event!”\textsuperscript{126} The abundance of the earth pulsates here in and as human activity charged with specifically conditioned but profoundly transforming potency, as an “unheard of event” and as “something” unprecedented. Laboring with joy as they “had never tasted,” the villagers are breaking away from the social arrangements that “had always been” wherein they had no access to the fruits of their life-labor. It is an intensely open moment inducive of the most imaginative human energy during which, to quote a recent theorist, “all manner of possibilities – often decisive and sometimes revolutionary – stood to be both recovered and achieved.”\textsuperscript{127} Li Baotang, the quiet old man who has been the gatekeeper of the orchards all his life but has gone hungry most of his days and nights, finds himself altering amidst such unfamiliar and yet penetrating fresh abundance in the otherwise old orchards and familiar people:

He had watched other people picking the fruits or had picked those fruits for others for some twenty years. He never liked talking, and always worked quietly, incessantly, as if completely unmoved [by what surrounded him]; as if nothing was moving inside of him; as if he did not realize that those fruits were sweet and fragrant; as if what he held in his hands had been clumps of clay or lifeless bricks. There was no sweetness, no joy in them at all. None. But today? His sense of smell seemed to wake up together with the great breathing earth; he had discovered, for the first time, this green, luxuriant, rich environment, like a beggar suddenly coming across numerous gold coins. All the fruits were shining with such a life; all were twinkling and winking at him.\textsuperscript{128}

Li Baotang hereby crystallizes with and as a transformative dynamics, registering the moment where everyone or everything is possible to be re-imagined and re-defined, including one’s relationship to the land, to the labor process, to one
another, and to oneself. As if coming-into-being for the first time, Old Li is regaining his long lost sense of being among the living, like those fruits transforming from “clumps of clay or lifeless brick” into a fragrant freshness of abundance.

This returning of the living-dead as the intensely living, amid a transformation that illuminates what usually remains shadowy, unfolds through key scenes in the novel with specific implications evocative of a more generalized articulation of human ontology. Examples can be found throughout the novel but particularly in the chapters where the villagers struggle through their internal turmoil and external upheavals to arrive at their first collective decision in their public rallies. They elect a committee to evaluate the land across the village and prepare its redistribution, making participatory democratic moves whereby a new form of organizing inherent to such moves also comes into being. The members of the elected committee continue to work through their embeddedness in the old logic of power relations under the close watch of all the villagers, while gradually coming up with a range of specific decisions about how to redistribute the land among all the members of the village. That Qian Wengui be allocated some land and be enabled from then on to “learn to work for his living like a human being,” as stipulated by the committee and concurred with by the villagers, intimates the revolutionary degree of their emancipation from the Qian Wengui’s “way of the world that had always been” and their response to the Qian Wengui question. The core issue of land reform is not, here, in Ding Ling’s terms of novel writing at least, about the claims of bioethnically given “good old peasants,” neither is it about any “arch-villain” of bioethnically determined enemies, class marked or otherwise. It is about revolutionary possibilities and actualizabilities of human transformation and their ways of making life and arranging social relations. It is about another kind of humanity in the making-cum-remaking. The villagers’ fury toward Qian Wengui shown at their rally to “settle scores” with him is in this sense a pivotal moment of a working through and working over “the way of the world,” as everyone involved is shaken to the core, however in different ways. Old Hou received an unprecedented visit from his cousin-landlord: Something happened inside of this visitor after his experience at the rally; he now brings the title deeds of the land that he took from Old Hou’s father a decade ago, and insists that Old Hou accept them as a “belated return.” After the most unlikely visitor is gone:

. . . [T]he two old people [Hou Zhongqüan and his wife] looked at each other, afraid that they were in a dream. They turned the title deeds over and over, and then rushed to the door to look, then they ended up laughing; they laughed until they became sad. Hou Zhongqüan sat on the steps of the courtyard, wiping away his tears and thinking back on the hard life he had always had. He had led camels in the desert, blown about by the wind and snow; he had trudged the plains, the endless sand dunes, while hope like the horizon at dusk faded farther and farther away. He remembered his illness, when he had nearly died; he thought then it would have been better to die,
but he lived. *Living was so much harder than dying!* Gradually he came to believe in fate and retribution, placing truth in the invisible future life, using the illusion to console himself. But now the future was a fact, reward had come so quickly! This was something he had never thought of, had never dared to think of. He should be happy and he was happy, but his happiness was no longer something that he could bear; his tears were flowing because of his happiness. *He had come to life again, his senses were reawakened: he was not a dead old man anymore* (my italics).

Such unbelievable occurrences made of tears in silence, bodies in pain, and stirrings of the living invisibles, summons forth those female figures in Ding Ling’s writing that had populated China’s cultural landscapes since the 1920s, with their cognitive, ethical, and ontological significance. Similarly summoned forth from her erasure amid the turns of events is the young woman in *Sanggan River*, Heini, whose meanings of existence are recognized neither by the man she once shows love in the world of the novel nor in the eyes of her many critics in the world of actual life over the decades. A recurrent question has followed Heini the literary figure as much as her author Ding Ling in life in modern Chinese literary and political history, a question which is an extension of the question raised by Kang Sheng in 1938 and Zhou Yang later. How can it be real that Heini wants to break out of her uncle’s household that is naturally her “home”? How authentic can a woman like Ding Ling be as a revolutionary?213 A female body of unintelligibility, Heini is absent in the novel across many pages after the scene of her earlier failed attempt to find love in Chen Ren, and reappears in the high moment in the novel in Chapter Fifty-Five titled “The Joy of *Fanshen*,”134 where the villagers are having their field day and collecting their respective shares of the village’s redistributed wealth. Chen Ren, now the respected director of the Peasants Association also receives his share (some tools and grains) and shares the rejoice flowing amidst “us all.” When he sees an old man trying to move a water vat without much success, he approaches intending to help but something stops him. A young woman runs up to help the old man who turns out to be Qian Wengui’s abandoned elder brother, the widower who grew vegetables for his livelihood. The young woman is Heini and Heini, in this moment, is radiant with joy or, in effect, *is* joy itself:

Chen Ren was stunned, such an unexpected encounter made him temporarily lost, and his mind perplexed: “Look, she is so joyful; what makes her so happy? What is she happy about?” Yet Chen Ren instantly saw what he had not been able to see, as if suddenly waking up from dreams, and precipitated into a discovery of how laughable he himself had been, “why would she not be unhappy before? She was an orphan in this place that was Qian Wengui’s reign, and when all those oppressed by Qian Wengui are liberated, she is liberated amongst them, how can it be otherwise?”135

How can it be otherwise? – when one inhabits the human relations of the world as bionaturally given and defined, as Chen Ren’s first response registers, one
thereby has made conscious or unconscious alignment with the bioethnic politics and the power relations it conceals and re-enforces. Yet such an alignment has never been natural for Heini. As the bioethnically crippled sex, she turns momentarily visible in the midst of *Fanshen* in the novel, just as the question of who this biological niece of Qian Wengui is and can be as well as what she can mean becomes momentously compelling in the revolutionary opening of a transformative moment in history. She becomes legible and can only be legible when the codified kinship as a traditional system of hierarchy and modern marriage as a new institution of business dealings are pried open, exposed to be inherently gendered and burst as humanly most alienating if not destructive. Her “feelings” for Chen Ren also turn sharply intelligible in such a moment. Those feelings are rhythms between living beings that constitute a gratuitous reciprocity as the “warm springs” of humanity. Except in such moments of revolutionary transformation, gratuitousness seems to be the equivalent of unintelligibility in the enterprises of “normal” human affairs. Once owned and instrumentalized by both traditional and modern versions of bioethnic politics with a coerced identity that is also a social deformation, Heini is thus the body and trope of routinely erased joy of life in modern China. She is joy of life that appears and can only appear when both versions of power relations are sent into an unraveling in such moment as the epochal land reform that precipitated the Chinese peasantry into radical change, designating the real content of the Chinese revolution.

“Warm Spring Village was no longer the same place as yesterday,” the story thus ends, yet without closure, “this was an ending; this was a beginning.”136 Like a river that does not end, the story affords no closure about the sustainability of humanity as social rhythm of gratuitous reciprocity. Indeed, one does not know how long Chen Ren’s recognition of Heini as a body and trope of joy of life will last, and to what degree he is transforming himself in the midst of the transformation of the power relations that “had always been.” He approaches Heini and the old man the vegetable grower to help them carry the large water vat, and Heini responds in a deeply mediated way: “Seeing Chen Ren’s warm smile toward her, Heini blushed, she did not know what to do and turned away pretending that she was not in this group. [As Chen Ren carried the vat and lead the way walking out, her uncle] the old widower followed, slowly, making some sound in his old throat. *The smile on Heini’s face had already disappeared; she was walking at a distant from [the two men], in silence*”137 (my italics). One could argue that here is an image of traditional femaleness: Heini blushes at and shies away from expression of intimacy. Yet a sense of inherent uncertainty is discernable in the quick disappearance of her smile, in the chosen motion of her body as she distances herself from the men further and further, and in her silence of unexpressed contents. The novel never revisits the Chen Ren–Heini encounter, and a marriage between the two, the logical closure of any melodramatic love story, is nowhere to be seen. Heini remains a female-fleshed body and female-levered trope in the heart of *The Sun Is Shining on the Sanggan River*, whose rhythms are too potent not to be distinctly present and too deeply silent not to be richly obscure and profoundly unsettling. Indeed, critics and historians of Chinese literature...
and politics have never ceased their wonderings and debates about how to render Heini transparent, and so far have reached no conclusive results. “Do I have a home?” This seemingly simple question with which a Chinese scholar in Ding Ling studies opens his best known essay written in Heini’s first person narrative remains a most suggestive intimation of the place or placelessness of a female figure in the established order of the world and its institutions of intelligibility. It is “a rich and [thus] obscure message” authored by modern China’s most prominent and most controversial women writer. Heini passes through the tumultuous landscape of the novel as if a gentle and yet persistent heat that burns in one’s dream with real bodily effect felt even and when one’s dream recedes into another round of a routine day. Most appealing for some and least tangible for others, Heini seems at once evocatively real and poignantly unreal among all the characters in the novel. Her at once central and marginal presence in the heart of *Sanggan River* seems to signify that Ding Ling’s rendition of the Chinese land reform is really a tale of an actualizable imaginary that is also an act of imagination. It does this in haunting resonance with Qiu Jin’s monumental trope of the Jingwei bird, Bing Xin’s lyrical parable of the startling cognition, Bai Wei and Yüan Changying’s dramatic staging of an ethical double, Xiao Hong’s stirring songs of alternative kinship, and Wang Ying’s cross-embodiments of transformation.

When Ding Ling began to envision her female figure Heini with the epochal story of the land reform, the civil war between the KMT and the CCP was about to erupt in China as an integral part of the quickly shifting and deeply troubling scenes of the post-Second World War world. Chinese society, struggling to emerge from the cruelest moment of its twentieth century, was still caught up in a field of institutional and human wreckages. The defeat of the Japanese military expansionism in the war did not in itself end “the way of the world that had always been” and its naturalized violence. When life was lived as if a walking with death, fear of death displaced life. In a time and place where there was no telling if such a tale of actualizable imaginary may find viable social, cultural, and institutional articulations, Ding Ling put her own body on the line as she wrote it up. Probing into and bringing forth the felt rhythms hidden amid the violent force fields of a violent time, such an act of imagination and activation of the imaginary constitute a necessary condition for making institutional articulations possible, where the imaginative may find or make their dwellings. The authorial comment on Zhang Pin, the CCP hero who briefly appears in the tale, seems more pertinent when applied to the author’s act of writing and materialization of the fiction: “Knowing him and being with him, people with little or no power began to feel that better days were possible, began to resist the forces that were making their lives a field of misery, and began to [dislodge their own acceptance of the logic of and] start fighting against the great power politics.”

*The Sun Is Shining on the Sanggan River* is in this sense not only an epic storytelling; it is an effort of epic proportion to actualize a Chinese feminist imagination. Decades later, Ding Ling wrote of her effort to hold onto such storytelling as history-making by evoking the rhythms of a “daily walk” that brings non-existent paths
into existence: “It is not easy to open up such a yet non-existent path of movement by just walking persistently; those who have tried and done so know its pain and beauty. I want to pave this path one step at a time and let each footstep leave its print on earth, walking toward genuine knowledge, walking into genuine usefulness, while walking beyond one’s own given limit.”

In light of such rhythms, the divide between the “literary writer Ding Ling” and “political activist Ding Ling” posited by critics may be remapped as a rich difference that joins the “early Ding Ling” and “later Ding Ling,” whereby the Ding Ling story may come to life again as a veritable Long March that marks out the horizon of the Chinese feminist imagination as the heart of the Chinese revolution. It is a long march through trials and tribulations, and with unusual efforts and unbelievable transformations, in print and in life. As if an actual double of her literary figures in making their yet-to-be paths, Ding Ling the author persistently “walked” such a long march in the world outside her writing, as an actualizable imaginary and an unintelligible existence – as rhythms of the unreal – throughout the subsequent decades of the twentieth century. She walked through the sudden denunciation that removed her from the public life in the “traumatizing” mid and late 1950s, the persecution that sent her to jail in the “radicalizing” 1960s, and the attacks that depicted her as a “brain-washed” adherent of the inherently “inhuman” Chinese revolution in the “humanistic” 1980s. All of which is beyond the scope of this book project and yet is internal to the Ding Ling story rendered here. The feminist complexity of Ding Ling’s lifework remains a bone in the throat as it were in the orthodox versions of the CCP history before the 1980s and in new discourses produced since the 1980s that posit themselves on the premise of the “bankruptcy” of the Chinese revolution. The former desires to assign Ding Ling to the role of an “unauthentic” revolutionary for the writings that she published on “bourgeois female” in the 1920s and the problems in the CCP-led movements since she arrived in Yan’an in the 1930s, disregarding the immensity of her revolutionary activity in the thick of the life in Yan’an. The latter desires to make her a “tragic” women writer as witness to and proof of the falseness of Chinese women’s liberatory transformation central to the Chinese revolutionary movements, and insists on sympathizing her into a complicitious victim of the revolution to which she devoted her lifelong passion. Ding Ling refused to validate both. In the face of the former’s tyrannical accusation, she periodically re-asserted how her early tales of “the modern girl” and her later stories of the “weak species” are inherently linked, and both are central to her life passage into the Chinese revolution. In the face of the latter’s tyrannical sympathy, she insisted on the values of her activity in the revolutionary movements as “life-blood” and “paradigm-evoking” for her literary writings; the mutual shaping up of both lead her to a fulfillment of life in the Chinese revolution. The core of such fulfillment, as Ding Ling reiterates throughout her living days, is in the midst of a revolutionary self-transformation. Such reassertion, reiteration, and insistence by Ding Ling are openly dismissed by both parties as “pretense” and implicitly denied as “unreal.” Those seem to be absolute enemies in their claimed ideologies, paradoxically, converge
in their denying the Ding Ling story of human intelligibility, often with the same
category.\footnote{146}

Such indicative paradox summons the attention of scholars who are more
aware of how the Ding Ling story may point to a yet-to-be seen practice of
tremendous implications for not only the studies of Chinese writing women but
feminist theory, performance studies, and social historiography. She also raises
the question of how “modern Chinese women revolutionaries” may have given
rise to an unnamed energy in the domains of human possibilities. In the light of
the Ding Ling story, one might begin to dialogue with such possibilities that resist,
extend, or burst the bioethnically posited categories and their classificatory func-
tions foundational to the various versions of the bioethnic power relations, for the
benefit of the current human rhythms in their invisible presences. Indeed, the
catastrophes of global proportion that rendered modern China and the Chinese
into a specific body of “the weak” are far from being or becoming irrelevant
bygones in world history, and Ding Ling’s insistence on the actualizability of the
imagined alternatives gains more urgency as her lifework offers efficacy. The
“debris piled up” amidst “progress,” as famously phrased by Walter Benjamin,
are so rendered in the Ding Ling story that they are not only sorrow scenarios to
be contemplated. They are human scenes in a state of double emergency to be
worked through and over into imperatives and resources for “unheard of” actual
transformation, where warm springs of humanity may recur with a revolutionary
feminist imagination.
Then and Now

This book was conceived more than a decade ago, at a time when China was still inscribed by the prevailing world powers as an at once precarious and threatening body politic manifest of human deficiency and social liability. As I am completing it with this afterwards, China seems on its way to become a strong modern country as some have asserted and many hope on both sides of the Pacific Ocean and around the globe. The world and its relational geography have been changing drastically indeed. But what such a status of being one of “the strong” and “modern” may imply or entail certainly is not a settled story for all citizens of that nation and the world caught up in the present new round of global sea change. If story-making is also life-making as this book has traced and argued, then the Chinese story of modernization as a “strong” country is still to be made in a process of telling it. Here I arrive at full circle and return to the point with which this book begins. If telling the stories of the “weaker sex-cum-weak species” with a view to acknowledging the power of their imagination is also an act to probe possibilities in life, then the storyteller as a historian-scholar not only dialogues with but participates in what is being told as she imaginatively defines her relationship to her own context in the midst of her storytelling. It is an active process where the tracing of a female figured and leveraged legacy is a participatory renewing of its potency, and where the encounter with the disappeared is also a re-embodiment of its potential for the survival and empowerment of otherwise impoverished or ruined humanity. Rather than “interrogating” the “object” of her study, the participatory storyteller allows the hidden or erased rhythms of life springs in what she traces to enter her existence, an entering that is also her own cognitive, affective, political, and ethical transformation. Such tracing premises itself on a cognizance that what is being researched is not a finished story to be analyzed and narrated, but a life process linked to the ways in which the historian-scholar as the storyteller inhabits the prevailing terms of her own time, and confronts the implied pressures therein. Instead of licensing free variations on the “stories of the past,” variations whose hidden justification lies in their complicity in shifting operations of power relations prevailing in today’s world of

Afterword
various global wars, the participatory historian-scholar as the storyteller “may rather serve to test current views” and their naturalness.

Such a test, which is also a test about how the historian-scholar relates herself to her own context as bound up with large social and political issues, can at times be painfully challenging. In one of such difficult moments of my own life, I had an exchange with my mother. It was very late in the night and I was sitting at her bedside in a hospital. A talented daughter of a large gentry-official family from the Yangtze delta, she became a woman revolutionary when she joined the War of Resistance against the Japanese Invasion and the CCP underground at the age of barely thirteen. I asked how she managed to take such an “extraordinary” and courageous action at radical odds with the prevailing powers in that time of extreme violence. Mother paused. Then, gently and simply, she said: “It was common. Many women had done so. No one wants to live on their knees ([knelt down] knees (Meiren yuanyi guizhe huo). It was a common story.”

This book is my way of tracing my mother’s common story on how to stand on one’s feet rather than on one’s knees. It is my act of renewing the female-levered rising of the otherwise doomed “weak species” in the field of social ruins and human suffering that is called modern Chinese history. And it is my attempt to evoke the unseen rhythms, motions and movements in such rising as my participatory labor in more desirable transformations at yet another turning point of the history of this world.

All those women studied in this book are no longer in this human made world, still crisis-ridden and war-driven, with piled up, variable casualties. And their appearances in the written chapters of modern world history are still far from adequate. Yet they do appear amongst us, often at the least expected and surprising moments. As Ding Ling’s recent biographer writes: “At the places you are expected to be found, you are nowhere to be seen; at the times when you are not expected to be seen, you appear. / Train station after train station, wharf after wharf. It is a long way. / A young woman, ‘a moth that embraces fire,’ dancing in circles in the burning tips of flames, a brilliant and catastrophic prophesy of life. / Impossible to travel, yet still must go onto the road, leaving home behind. / It is a prophesy without conclusion, the destination of your walking is to live and live among the common folk with their common stories. / Snow and wind knock at your door, making the fireplace next to the wood column solitude. / At the places where you cannot be found, one encounters you, it is a real myth, a calamity, / where living or dead is unknown, one morning you come to life again amongst us. / . . . At the times when we cannot find you we find you, at the places where we cannot see you we see you.”

The unseen rhythms of alternative humanity recur, as the recurrent unreal with immense power, then and now.
Notes

Introduction: On Empowerment


6 *Funü zazhi* (Women’s magazine, issue 7, 1924), pp. 1064–1070.


For scholarly renditions of such translations, see *Chen Sihe, Zhongguo xing wenxüe zheng-tiguan* *(New Chinese literature as an [open] totality*, Taibei: Y eqiang chubanshe, 1990); *Lydia Liu, Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937* *(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).*


Works in the fields of social history by contemporary Chinese women scholars Lin Chun, Liu Bohong, Lu Meixü directly inform my study here.


The indicative story about how Ding Ling in the 1920s rejected an invitation to contribute to a special volume of “female literary works” is discussed in Chapter 6 of this book. For related discussion, see Tani Barlow’s *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* *(Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).*


26 Li Youning and Zhang Yüfa (eds), *Jindai zhongguo nüqüan yündong shiliao, 1842–1911 (Documents on the feminist movements in modern China, 1842–1911)*, Taibei: Zhanqiang wenxue chubanshe, Biographical literature publishing company, 1975), pp. 662–663. Any citation from this collection later in this book in English will be referred to as shiliao.

27 Ibid., pp. 576–577.


29 Zhang Dan and Wang Renzhi (ed.), *Xinhai geming qian shenian jian shilun xüanji (Collection of essays and articles published during the ten years before the 1911 Xinhai Revolution)*, (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 1960), pp. 898–899. Any citation from this collection later will be referred to as shilun xüanji.


34 Such impulse occurs in Shi Pingmei, Lu Jingqing, Chen Xüezhao, Chen Ying, Lin Huiyin Luo Hong, Luo Shu, Feng Keng, and many more, whose works cannot be included in this book due to the limit of space.

35 Bing Xin, *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 439.


37 The phrase is from Arif Dirlik, “Modernity as history,” in *Social History*, vol. 27, no. 1, January 2002, p. 38.

38 For a critique of language-confined cultural theories and their linguistic-centered questions, see Henri Lefebvre (Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans.), *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).


42 Bing Xin is the last to depart, on February 28, 1999.
43 The original line is: “Reading the fabric of my silk handkerchief, / Half stained by blood and half by tears of pain.” Qiu Jin ji, p. 89.
44 I am interested in the problem of “the Real” as it is articulated by Slavoj Zizek via Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida via Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche. Derrida’s “signified” which “is the absence constitutive of the floating of the signifier,” is one of its key versions. Their theories are relevant to what I attempt to discuss in this book. So is Hegel’s enunciative line that haunts all their scenes of writing: “The real is rational; and the rational will be real.” G.W.F. Hegel (A.V. Miller, trans.), Phenomenology of the Spirit, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 211–585.
45 For an illuminating analysis of the distinction among “the absent,” “loss,” and “lack,” see Dominick LaCapra’s chapter titled “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” in Writing Traumas, Writing History, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, pp. 43–85.

1 Unseen Rhythms, Sea Changes

5 While learned women existed in dynastic China, women’s learning was never an institutional part of Chinese dynastic history. The civil examination system established since the Sui Dynasty (581–618) had been, as a matter of organizing principle and institutional execution, a male-exclusive operation throughout its more than thirteen centuries of existence.
6 Qiu Jin, He Xiangning, Liu Qingxia, Chen Xiefen, Chen Hengzhe, Zhang Zhuyun were among the earliest women who went overseas. Shan Zhili (1856–1943) went to Japan as early as in 1899. See Lu Meixi and Zheng Yongfu, Zhongguo funü yündong 1840–1921 (Chinese Women’s Movement, 1840–1921, Changsha: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1990), pp. 193–223, p. 218. Any citation from this book later will be referred to as funü yündong.
8 See funü yündong, pp. 38–41. See also Chen Jingpan, Zhongguo jindai jiaoyüshi (Modern Chinese history of education; Beijing: Beijing renmin chubanshe, 1979).
9 It was founded by Jing Yuanshan (1841–1903), the Director of Shanghai Telegram Bureau, and his wife, with the support from Shanghai gentry-business community, circles of news stations and journalism, and political figures in the reform movement. It was closed in 1900 after two years’ operation. See Jing Yuanshan, “Zhongguo nüxüetang
Chinese elite women rallied to ask for donations for the school, involving missionary women from Europe and the U.S., as well as Japanese diplomats’ wives. See Shuntian ribao (Shuntian daily), December 5, 6, 9, 10, 1906; also Beijing nü bao (Beijing women’s journal), March 10, 1906.

11 See Sheng Ying and Qiao Yigang (ed.), Ershi shiji zhongguo nüxing wenxüeshi (Twentieth Century Chinese women’s literary history, Tianjing: Tianjing renmin chubanshe, 1995), vol. 1. Any citation from this book later will be referred to as Zhongguo nüxin wenxüeshi.


13 Although their aspiration at one level appeared similar to the suffragettes in England or America, these Chinese women’s struggles for advancement in society were not and could not be premised on legally negotiated entries into the rubrics and mechanisms of the nation state for such modern regime with its institutional codifications did not exist in the context of those women’s lives, which was a civilizational crisis and disintegration. For commentaries on the specific achievements and overall limits of Anglo-American “liberal feminism” and “feminist negotiations,” see M. Jacqui Alexander and Chondra Mohanty, Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic features; also see Perry Anderson, “Renewals,” New Left Review 1, January – February, 2000.

14 Economic and financial factors in the coastal areas played crucial roles in such a surge of women’s publications, which is a topic in itself for examination. Women’s writings for an emergent reading public prior to the Reform Movement would shed lights on the women’s publications in the 1890s and place the latter in a hitherto understudied genealogy. For historical materials on women’s publications in and since the 1890s, see qikan jieshao (Survey of the periodicals and newspapers in the Xinhai Revolution period, Beijing: Beijing renmin chubanshe, 1980). See also Jacqueline Nivard, “Women and the Women’s Press: The Case of the Ladies’ Journal (Funü zazhi, 1915–1931)”, in Republican China, vol. 10, no. 16, 1984/1985, p. 50; Charlotte L. Beahan, “In the Public Eye: Women in Early Twentieth Century China,” in Richal Gaisso and Stanley Johannesen (eds), Women in China (Philo Press 1982), pp. 215–238; “Feminism and Nationalism in the Chinese Women’s Press, 1902–1911,” in Modern China 1 (1975), pp. 379–416.

15 The first issue, published in March 1903, is the only extant issue of this journal. See qikan jieshao, vol. 3, p. 75.

16 qikan jieshao, vol. 3, p. 76.


18 qikan jieshao, vol. 3, p. 76.


20 Yan Fu (1854–1921), the first Chinese translator of a range of Western economic theorists, also translated Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations which appeared in 1901 and asserted tremendous influence among the intellectuals in the late Qing. For a recent discussion of this major cultural and intellectual event in modern Chinese history, see Lai Jianchen, Yadiang shiming yu yan fu – guo fu lun yu zhongguo (Adam Smith and Yan Fu – The Wealth of Nations and China, Beijing: Sanmin, 1991).

21 See Beijing nü bao (Beijing women’s paper), “Nü xuetang zhangcheng” (“Regulations on women’s schools”), October 6, 14, 18, 1906. See also Alison R. Drucker, “The

24 qikan jieshao, vol. 3., p. 75.
25 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 76.
27 Rey Chow’s Women and Chinese Modernity is seminal in terms of scholarly articulations of the internal link between gender and ethnicity (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
28 What has been defined as “decadent literature,” found in some of the “self-injuring” writings by such writers as Yü Dafu, registers such effects and may need closer inquiry. David Der-wei Wang’s work on “repressed modernities” in late Qing fiction offers specific scenarios that deserve further consideration. Fin-de-Siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
29 Male writers such as Lu Xun, Wen Yiduo, Hu Yeping, Yin Fu, and Rou Shi, radically diverse in other ways, are among those whose politicizations were precipitated by their exposures to the violence of such bioethnic politics in a semicolonial context. Their relations to Chinese women’s cultural formations require more nuanced examination.
30 For some sketches of such an “anti-tradition” genre of intellectual behavior – as well as its opposite – in modern Chinese cultural history, see Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, Gaobie keming (Farewell to revolution, Taibei: maitian chuban youxian gufen gongsi, 1999).
32 One of the indications of the heated debates between two intellectual camps is Lu Xun’s engagements with a variety of men of letters in his prose-writings. Lu Xun, Lu Xun quanji (Complete collection of works by Lu Xun, Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981).
37 Fei Xiaotong, Congshi qiuzhi lu (Learning from searching for the reality, Beijing: Beijing University, 1998), pp. 61–62.
38 For cogent theoretical works on this topic, see Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, and Terry Eagleton (Seamus Deane, ed. and intro.), Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). For feminist critique of Eurocentric articulations of “nation building,” see Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in Third World (London: Zed Press, 1986); Anne McClintock et al. (eds), Dangerous Liaisons (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
40 qikan jieshao, vol. 4, p. 682.


For a recent analysis of the ancient or traditional connotations of *Minzu*, as it is explained by early scholars such as Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong, see Wang Mingming, “Minzu yu guojia, cong Wu Wenzao de zaoqi lunshu chufa” (“Nation and State – Beginning with Wu Wenzao’s early explications”), in *The Journal of the College of Ethnic Studies in Yunnan* (*Yiunnan minzu xueyuan xuebao*), issue 6, 1999 – issue 1, 2000.


The Chinese term for “race” is “zhongzu,” again coming from European languages via Japanese coinage “shuzoku.” Ibid.


Christina Gilmartin makes an astute observation of this Chinese term and its connotation in her *Engendering the Chinese Revolution*, p. 7.

*shiliao*, pp. 566–567.

*funü yündong*, pp. 263–296.

*shiliao*, vol. 1, pp. 173–175.

Ibid., pp. 431–433.

*shiliao*, pp. 566–567.


Ibid., 355–479. Notably, Lu Xun and other leading male authors of modern Chinese culture also lack such resolves or real cognitive interests in such divisions. For a recent articulation of this aspect of Lu Xun, see Wang Xiaoming, *Lu Xun zhuo* (*A biography of Lu Xun*), Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1993), Chapter 4 and 5.

*shiliao*, vol.1, p. 664.

*Nübao* was founded in 1907 by Jin Nenzhi, Ye Sixiang and others in Shanghai. See also *qikan jieshao*, p. 508.


*shiliao*, pp. 566–567.


69 Mao Zedong’s and others’ writings in 1919 about the death by suicide of Miss Zhao appear to strongly echo Qiu Jin’s 1904 writing. The implicit or overt difference between the two kinds of writings about women’s suffering, if there is such a difference (which should be argued to begin with), again constitutes a subject of inquiry in itself. One of the more discernable attributes of such difference might be found in the fact that the latter (Qiu Jin) paid closer attention to the actual body and bodily conditions of those suffering women. She worked to persuade those women to specifically dislodge themselves from such conditions as much as to do so with herself, while the former often shift their focus onto the unjust social structure in more general terms and how such structure must be destroyed.


71 The oral quality of Qiu Jin’s mournful writing sets it apart from the vernacular writings intended for readership as promoted nearly fifteen years later by the May Fourth literary movement. For a seminal study of early revolutionary women in their public agitation activity, see Mary B. Rankin (ed.), *Early Chinese Revolutionaries: Radical Intellectuals in Shanghai and Chekiang, 1902–1911* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

72 For recent discussions of the cultural genre of mournful female figured in Chinese classical drama, see Haiping Yan, “Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama,” in Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait (eds), *Theatricality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), pp. 65–89. For such figures in folk culture, the enduring story of “Menjiangnü kuchangcheng” (“A woman named Mengjiang who wept at the feet of the Great Wall”), passed from generation to generation orally, is exemplary. See “Mengjiang nü de chuan shuo” (“The folklore of Mengjiang ni”), in *Zhongguo minjian gushi* (Chinese folklore), at www.6mj.com (accessed 1 September 2005).

73 That a bride is expected to weep when she is about to leave her parents’ house, for instance, constitutes a rich topic about gendered social rituals for explorations from a feminist perspective. A wide range of fiction since the late Qing era affords many stories. For a recent web site devoted to the topic “Folk culture and folk ritual – weeping” (“Minjian minsu wenhua – ku”), see *Jiaxin wenhua wang* (Jiaxin web on culture), www.jxcnt.com (accessed 1 September 2005).

74 For those women who fought, worked and died for and in the 1911 Revolution specifically, see Zhang Yufa, *Qingji de geming tuanti* (Revolutionary organizations in late Qing dynasty, Taibei: Zhongyang yanjiuyüan jindai shi yanjiusuo, 1975), pp. 76–100.


76 For more classic samples of discussions of “multiply oppressed women,” see Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (eds), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown MA: Persephone Press, 1981); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman,
1990). It is striking to see that bell hooks, after more than twenty years of writing, titled her most recent book *A Woman’s Mourning Song* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 2005).

81 Li Youning and Zhang Yufa (ed.), *shiliao*, p. 416.


2 **Qiu Jin and Her Imaginary**


2 Ibid., p. 98.


4 The year when Qiu Jin first went to Beijing is a debatable issue. Some argue that it is in 1899 and others in 1903. I choose to adopt Guo Changhai and Li Yabin’s conclusion here, which is supported by detailed analysis of documents. See Guo and Li, *Qiu Jin shiji yanjiou*, pp. 113–117.

5 The idea of “studying the world” or “learning about the world” entered the history of Chinese political and cultural thought as an idea of significant importance in the aftermath of the Opium Wars in the 1840s. See Feng Youlan, *Zhongguo zhexueshi xinbian* (*A New History of Chinese Philosophical Thought*, Beijing: Beijing renmin chubanshe, 1989), vol. 6, pp. 46–55.

6 See Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann, Ellen Widmer et al.


8 “In Hunan, Qiu Jin already had the fame of being a talented woman; . . . her parents-in-law offered an old style Chinese bank in the City of Xiangtan as a welcome gift to their newly wed daughter-in-law.” Shan Mu, *Qiu Jin zhuo*, p. 195.


10 For instance, women at the imperial palace hoping for royal visits; merchants’ wives in empty estates waiting for their husbands who are away on business trips; ladies of the gentry literati lingering alone as their scholar-masters seek success in the imperial examination or officialdom; “widows of the living” longing for their men who are soldiers stationed in remote areas or fighting wars; courtesans in need of or even in love with their often casual-hearted patrons – all wrote their variously felt sorrows about their relations (or the lack thereof) to their male superiors. Qiao Yigang, *Zhongguo nuxing de wenxue shijie*, pp. 14–45.

11 Ibid., pp. 103–142. See also, Men and Dai, *Fuchu*, pp. 1–25.

12 Qiu Jin, *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 68.


14 Li Yi, Yu Xuanji, Xue Tao of the Tang, Li Qingzhao of the North Song, and Zhu Shuqing of the South Song, among others, produced abundant poems of such
“female sorrows and longings.” Li Qingzhao’s “scissorful of plum blossom” is one of the best known. Ibid., p. 123.
15 Ibid.
16 See Li Bai, *Li Bai juan* (The volume of poems by Li Bai), in *Qian tangshi* (Complete collection of poems of the Tang Dynasty, Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1979).
18 Such interventions should be distinguished from a “masculinizing” impulse that re-inscribes the gendered hierarchy by measuring women with the standards of “manly aggressiveness” – a distinction that at times seems blurred by critics dismissive of the enabling effects afforded by images of female that, in the making of revolutionairy culture of twentieth century China, cross the boundaries of femininity and gain forces usually reserved for the male gender. Audre Lorde, Jacqui Alexander, and many gay and lesbian studies scholars have long illuminated the efficacy of such intervention.
20 Qiao Yigang comes to a strongly argued conclusion that Qiu Jin is “the first Chinese woman writer who breaks away from the traditional feminine literature.” Qiao Yigang, *Zhongguo nüxing de wenxüe shijie*, p. 154.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid. See also Sang Bin, “1905 nian qianhou de xinxüe rechao he xüesheng zhuangkuang” (“Waves of new schools and the orientations of the students around 1905”), in *Wanqing xüetang* (Academies in the late Qing dynasty, Shanghai: Xüelin chubanshe, 1995), pp. 139–231.
30 Qiu Jin, “Jinggao Zhongguo er wanwan nü tongbao” (“Respectfully speaking to my two hundred million fellow women”), in *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 5.
32 The War referred to here is the colonial Russo-Japanese War over the control of Northeastern China in 1904, during which the first modern Chinese navy was destroyed.
33 Qiu Jin, *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 81.
34 Ibid., p. 116.
35 Ibid., p. 89.
36 Ibid., pp. 36–45.
37 Qiu Jin owned not only her own bridal dowry, which was substantial, but also properties given to her by her father-in-law when she was married. See Shan Mu, *Qiu Jin zhuoan*, pp. 194–195.
40 Zhou Liangpei, a contemporary biographer and writer, offers an informative account of how Ding Ling’s mother and her women friends at the turn of the century attempted to unbind their feet and imposed on themselves the routines of stringent

41 Qiu Jin wrote songs, public speeches, narrative stories, critical essays and *tanci*-drama in basically vernacular Chinese, as well as published political pamphlets, translations from Japanese of medical texts, documents for party activities, and military organization plans, all in addition to a fairly large quantity of poetry in classical forms. See *Qiu jin ji*.

42 For the poem, see Qiu Jin, *Qiu jin ji*, p. 80. For the information on the time and place this picture was taken, see Guo Yanli, *Qiu Jin yanjiou ziliao*, p. 39.

43 For a concise discussion of the events and other organizations that led to the founding of the Revolutionary Alliance and its political programs, see Li Zehou, *Zhongguo jindai sixiangshi lun* (On modern Chinese intellectual history, Beijing: Beijing renmin chubanshe, 1979), pp. 288–298.


45 For “six political guiding principles” of the Alliance, see Qü Wu, *Zhongguo guomindang shi*, pp. 32–36. While the Provisional Government of Republic China established in Nanjing and led by Sun Zhongshan as its president after the 1911 Revolution only lasted three months, it is historical that the bill on women passed by its Provisional Congress in 1912 stipulates that women have equal rights to political participation at all levels of the governing body. Ibid., p. 57.

46 Others who held such a level of responsibility include Huang Xing, Song Jiaoren, Cai Yuanpei, and Liao Zhongkai. Ibid., p. 32.

47 Xü Xilin, an anti-Manchu republican and Qiu Jin’s long-time friend from Zhejiang Province, founded the center and later invited Qiu Jin to be its principal. See Zheng Yunshan, *Qiu Jin*, pp. 64–72.

48 Ibid., pp. 82–100.

49 Qiu Jin, *Qiu jin ji*, p. 98.


51 Ibid., pp. 126–135; also see the photocopies of *Datong xüean* (The files on the case of the Datong academy) and *Zhejiang banli Qiu jin geming qüanan* (The complete files on the case of Qiu jin revolution settled by the Zhejiang court, 1907); and the annotation of this poem, in *Qiu jin ji*, p. 98.


53 Fan Wenlan, “Qiu Jin – yi wei nü gemingjia” (Chiu Chin – a woman revolutionary), in *Zhongguo funü* (Women of China), August 1954, p. 31

54 Qiu Jin, *Qiu jin ji*, p. 89.


56 See Gayatri Spivek, Rey Chow, bell hooks, Jacqui Alexander, Chandra Mohanty.

57 For instance, see Qiu Jin, “Guangfuju qiyi xigao” (“Condemnation of the Qing court by the army for recovering Chinese country”), in *Qiu jin ji*, pp. 21–22.

58 Ibid., p. 81.

59 Ibid., p. 116.

60 Ibid., p. 45.

61 The Revolutionary Alliance was founded in August 1905. Guo and Li, *Qiu jin shijii yanjiou*, pp. 41–143.

62 Ibid.

64 Qiu Jin, *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 72.
66 Ibid.
69 The familiar form of “feminine literary friendship” is both a genre of social behavior and a literary genre of writing. For Qiu Jin’s writings in the mode of “feminine literary friendship,” see, in *Qiu Jin ji*, “Taqing jishi” (“Spring outing”), p. 60; “Jizhi jie yi shi xiangweyi cìwēn dazhī” (“Rhyming with elder sister Jizhi jie’s comforting poem”), p. 61; “Ji Jizhi” (“For Jizhi”), p. 64; “Songbie” (“Parting”), p. 65.
70 Qiu Canzhi’s *Gemingjia Qiu Jin zhuān* offers a vivid account of their friendships, pp. 22–31.
72 Qiu Jin, *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 78.
73 Lǔshī refers to a form of poetry: a poem of eight lines, each containing five or seven characters, with a strict tonal pattern and rhyme scheme.
77 Qiu Jin, *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 36.
81 Ibid. See also Zheng Yūnshān, *Qiu Jin*, p. 33.
84 Guo Yanlǐ, *Qiu Jin wenxüe lungao*, p. 171.
85 For one of the most useful citations of memoirs and studies of Qiu Jin published in Japan since the 1950s, see Ono Kazuko’s *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution 1850–1950*, p. 217.
86 For the entire article in Chinese, see Fubu fanzi (Hattori Shigeto), “Huiyi Qiu Jin nüshī” (“Remembering Ms. Qiu Jin”), in Guo Yanlǐ, (ed.) (Gao Yan, trans.), *Qiu Jin yanjiu ziliaoj*, pp. 166–192. The first part of this article was initially published in Japan in 1951. See Hattori Shigeko, “Fujin kakumeika o Shu Kin joshi no omoide (I)” (“Memories of the venerable revolutionary, Ms. Qiu Jin”), in *Chugokeugo zasshi* 6, March 1951, pp. 1–3. The article was published in its entirety in Japan in *Tōzai kōshō*, (Tokyo: Tokyo-to Seiso Shuppan), issue 1, September 15 1982, pp. 38–49.
87 Guo Yanlǐ, *Qiu Jin yanjiu ziliaoj*, p. 189.
88 Ibid., pp. 189–192.
89 Ibid., p. 191.
92 Such “modern concubines” became familiar scenes throughout the Republican era of the 1920s and the 1930s. In terms of its social and structural features, the fate of such Chinese modern concubines overlaps in part with the destiny of Western bourgeois wives whose constitutive double is found in the institution of modern prostitution.
93 Qiu Jin, “Wo xianmu oumei renmin” (“I envy the people in Europe and America”), in *Qiu Jin ji*, p. 112.
In Chinese mythology, the Goddess Nüwa uses her magic stones with five colors to repair the broken heaven.


One of the popular songs in modern and contemporary China that commemorates those who died for and in the Chinese revolution is titled “Wuyüe de xianhua” (“Fresh flowers in May”).

Qiu Jin, in her letter dated 12 September 1905 to her brother, registers her perception of the emergence of such elite and the features of its social behavior in the Chinese context. See *Qiu Jin ji*, pp. 38–41.

Zheng Yünshan puts it: “Desiring to search for knowledge and truth to save their country, [those Chinese overseas students] gathered in Japan and made Tokyo one of the headquarters of the twentieth century Chinese revolution.” Ibid., p. 30.


Those women friends were founding members of Society of Qiu Jin (*Qiu she*) established in 1908 and led by Xu Jichen (Zihua). They were also a sustaining force for Qiu Jin’s daughter Qiu Canzhi (Wang Canzhi). After 1911 Revolution and upon Sun Zhongshan’s suggestion, Xu Jichen (Zihua) became the Principal of Jinxiong Women’s College in Shanghai in 1912. She remained in that position for sixteen years. Qiu Jin’s daughter Qiu Canzhi became the principal in 1927 until she went to the U.S. to study. Guo and Li, pp. 246–247.

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The immense range of literary, historiographical, and scholarly works on Qiu Jin produced during the twentieth century constitutes a research topic on its own, so are organizations such as the “Qiu Society.” Oral stories of various kinds about Qiu Jin are fabrics of Chinese literature and cultural memories.

*Tanci* is a genre of southern dramatic performance comprising prose singing, vernacular dialogue, and narrative story telling. The translations of this drama cited here are rendered by myself with reference to the translations of its excerpts in Amy D. Dolling and Kristina M. Torgeson (eds & trans.), *Writing Women in Modern China*, pp. 39–78.

Ibid., p. 55.
The class specific feminist impulse in the work is part of such a program. When those women left China for Japan, they left the maid who helped them behind without much thought. Ibid., p. 89.


Qiu Jin, *Qiu Jin ji*, pp. 65–66. Although it is possible that Qiu Jin might have written more, it is basically verifiable that Qiu Jin did not complete the whole drama as she planned (and registered in her table of contents), particularly if one considers how her political life intensified since she returned from Japan.

Scholars often note her strong notions regarding “xia ke” – a force of chivalry or “noblesse oblige,” a deep-seated concept in Chinese cultural tradition that holds up individual acts of daring in executing social justice as the hope of the downtrodden multitude. Zheng Yünshan, *Qiu Jin*, pp. 3–6.


3 The Stars of Night


3 Lu Xin, later the most revered writer of modern China, had returned from study in Japan in 1909; and he remained silent for almost a decade until 1918 when he published his first fiction. See Lu Xun, *Zixü* (“A Preface to Call to Arms”), in *Lu Xin quanji*, vol. 1, pp. 415–421.


5 *funü yündong*, pp. 270–376.

6 Coordinating with one another in many ways, those organizations had their respective foci. The Alliance of Women’s Rights for instance issued its call to battle against the
prevailing male-centered authority and patterns of social relations, while the Chinese Women’s Association called on “our sisters” to revolutionize society by “first revolutionizing ourselves.” Sheng Ying and Qiao Yigang (eds), Zhongguo nüxing wenxüeshi, pp. 28–29.

7 Ibid. Zhongguo nüxing wenxüeshi, pp. 27–180.

8 Chen Hengzhe’s “Yiri” (“One day”), for instance, was written in Chinese vernacular and published in Oumei xüesheng jibao (Overseas students in Europe and America quarterly), in 1917, one year earlier than Lu Xun’s “Kuangren riji” (The madman’s diary), Ke Ling, “Xüyan” (“Preface to Chen Hengzhe xiaoshuo”), in Chen Hengzhe xiaoshuo (Fictions by Chen Hengzhe, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), p. 2.


12 “Chaoren” (Superman) is one of Bing Xin’s early stories. See Dong Fen, “Chaoren fuzhu” (“A note on Superman”), in Bing Xin yanjiu ziliao (Research materials on Bing Xin, Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1984), p. 306. The collection will hereafter be referred to as Yanjiu ziliao.


14 Shen Congwen, “Lun Bing Xin” (“On Bing Xin”), in Yanjiu ziliao, 1926; Ah Ying, a key figure of modern Chinese literary scene, wrote in 1930 that “[She] is no doubt the earliest, the most influential and representative female poet and author of modern China.” Ah Ying, Zhongguo xiandai nüzuojia (On modern Chinese writers, Shanghai: Beixin shujü, 1931), p. 197.

15 In the 1920s and the 1930s, some critics regarded her as “an intelligent woman student who has not lived beyond her school environment,” others viewed her as “a young woman with a lively imagination, [who] tried to poeticize reality, .. influenced by Christianity and Rabindranath Tagore’s philosophy of eastern cosmological harmony;” see Chen Xiying, “Bing Xin nüshi” (“On Ms. Bing Xin”) and Mao Dun, “Bing Xin lun” (“On Bing Xin”), in Yanjiu ziliao, p. 194 and pp. 243–244. Marxist historians in the 1950s tended to define her narrative position as that of “sentimental bourgeois idealism;” see Fan Boqun and Zen Huapeng, “Lun Bing Xin chuanguzuo” (“On Bing Xin’s creative writings”), in Yanjiu ziliao, pp. 262–296. Some feminist scholars of the 1980s find a “Lacanian imaginary” where the mother and child merge into “a site of pre-Oedipal consciousness,” see Meng and Dai, Fuchu, p. 122.

16 Critics of the above-mentioned diverse political persuasions generally share the view that Bing Xin’s “motherly love” is “narrow” in terms of its social implications. Yanjiu ziliao, pp. 193–418.

17 The phrases “elder sister is motherly” (“Zhangjie weimu”) and “elder sister-in-law is motherly” (“Zhangsao weimu”) are part of Chinese vocabulary, which means that high respect is paid to elder sisters or elder sister-in-laws who shoulder the responsibility of the parents to bring up the younger siblings in a family. Elder sister, a television drama series directed by Zhang Qiaobiao and posited on the phrase of “Zhangjie weimu,” was just produced by Hubei TV studio and broadcast on CCTV in May 2004.


20 Ibid., pp. 100–101.

21 Chen Xiying, “Bing Xin nüshi” (“On Ms. Bing Xin”), in Xiying xianhua: xinwenxüe yündong yilai de shibu zhuzuo (Xiying commentaries on ten works since the new literary movement, Shanghai: Xinyüe shudian, 1928).

22 C.T. Xia defines Bing Xin as part of the “Chinese tradition of sentimental literature;” Yanjiu ziliao, p. 411; also C.T. Xia, A History of Chinese Fiction (Hong Kong: Hong Kong youlian chuban youxian gongsi., 1978).

23 Li Zehou, Lunyü jindu (Reading the Analects today, Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu yonxian gongsi., 1998), pp. 7–32.
Hence in Chinese language the other common name for the officials at the local or regional level is “fumu guan” – literally “mother and father official.”


For a useful and relatively recent account, see Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers (eds), Women and Chinese Patriarchy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press and Zed Books Ltd, 1994).

For in-depth scholarly discussions of the notion of “qing” (“feelings”) and its signification in Chinese aesthetics and ontological outlooks, see Li Zehou, Meixüe sijiang (Four lectures on aesthetics, Taibei: Renjian chubanshe, 1988).

The codes that regulate “feelings with rites” are vividly narrated in the Chinese literary classic, A Dream of Red Mansions by Tsao, Hsueh-chin (ca. 1717–1763) (Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, trans.), (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978).


Zi Gang, “Bing Xin fangwenji” (“An interview with Bing Xin”), in Yanjiou ziliao, p. 107. Writing women from the May Fourth period could hardly find the support that they needed from Confucian tradition without structurally altering its teaching. Throughout Confucius’ Analects, for instance, there is only one line that mentions women – Line 25 in Chapter 1 – which goes: “Only women and small-minded men are difficult for [Confucian subjects] to be with.” Li Zehou, Lun yü jing du, pp. 409–410.


For crucial distinctions made between “normative” and “normalization,” see Dominick LaCapra, Representing the Holocaust (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

For critical mappings of such “manifest destiny,” see Stuart Hall, Cornell West, and Edward Said.

Harold Shadick offered this information in a conversation with me in 1987. Then a Professor Emeritus of Cornell University, Shadick had been the chair of the Department of Foreign languages at Yanjing University in the 1920s and 1930s. He revisited Beijing and Bing Xin, his former student, in 1987 in Beijing.

See “The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews,” in The Oxford Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Feng Fei is representative of the 1910s Chinese writers’ understanding of Paul: “Paul says: ‘A man who does not touch women is a good man. In order to avoid obsceneness, however, every man has a wife, and every woman has a husband.’ He also says: ‘Just like Jesus is the head of the Church, husband is the head of the wife.’ He also says: ‘Human’s head is Jesus, woman’s head is man.’ . . . We then know how Paul judges women: he does
not ask whether women are virtuous or intelligent; he dictates that all women’s relationship to men be established in the model of the relationship that the faithful must have to Jesus.” Feng Fei, *Nüxing lun (On Female)*, Shanghai: Zhongguo shuju, 1919, p. 30.

44 Scholarly studies of the figure of St. Paul and the idea of “religion” in general have been taking an interesting turn in the recent years. See Jacques Derrida (Gil Anidjar ed. and intro.), *Acts of Religion* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002). I thank Linda Kinz for bringing this point to my attention.


48 Such potency of “feelings” is related to what might be called the “primacy of emotions over rationality” that Lee Ou-fan Lee and others explored as the feature of the literary scenes of the 1910s and 1920s (*The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1973). Perry Link’s discussion of urban writings labeled by the May Fourth writers as “[the schools of] mandarin ducks and butterflies” (“Yuanyang hudie pai”) is informative when he points out that, among about a hundred writers of this school, none were female (“Traditional-Style Popular Urban Fiction in the Teens and Twenties,” in *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*). Rey Chow’s attempt at re-reading the writers of this school is useful in its articulation of the gendered limitations of the May Fourth writers. But the difference between the dynamics at work amongst the female characters centrally depicted in the works that belong to “the school of mandarin ducks and butterflies” and the dynamics at work in Bing Xin’s writings remains. Sisterly impulses in Bing Xin cannot be rendered commensurable with the most or majority of feminine figures – however complex in their effects – in the writings of the school of “mandarin ducks and butterflies.”

49 Bing Xin, “Xiao jiating zhidu xia de xisheng” (“Sacrifice under the system of nuclear family”), in *Bing Xin qianji*, vol. 1, pp. 101–103.

50 Ibid., p. 102.


52 Bing Xin, “Zuihou de anxi” (“Final resting”), in *Bing Xin qianji*, vol. 1, pp. 76–84.


54 Bing Xin, in *Bing Xin qianji*, vol. 1, pp. 55–60.


57 See, for instance, Feng Yüanjün’s “Separation,” in *Chunheng (Traces of the spring)*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997, pp. 1–11. Lu Yin, Shi Pingmei, and other women writers at the time to varying degrees inscribe such rubrics with different critical reflections. See Lu Yin (Qian Hong ed.), *Lu Yin xuanji* (*Selections, Fujian: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1985*). See also *Zhongguo nüxing wenxieshi*, pp. 91–184.


61 Ibid., p. 66.
62 In her early prose writings, Bing Xin discussed how to confront such difficulty. See Bing Xin, “Tibi yiqian zenyang anfang ni ziji” (“How to place yourself before you use the pen”), in Bing Xin qüanji, vol. 1, pp. 206–207. Other writers also raised the same questions in 1920s. See Lu Xun, “Ze mo xie” (“How to write”), in Lu Xin qüanji, vol. pp. 18–19.
66 Ibid., p. 83.
67 Ibid., p. 84.
68 Su Xüelin, Ah Ying, Shen Congwen, Mao Dun, and Hu Shi are among the critics and writers who have made such observations. Yanjiou ziliao, pp. 194–418. Hu Shi may have been the first critic who used the term. Bing Xin, “Huiyi zhong de Hu Shixiansheng” (“Mr. Hu Shi in my recollection”), Bing Xin qüanji, vol. 9, pp. 111–112.
70 Hu Shi’s comments, quoted in Bing Xin, “Hui yi zhong de Hu Shizhi xiansheng,” Bing Xin qüanji, vol. 9, pp. 111–112.
71 It is useful to refer to the artistic and scholarly works on colonial culture and cultural colonization that show us how “the natives” are made “childlike.” See Wole Soyinka, Death and the King’s Horseman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987); Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Decolonizing the Mind (London/Nairobi: James Currey/Heinemann Kenya, 1992).
74 In her essay titled “Wo shi zenyang bei tuijin ertong wenxüe zuojia duiwu li qüde” (“How I was pushed into the category of writers of children’s literature”), published in 1980, Bing Xin writes: “Among my writings, only Letters to the Young Reader was written for children... and yet gradually it became something close to an expression of my own lyrical impulses, and the reader for whom I was writing for became indistinct and blurred.” Bing Xin qüanji, vol. 7, p. 115.
75 Critics often use the term “qingxin” (“limpid and fresh”) or “xingyün liushui” (“moving like wind and flowing like water”) to describe the Bing Xin style. Pu Manding (ed.), Bing Xin mingzuo xinshang (Appreciations of the best-known works by Bing Xin, Beijing: Zhongguo heping chubanshe, 1993). While most of major writers in modern Chinese literature are often discussed in terms of their social insights or historical substance or political passions, Bing Xin is almost always discussed first and foremost in the terms of “the Bing Xin style” as writing style only. It is significant to see how Qū Qiubai, the leading figure of the CCP in literature and culture, as early as 1932, recognized the historical significance of a normative sense of social equality at work in Bing Xin’s writings. Qū Qiubai, “Laohu pi” (“The tigers’ skins”), in Yanjiou ziliao, pp. 230–232.
78 Ibid., pp. 461–462.
79 Ibid., pp. 460–461.
80 See Meng and Dai, Fuchu, pp. 110–134.
81 Bing Xin, “Fanxing” (“Stars”), in Bingxin qüanji vol. 1, p. 234.
82 Sun Zhongshan’s comment was concise: “[the attempt at] dismantling the Manchu’s despotism turned out to be not the ending of the old but many new despots.” Qū Wu, Zhongguo guomindang shi, p. 101, pp. 102–103.
83 Bing Xin’s father, who had fought in the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese navy war, was appointed as an official in the Ministry of the Navy in 1931. Both the paternal and maternal sides of her family were involved in the 1911 Revolution. Xiao Feng, *Bing Xin zhuoan (A biography of Bing Xin)*, Beijing: Shiyüe wenyi chubanshe, 1987), p. 11, pp. 16–17, pp. 25–28, pp. 32–39.

84 Bing Xin, “Huiyi wusi” (“Recalling the May Fourth”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 7, p. 27.


86 Bing Xin, “Lian ge jiating” (“Two families”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, pp. 11–19, which was published in *Wenyi fukan ( Literary Supplement)* to *Chembao (Beijing Morning Post)* on September 18–22, 1919.


88 Bing Xin, “Ershi yi ri tingshen de ganxiang” (“Thoughts on the trial of May 21st”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 3.

89 Ibid., “Thoughts on the trial of May 21st”, in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, pp. 3–4.

90 Ibid., pp. 3–4.

91 Bing Xin, “Pohuai yu jianshe shidai de nüxüesheng” (“Women students in an era of destruction and construction”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10.

92 Bing Xin was helped by her cousin who was an editor of the literary supplementary of *Chembao (Beijing Morning Post)*. Xiao Feng, *Bing Xin zhuoan*, pp. 73–74.

93 Bing Xin, “Lian ge jiating” (“Two families”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 19. The question of differences among women and the ethical imperatives of feminist self-transformation is the focus of the next chapter. Let it be noted here that the females in this story by Bing Xin are not naturally positive or negative figures. She does not question the structure of heterosexual family itself or related “female virtues” and yet at the same time prefigures a certain de-essentializing impetus that reveals how the shifting grounds of such family in a time of change require transformations of women and men in terms of their value systems, lifestyles, and patterns of behavior.


98 Bing Xin, “Shishui duansong le ni” (“Who ruined you”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, pp. 130–133.

99 Bing Xin, “Zuihou de anxi” (“Final resting”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1 pp. 76–84.


103 Hence the image of Bing Xin has always been associated with privileges. Zhuo Ru, *Bing Xin zhuoan*, pp. 137–144.


107 Ibid., p. 166.

123 Ibid., p. 395.
125 The sea has figured prominently in Lu Yin’s literary world as it is in Bing Xin’s. The difference between the two may be that Lu Yin’s sea is often more destructive than Bing Xin’s.
128 The translation is from Amy D. Dooling and Kristina M. Torjeson (eds), Writing Women in Modern China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 155.
132 Ibid., p. 277.
134 Lu Yin, “Dongyou de lai de liwu” (“Gifts from trip to Japan”), in Lu Yin jiujiaji, pp. 357.
135 Jiang Liping, Nüsheng, furen: Wusi si nüxing xiaoxiang (Students, women: a portrait of four may fourth women, Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1995), pp. 22–26, pp. 74–79.
136 Knowing that he had a wife in an arranged marriage, she rejected the idea that the man obtain a divorce since “I cannot bear to see another woman suffer as an ‘abandoned woman’ because of my love.” After marrying the man in Shanghai in 1923,
she asserted, “I am not afraid of society’s opinion” which legally marked her as a concubine. The following two years of her married life were extremely difficult as the man was unable to live up to his own idea of being a progressive intellectual and furthermore failed to make a necessary living. He died in 1925 of typhoid fever. Alone with their ten-month old daughter, Lu Yin, who had been writing to provide for both of them, found herself under an attack of moral denunciation led by the man’s family. Ibid., 17–21, 79–82, 138–144, 151–158, 162–164, 186–191.

Securing a teaching position in Beijing through women friends, Lu Yin and her daughter moved there in 1927. Convinced by a man who seemed to understand the meaning of her writing and struggles, Lu Yin shocked her social circle once again and married the man, who was nearly ten years her junior and had no economic means. After the couple moved to Shanghai in 1930, Lu Yin took on several jobs to provide for the family. Ibid., pp. 245–251, pp. 305–308.


Ibid.

See “Ji weipo” (“A letter to weipo”), “Haibin guren” (“Seaside friends”), “Shengli yihou” (“After victory”), and most fictions in *Lu Yin xüanji*, vol. 1 and vol. 2.

Ibid., p. 15.


Chen Hengzhe, “Xifeng” (“West wind”), in Xifeng: Chen Hengzhe xiaoshuo (West wind: fictions by Chen Hengzhe, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), pp. 42–50


Lü Yi (Su Xuelin), *Jixin* (Shanghai: Shanghai Beixin shujü, 1929).


Bing Xin, “Fanxing” (“Stars”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 234.


Bing Xin, “Wozuo xiaoshuo, you heceng beiquanne?” (“I write fiction, have I ever been pessimistic?”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 40.

Bing Xin, “Fanxing” (“Stars”), in *Bing Xin qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 250.

4 Other Life

1 Bai Wei, “Yi,” (“Letter one”) in “Bai Wei zhibu” (“Bai Wei’s part”), in *Zuoye* (Last night, Hebei: Hebei jiaoyü chubanshe, 1994), p. 3.


4 Xie Bingying’s *Nübing riji* (“A woman soldier’s diary”), a series that was published from 14 May to 22 June, 1926, in *Wenxue fukan* (“Literary supplement”) to *Zhongyang ribao* (*Central daily*) is among the most influential.

5 In the historical passage from the 1920s to the 1930s that drastically altered China’s modern trajectory, the rise and fall of the First National Revolution was defining. See Maurice Meisner’s delineation of this turn of events, in *Mao’s China and After* (London: The Free Press, 1986), p. 27.

6 See reports in *Shenbao* (*shen daily*), a leading newspaper in Shanghai, April 20, 1927.


13 Wen Guan, “Cong yipusheng de nala dao Zhongguo de funüyündong” (“From Ibsen’s Nora to Chinese Women’s Movement”), *Funiu yuexian* (*Women’s monthly*), vol. 2, 1934, 2949.

14 The Nationalist government founded the Censorship Committee in early 1934 and launched a series of activities banning books, smashing bookstores, harassing publishers. Lu Xun wrote about such attacks in his “Houji” (Afterwords) to *Zhun fengyüe tan* (*Wind and moon talks allowed*), in *Lu Xun qüanji*, vol. 5, pp. 321–323. See also Tang Qing, “Jiwei nüzuojia de xiaoxi” (“About several women writers”), *Nüzi yuexian* (*Women and literature*), Shanghai: Jizhi shujü, 1934), pp. 1–9.

15 Bai Wei was nervous when she first time visited Lu Xun. Perhaps to ease the tension, Lu Xun reportedly said to her with a kind smile: “Others all say that you are a xiannü (fairy), I see that you are also a human being in this world.” Bai Shurong and He You, *Bai Wei pingzhuan* (*A biography of and commentary on Bai Wei*), Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1985), p. 107.

16 For a related discussion of Bai Wei, see David Wang, “Crime or Punishment?” in *Wen-Hsin Yeh* (ed.), *Becoming Chinese*.

17 Bai Wei, *Sufei* (*Sophia*), published with the pen name “Ms. Suru,” in *Yüsi* (*Threads of words*), vol. 17, no. 1, 1926; *Xiaoshuo yuexue* (*Fiction monthly*), vol. 17, no. 1, 1926.

18 Ibid.


20 Bai Wei, “Wo touru wenxüe quanzi de chuzhong” (“My initial literary turn”), in *Bai Wei zuopin xüan*, p. 9.

21 The date when it was performed remains unclear. Bai Wei, *Qiangwei jin* (*Rose wine*), in Jün Sheng (ed.) *Xiandai nüzuojia xiju xüan* (*An anthology of dramas by modern women writers*, Shanghai: Shanghai fanggu shudian, 1929), pp. 1–74.


23 Ibid., p. 51.

24 Ibid., pp. 54–55.

25 Ibid., p. 48.
26 Ibid., p. 60, pp. 70–71.
27 Ibid., p. 74.
28 Ibid., p. 48.
30 Bai Wei, Dachu youlingta (“Breaking out of the ghost tower”), was first published in Benliu (Currents), issue 1–4, 1928. Quotations used here are referred to Ding Po (ed.), Bai Wei zuopin xuan (Selections of works by Bai Wei), (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1985), pp. 245–332.
31 Bai Wei, Dachu youlingta (“Breaking out of the ghost tower”), in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, p. 281.
32 Ibid., pp. 288–289.
33 Ibid., p. 297.
34 Ibid., pp. 322–327.
36 Ibid., pp. 286, 323.
38 Bai Wei, Dachu youlingta, in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, p. 272.
40 Ibid., p. 331.
41 Recent publications on urban women’s suicides offer much newly researched material on such conditions. See, for instance, Bryana Goodman, “New Women who Committed Suicide,” The Journal of Asian Studies, vol. 64, no. 1, February 2005, pp. 67–101. Chinese women literary writers wrote extensively about such conditions since the late 1920s. See for instance Lu Yin’s “Huaping shidai” (“An era of flower vases”), in Qian Hong (ed.), Lu Yin zuopin xuan (Fujian: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1985), pp. 51–52; Yuán Changying’s “Zai falushang pingdeng” (“Equal in the front of law,”) in Xingnian siyi (Turning forty, Shanghai: Shanghai shangwu yinshuguan, 1946); Ding Ling’s “Qingyun li zhong de yijian xiaofang li” (“A small room in Qingyun lane”), in Ding Ling qüanji, pp. 191–197; Bai Wei’s novella Zhadan yü zhengniao (Dynamite and marching birds, in Bai Wei zuopin xian, 1929), pp. 19–225.
42 Bai Wei (Jün Sheng, ed.), Fangcen (Visiting Fangcen, in Xiandai nüzuojia xijüxüan, Shanghai fanggu Shudian, 1933), p. 111.
43 For an informative account (albeit with the CCP political perspective) of KMT’s policies of “nation building,” see Qū Wu, Zhongguo guomindang shi, pp. 206–293, pp. 393–466.
44 For feature stories, journalist accounts, and other prose’s that map such an emergent urban China, see Funü yüekan (Women’s monthly), Nüsheng (Women’s voice), Nüzi yüekan (Female monthly), from 1925–1937.
45 Women writers discussed in this book all produced works highly critical of such a “modern packaging” of feminaleness. Women’s journals also published social-political critiques. Female monthly (Nüzi yüekan), for instance, published a great range of such articles in 1933 alone. To mention a few here: Xin Mian, “New women’s movement and the New Life Movement” (“Xin funü yündong yu xin shenghuo yündong”), Female monthly, vol. 1, issue 10, May 1933, pp. 2277–2278; Bai Bin, “Talks on modern women” (“Tantan xiandai nüzi”), vol. 1, issue 9, November 1933; He Lingxin, “Chinese women in the midst of upheavals” (“Dongdang zhong de zhonghuo funü”), vol. 1, issue 10, December 1933, pp. 1492–1495. What happened behind such images were often sexual abuse and violence that resulted in the social or actual death of such feminized modern Chinese females. For example, see Li Wei, “On Ruan Lingyi’s Suicide,” Nüsheng (Women’s voice), vol. 3, issue 9, 1935, p. 1.
In her “Nala de chulu xü” (“Preface to Nora’s way out”) written in 1933, Bing Xin refers to such a condition with a self-reflective and critical tone: “The author of this book has begun her writing in a way that seems similar to mine... but I hope that she will develop in a different way from what happened to me, because I have made no progress in about a decade, which is a fact that is recognized by others as well as myself. She should view me as a red warning light in the midst of her journey!”, in Bing Xin qüanji, vol. 3, 1933, p. 40.


Qiao Yigang, Zhongguo nüxing de wenxüe shijie, p. 270.


For Yuan Changying’s articulation of her reading of the play, see “Kongqüe dongqian fei xü” (“Preface to southeast flies the peacock”) quoted in Su Xuelin, Zhongguo ersanshi niandai zuojia (On Chinese writers of the 1920s and the 1930s, Taibei: Zhunwenxüe chuban youxian gongsi, 1983), p. 509.

Yuan Changying, Southeast flies the peacock, in Yuan Changying zuopin xüan (Selections of works by Yuan Changying, Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1985), pp. 8–9.


Xin qingnian (New youth), the leading journal during the May Fourth movement founded in September 1915, published a range of articles on drama and theater in almost every issue from March 1917 to March 1919. Its June issue of 1918 is devoted to Ibsen; its October issue of the same year is devoted to drama. Dong and Chen, Zhongguo xijü shigao, (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990), pp. 36–39.
72 Paula Moya’s key point is relevant here: “Survival is not enough for feminist politics.” See Reclaiming Identity, pp. 67–101.
73 As Ding Ling puts it, “some say that I am very romantic, which of course is basically bad name calling,” Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuoan.
74 The ending of Sufei, where Sufei could have killed Chen Te but did not, is often regarded as an indication of a certain “Buddhist influence” on early Bai Wei by some critics. Such reading may be too simple since Chen Te’s death would not have really altered Sufei’s social embedment in such conditions. See Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, pp. 65–68.
75 Sheng Ying and Qiao Yigang, Zhongguo nüxing wenxueshi, “Bai Wei,” p. 148.
76 Qiao Yigang, Zhongguo nüxing de wenxue shijie, p. 204.
77 Bai Wei, Lin Li (Beautiful jade, Shanghai: Shanghai shangwu yinshuguan, 1926).
78 Qiao Yigang, Zhongguo nüxin de wenxue shijie, p. 204–205.
79 Bai Wei, “contents page,” in Lin Li.
80 Ibid., pp. 34–35.
81 Ah Ying, “Bai Wei,” in Zhongguo xiandai nüzuojia, p. 170.
82 Bai Wei, Lin Li, pp. 34–35.
83 Such a reading may evoke Emmanuel Levinas’ account of ethical impulse (Time and the Other, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987, trans. by Richard A. Cohen) and other related discussions on Western ethics and secularization. Bai Wei’s staging discussed here however is not theologically charged.
84 Bai Wei, Lin Li, pp. 5–7.
85 Qing Hong, “Yang Sao,” in Sanshi niandai zai Shanghai de zuolian zuojia (Members of the Leftist Leagues in Shanghai in the 1930s), pp. 401–413.
86 Bai Wei, Lin Li, p. 41.
87 Bai Wei, Lin Li, p. 42.
89 Ibid., p. 57.
90 Ibid., pp. 58–62, pp. 131–143.
91 Ibid., p. 13.
92 Zhang Ruogu in his commentary on Lin Li in 1928 compares Wave with Goethe’s Faust but adds that “but he is not awarded with the redemption and transcendence that Faust receives from Goethe. Rather, he is torn into pieces by animals.” Zhang Ruogu, Zhongguo xiandai de nüzuojia: zhen shan mei nüzuojia zhuangao (China’s modern women writers, special issue of Truth, goodness, beauty, Shanghai, 1929).
93 Bai Wei, Lin Li, pp. 13–15.
94 Ibid., p. 32.
95 Ibid., p. 50.
96 Bai Wei, Lin Li, pp. 107–127.
98 Hence her name is “Liu Li,” which in Chinese means “glazed tile” with the implications that she has the appearance of something like jade but without jade’s quality of genuine integrity.
99 Bai Wei, Lin Li, p. 199.
100 Ibid., pp. 207–208.
103 Such an ethic is located in the Self “holding to the responsibility for the Other” Ibid., p. 81.
104 Bai Wei, Letu, in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, pp. 333–378.
The path-opening significance of Bai Wei’s works in the history of modern Chinese drama is much understudied. Major dramatists such as Chen Dabei, Xiong Fuxi, and later Cai Yü discernibly benefited from Bai Wei’s works and their innovative features. Sheng Ying and Qiao Yigang (ed.), Zhongguo nuxing wenxueshi, vol. 1, pp. 153–154.

For recent works that record some indicative incidents, see Wang Xiaoming’s Lu Xun zhuan.


Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, p. 21.

Bai Wei, “Wo toudao wenxüe quan li de chuzhong” (“My initial literary turn,”) in Zhen Zhengduo and Fu Huadong (eds), Wo yu wenxüe (I and literature, Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1934). Also in Bai Wei pingzhuan, pp. 7–8.

Bai Wei and Yang Sao, Zuoye, p. 17. “Wei” indicates in Chinese a certain type of flower of the rose family.

Bai Wei, “Wo toudao wenxüe quan li de chuzhong” (“My initial literary turn”), in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, p. 5.

Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, p. 61.

Bai Wei, “Wo toudao wenxüe quanli de chuzhong” (“My initial literary turn”), in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, p. 5.

Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, p. 50, p. 58.

Quoted in Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, p. 60.

Bai Wei, “Wo toudao wenxüe quanli de chuzhong” (“My initial literary turn”), in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, p. 5.

Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, p. 50.

Bai Wei, “Wo toudao wenxüe quanli de chuzhong” (“My initial literary turn”), in Bai Wei zuopin xuan, p. 5.

Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, p. 52.

Qi Wu, Zhongguo guomindang shi, pp. 164–165.

Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, pp. 78–79.

Ibid., p. 78, p. 81.

Ibid., pp. 112–121, pp. 132–133.

See Yang Sao’s letters to Bai Wei, in Zuoye, pp. 143–300. See also Bai Shurong and He You, Bai Wei pingzhuan, pp. 117–119.

For works published during this period, see “Fulu: Bai Wei zhuzuo mulu” (“Appendix: a
list of Bai Wei's works”), in Bai Shurong and He You, *Bai Wei pingzhuan*, pp. 283–286.

146 Bai Wei, *Bei jü shengya*.

147 “Yi feng gongkai xin” (“An open letter”), in *Funü shenghuo* (Women's life), vol. 4, issue 6, April 1937.

148 Bai Shurong and He You, *Bai Wei pingzhuan*, pp. 122–123.

149 Bai Wei, “Zuoye xüshi” (“The preface to yesternight”), in *Shounan de nüxing men* (Suffering women, short fiction), *Yi Niang* (Maid or concubine, a one-act play), *Jia yangren* (Fake foreigners, a multi-act play) can all be found in *Bai Wei zuopin xüan*, pp. 239–420. *Ying* (Oriole, a two-act play), *Beining lu mou zhan* (A bus-stop on Beining road, a one-act play) and “Huo xin” (“Letter of fires,” a poem) were all written for *Beidou* (The Plough), the radical journal edited by Ding Ling after Hu Yeping was secretly executed by the KMT. They were published respectively in issues of 2–4 in 1931, vol. 1 and issue 1, 1932, and vol. 2, issues of 3–4, 1932. For a serial of five short fictions titled “Sandeng bingfang” (“Third class ward”), see *Funü shenghuo* (Women's life), 1, 3, 4 issues of vol. 2, 1936.

150 Bai Wei, *Ta de xiao* (Her laughter), in *Bei jü shengya* (Living tragedy), Shanghai: Wenzhöe chubanshe, 1936).

151 Ren Jun, “Fuping” (“Afterward”) to Bai Wei’s “Xiang, jiao, kuang” (“Thought, anxiety, and madness: An open letter to friends”), in *Shanghai wanbao* (Shanghai evening news), 1948, in Bai Shurong and He You, *Bai Wei pingzhuan*, p. 278.

152 Such an ethical question recurs in her works. In addition to the above mentioned, Qün nü du (Passages of women), another five-act play finished in the 1940s, is important. It enacts the story of a group of women dramatists who survived the Sino-Japanese war as their theater company was torn asunder, each finding herself caught in a violent storm without knowing whether she would survive the next day. Each asked herself the question of how to live amid the scenes of deaths, and each answered the question by paving unprecedented “passages toward life.” This important play is an unpublished manuscript. See Bai Shurong and He You, *Bai Wei pingzhuan*, pp. 241–242.

153 Bai Wei, *Tá de xiao* (Her laughter), in *Bei jü shengya* (Living tragedy), p. 828.

154 Bai Wei, “Letter Eighteen,” in “Bai Wei Part” of *Zuoye*, p. 27.


156 “Tian zhi jiaozi” (“the favored children of heaven”) is a frequently used phrase in modern Chinese cultural history to describe women and men of university education and advanced overseas education, and is still in use today. See, for instance, *Wenhui daily*, *Renmin daily*, and *Guangming daily* for columns in higher education, throughout the 1990s.


158 In Chinese higher education circles, “Ying Mei pai” (“those who were educated in England and the U.S.”) constitute a privileged class status in modern Chinese history for many of them came from wealthy family backgrounds.

159 Yüan Changying, *Xingnian sishi*, pp. 75–76.


September 18, 1937, Japanese air raids destroyed the city of Leshan, Sichuan province, and Yuan’s apartment was burned down. Yuan Changying zuopin xuan, p. 283.

163 See New Women, Women Monthly, Women’s Life, Women’s Journal in the 1930s.

164 Yuan Changying, Renzhidao (Roads to humanity), in Yuan Changying zuopin xuan, p. 119.

165 Ibid., pp. 119–125.

166 Ibid., p. 122.


168 Ibid., pp. 277–278.

169 Ibid., 278.

170 Her plays such as Wentan huanwu (Ghostly dance of the literary world, 1929); Huo shiren (A real poet, 1929); Qianfang zhanshi (Soldiers at the front, 1929); fictions such as Wo ye zhihao ban ni xiaomie (I have no choice but to extinguish with you, 1935); and prose such as Limmeng hu shang (On limmeng lake, 1935–1936); “Bali de yiye” (“A night in Paris,” 1937); “Molangyin jiaoshuo” (“A professor,” 1937); and “Mantan youyi” (“On friendship,” 1942, in Xingnian sishi, pp. 9–23), are among the noted. For all the pieces except for “Mantan youyi,” see Yuan Changying, Yuan Changying zuopin xuan.


172 Yuan Changying, Yuan Changying zuopin xuan, pp. 97–98.


175 Yuan Changying, Yuan Changying zuopin xuan, pp. 216–217; Bai Wei could have written these lines though likely with more fluid imagery. Plays by Pu Shunqing, Su Lüyi, Yan Li, Ya Yüe, Chen Baibing, and Zhao Qingge, which deserve studies, are also echoes of the female figures envisioned and bodied forth by Bai Wei and Yuan Changying.

176 Yuan Changying, Yuan Changying sanwen xüanji, p. 92.

177 Bai Wei, “Letter One,” in “Bai Wei bu” (“Bai Wei Part”) of Zuoye, p. 3.

5 War, Death, and the Art of Existence


4 Ibid.

5 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, p. 297


Notes

11 Xiao Feng, *Xiao Hong zhuan*, pp. 18–21.
14 Ibid., p. 150.
15 Ibid., p. 149.
16 Ibid., p. 150.
17 Ibid., p. 163.
18 Ibid., p. 149.
19 Xiao Jün, *Xiao Hong shujian jicun zhushi lu* (Annotated record of *Xiao Hong’s* letters, Heilongjiang: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1981); *Lu Xun xiansheng shujian zhushi ji qita* (Annotated record of *Lu Xun’s* letters and others), in Mingzuo xingshang (Appreciations of the masterpieces, Taiyuan: Mingzuo xingshang, issue 1, 1980).
21 Ibid., p. 150.
22 Xiao Hong, *Shengsi chang* (The field of *life and death*, 1934), in *Xiao Hong qüanji*, vol. 1, pp. 54–144.
24 Ibid., p. 86.
25 Ibid., pp. 61–62.
26 Ibid., 107.
27 Ibid., pp. 107–108.
28 Ibid., 105.
29 Ibid., pp. 86–87.
31 Xiao Hong, *The field of life and death*, in *Xiao Hong qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 106.
32 Xiao Hong, “Wang ah sao zhisi,” (“The Death of aunty wang,” 1933), in *Xiao Hong qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 3.
33 Ibid., p. 5.
34 Ibid., p. 8.
36 Ibid., p. 9.
37 Xiao Hong, “Qier” (“Abandoned child”), in *Xiao Hong qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 163.
38 Xiao Hong, *The field of life and death*, p. 97, pp. 85–86.
39 Ibid., p. 113.
40 Ibid., p. 114.
41 Xiao Hong, *The field of life and death*, in *Xiao Hong qüanji*, vol. 1, p. 114.
42 Ibid., p. 136.
43 Ibid., pp. 118–120.
44 Ibid., pp. 124–126.
45 Ibid., p. 139.
46 Ibid., pp. 140–141.
47 Ibid., p. 139.
48 Ibid., p. 136.
49 Ibid., p. 140.
50 Ibid., p. 139.
52 Ibid., p. 329.
59 Xiao Hong, Hulan he zhuang (Tales of hulan river, 1940), in Xiao Hong quanji, vol. 2, pp. 839–840. The translation is in consultation with Goldblatt and Yeung.
61 Lu Xun, “Xia de long yizhe fuji” (“Translator’s notes on Narrow Cage”), in Lu Xun quanji, vol. 110, p. 199.
62 See Yuan Shijie, “Qian niu fang yijou” (“Recollection of the days at the house of (white-edged) morning glory”), Harbin ribao (Harbin daily), August 3, 1980; Luo Binji, Xiao Hong xiao zhuang, pp. 186–191. Among those who supported Xiao Hong were Shu Qin and Luo Feng, both were members of the CCP underground in the special zones east of Harbin; Bai Lang, Luo Feng’s wife, who later also became a CCP member; Jin Xiao who led the movement of the leftwing circle of literature and the fine arts. Luo Binji, Xiao Hong xiao zhuang, p. 193.
63 Xiao Feng, Xiao Hong zhuang, pp. 40–50.
64 Ibid., pp. 51–58.
65 This was before the Second Coalition between CCP and KMT shaped in 1937.
66 Ibid., p. 59.
67 The title of the novella was co-chosen by Xiao Jun; its publisher was Lu Xun. It was a time when Bing Xin receded into silence and Ding Ling was under house arrest. As Lu Xun put it, “Xiao Hong may likely be a woman writer who continues what Ding Ling now is no longer able to do; and the time she uses to fill the voice left by Ding Ling may well be much shorter than the time that Ding Ling used to fill the void left by Bing Xin.” See “Lu Xun’s conversation with Snow,” trans. by An Wei, in Xinwenxue shiliao (Historical materials on new literature), issue 3, 1987, p. 250.
68 As recent scholarly works such as Qiu Shi’s Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun evince, Xiao Jun’s gendered behavior was the cause of Xiao Hong’s decision to dissolve their common-law marriage but was surely not the defining factor in her final phase of life.
69 Pregnant, she traveled from bombed Wuhan to Chongqing by herself as her second common-law husband went there without her. As the day of delivery came closer she left Chongqing for Jiangying County where Bai Lang stayed, and gave birth to a child while Bai Lang took care of her. The child was born dead. In Chongqing again for the year of 1939, her second common-law husband rejoined her. As Chongqing was under air raid attacks at the end of 1939, they left in January 1940 for Hong Kong where she died. Xiao Feng, Xiao Hong zhuang, pp. 108–110.
70 Xiao Feng, Xiao Hong zhuang, p. 103.
71 Ibid., pp. 118–123; Luo Binji, Xiao Hong xiao zhuang, pp. 133–147.
72 Xiao Hong, Tales of Hulan River, in Xiao Hong quanji, vol. 2, p. 737.
73 Xiao Hong, Abandoned child, in Xiao Hong quanji, vol. 1, p. 150.
74 Xie Shuantian, Hulan he zhuang, pp. 271–273.
75 Luo Binji, Xiao Hong xiao zhuang, p. 23.
76 Ibid., p. 25.
77 Xiao Hong, “Hong poli de gushi” (“A tale of red glasses” 1942), in Xiao Hong quanji, vol. 2, pp. 879–890; see the notes by Luo Binji at the end of the story, p. 890.
78 Ibid., p. 888.
79 Xiao Hong, Tales of Hulan River, in Xiao Hong quanji, vol. 2, pp. 698–878.
Similarly, one could argue that Xiao Hong’s “March in a small city” (“Xiaochen sanyue,” 1941), in *Xiao Hong quanji*, pp. 676–697, a haunting story about a young woman’s silent yearning for love and life is not merely an expression of nostalgia for the old rural North. It seems also about the unarticulated and unseen impulses of life that always return to haunt.


Lu Xun seems to have sensed such a feature: “unusual and nuanced touches, specific to a female writer, that endow the scenes with brightness and beautiful freshness.” Lu Xun, “Xuyan” (“Preface,” 1935), in *Xiao Hong quanji*, p. 54.


She was planning with Luo Binji to finish a novel titled *The Death of Lu Dai* (*Lu Dai zhishi*), which was a manuscript that Feng Xuefeng, another major leftwing writer, had been working on but could not finish since he was imprisoned by the KMT in its Shangrao concentration camp. It is a story about the Long March. Xiao Hong wanted to work together with Ding Ling, Nie Huanru, Xiao Jun, and Luo Binji “when this war is over,” and to visit the base areas of the red army and the routes of the Long March. When Xiao Hong was no longer able to speak, she wrote on a piece of paper: “I will be with the blue sky and green water forever, leaving that half of *Red Mansion* for others to finish... I die in the middle of my way, with regrets!” This “half of *Red Mansion*” refers to this book about the red army and its Long March. Luo Binji, *Xiao Hong xiao zhuan*, p. 26, p. 144.


In three major biographies on Wang Ying published in the 1980s, the year of her birth is designated as 1915; but in the memoir authored by her life companion Xie Hegeng, it is designated in 1913, see Xie Hegeng, unpublished manuscript. It is also so recorded in “Wang Ying,” by Liu Shaotang, in *Biographies of the Republican China*, vol. 24, issue 5, May 1 1983, pp. 144–146; and “Wang Ying, Her Books and Life,” in *China Books* (Beijing: Organ of the China Publications Center), 1982, vol. 11, no. 5.


She and her “husband-to-be” in fact wrote to each other before she fled and developed feelings and sympathy for each other. Sun and Zhou, *Malaiya Qingren*, pp. 20–23.


Angered by warlord He Jian who orchestrated the massacre in Changsha after Jiang Jieshi’s coup in Shanghai, Wang Keqin published a letter denouncing He Jian’s “antirevolutionary crime” and was then put on the black list for arrest. See Li Runxin, *Jiebai de mingxing*, pp. 38–39.


The contents of those messages, wrapped in three small packages, included directions about how to leave Changsha with the help of the CCP underground liaisons. Wang Ying, *Baogu*, pp. 374–383.

Se Zaoxiang, the eldest, was later executed by the KMT. See Sun Ruizhen and Zhou Jin, *Malaiya qingren*, pp. 60–64. For Se Zaoxiang’s poem of welcome to Wang Ying titled “three sisters,” see Sun Ruizhen and Zhou Jin, *Malaiya qingren*, p. 83.

Wang Ying was a founding member of Shanghai Society of Artistic Theater (1929), Shanghai Coalition Theater Society (1930), Drama Society of Fudan University (1930), Xinqiu Drama Society (1930), the Left League of Dramatists (1930), and the Drama Society of the Forties (1936). Sun and Zhou, *Malaiya qingren*, pp. 67–83.

Sun and Zhou, *Malaiya qingren*, pp. 67–83. Since the political climate made it impossible for those mostly radical drama societies to stage works by contemporary Chinese playwrights that engaged current social issues, the plays produced were largely adaptations or translations of modern European plays. Chen and Dong, *Zhongguo xian dai xijü shigao*, pp. 285–315.

Sun and Zhou, *Malaiya qingren*, pp. 74–76. Murayama, the author of the play, was an active participant in the Japanese anti-war movement led by such prominent shingeki dramatists as Kubo Sakae.


Lu Yin died the next year, 1934.
130 For work on this subject, see Perry Link, Lee Ou-fan Lee, and Yingjin Zhang, among others.
131 Sun and Zhou, Malaiya qingren, pp. 84–95.
132 Wang Hanlun, Yang Naimei, Hu Die, Ruan Lingyù were the leading film stars. Among the younger and noted female film stars, Ai Xia, Chen Puer and Wang Ying were more “left-leaning.”
133 Li Runxin, Jibai de mingxing, p. 70
134 Ibid., p. 74.
137 Ibid., p. 994.
138 Ibid., p. 995.
139 The suicides of Ruan Lingyù and Ai Xia were indicative. As Wang Ying recollected later, the dressing room of the “female stars” at the shooting sites was a place of gendered victimization. Li Runxin, Jiebai de mingxing, pp. 86–87.
140 Ibid., p. 64.
144 Wang Ying, “Meiyou he ai xia shuo zuihou de yijuhua” (“I did not have the chance to say my last word to Ai Xia”), Da wanbao (Grand evening news), February 15, 1934.
145 Wang Ying, “Xie qü le yijian wuse de waiyi” (“Throwing away a five-colored outfit,” 1934), Da wan bao (Grand evening news), March 7, 1934.
148 Li Runxin, Jiebai de mingxing, pp. 81–84.
149 Ibid., p. 84.
150 As early as in 1933, a critic published a review on Shanghai “female film stars” in Shen bao, in which he compared Wang Ying with other women actors, delineated “qualities that distinguish her,” and defined her as “an indicator of a future paradigm in the making of Chinese cinematic culture.” Following this review, another critic published an article entitled “On the Wang Ying Paradigm” (Wang Ying Xing) where he took her “acting” as an intrinsic dimension of her “being.” Sun and Zhou, Malaiya qingren, pp. 96–111, p. 106.
151 Li Runxin, Jiebai de mingxing, pp. 104–108.
153 Xia Yan, “Li shi yu feng yu,” (“History and parables”) Wensxiejie (Literary world, June 5, 1936), vol. 1, issue 1: “Sai Jinhua yutan” (“Additional words on Sai Jinhua”), in Nüzi yuekan (Female monthly), September 1, 1936, vol. 4, issue 9. For more information and critical discussions, see Xia Yan xijü yan jiu ziliao (Research materials on Xia Yan, Beijing: Zhongguo xijü chubanshe, 1980), vol. 1 and 2.
154 Li Runxin, Jiebai de mingxing, pp. 114–115.
155 Sun and Zhou, Malaiya qingren, p. 175.
156 A leading actor and prominent figure of the left dramatists, Jin Shan was Wang Ying’s first common law husband. Sun and Zhou, Malaiya qingren, pp. 156–179.
6 Rhythms of the Unreal I

1 Hu Yeping and Ding Ling, “Jiānshòu tí” (“Epigraphy”), Honghei (Red black), March 10, 1929, p. 1.
3 Ding Ling, “Wo muqin de shengping” (“My mother’s life”), in Ding Ling qianji, 6, pp. 63–75.

4 Yang Kaihui, later Mao Zedong’s first wife and a member of the CCP underground, also enrolled there as a student and was hence Ding Ling’s schoolmate. Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhu, p. 116.
5 A bosom friend of Yü Manzhen’s, Xiang Jingyu later became a founding member of the CCP and a leading figure in the women’s labor movements. She was executed by the KMT in 1928. See Christina Gilmartin, Engendering the Chinese Revolution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Delia Davin, Woman-Work (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
6 She returned to Changde in 1915 and attended a women’s school in the town. Shen Congwen, Ji Ding Ling (On Ding Ling, Shanghai: Liangyou wenxue congshu, 1934).
7 Yüan Liangjun (ed.), Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao (Research materials on Ding Ling, Tianjing: Tianjing renmin chubanshe, 1982), pp. 10–11. Chen Qimin was a member of Xinmin xuehui (Society of the new citizens), which was part of the circles of the CCP forces.
8 Yü Manzhen was a pioneering woman educator in Changde. She rejected her brother’s maneuvers to force Bingzhi into an arranged marriage and survived the devastation of her son’s death in 1918. In the aftermath of the 1927 White Terror she found herself increasingly isolated but she remained adamant in supporting her daughter’s pursuit of a different life. Yü Manzhen, “Dingmu huiyilu ji shi” (“Recollections and poems by Ding Ling’s mother”), in Ding Ling qianji, vol. 5, pp. 227–413.
9 For an astute analysis of the friendship between Wang Jianhong and Ding Ling, see Zhong Daopi, “Ding Ling lun” (“On Ding Ling”), in Yüan Liangjun (ed.), Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao, p. 333. Wang fell in love with Qü Qiubai in late 1923. Qü, who had joined the CCP in 1922, became the leading figure of the CCP in 1927. Ding Ling, “Wo suo renshi de Qü Qiubai tongzhi” (“Comrade Qiubai as I knew him”) in Ding Ling qianji, vol. 5, pp. 83–112.
10 Ding Ling then was under a certain influence of anarchism. For a seminal research in English on “Chinese anarchism,” see Arif Dirlik, Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
11 See Ono Kazuko, Bobby Siu, Delia Davin.
13 Ding Ling, *I grow up in love*, p. 97.
15 The notion of “female narcissism” is assumed in current literary studies of “the female self.” Early twentieth century Chinese literary criticism invokes similar and related notions such as “the psychology of the modern girl” with “modern female attributes” ranging from “fixative consciousness of the self,” “hysteria,” to “narcissism.” See Qian Qianwu, “On Ding Ling,” in Xiandai zhongguo nüzuojia (Modern Chinese women writers, Shanghai: Beixin shujü, 1931).
16 Yi Zhen, “Dāngdài Zhòngguó nüzuójia” (“Contemporary Chinese women writers”), in Funü zazhi (Women’s journal), July 1, 1930, vol. 16, issue 7.
17 Ibid.
19 Ding Ling, “Méngke,” in Ding Ling qüanji, p. 40.
23 Yuan Liangjun (ed.), *Dìng Lìng yánjiū zīliào*, p. 12.
24 Three years later at the historical ad hoc meeting of the CCP politburo on August 7, 1927 (bāqi huìyì), Qū Qiúbài was elected as the provisional chairman of the CCP politburo.
28 See selected photos in Ding Ling qüanji.
30 Ibid., p. 39.
31 Ibid.
33 Ding Ling, “Yíge rénde dānshèng zìxù” (“Preface to The birthing of a person”), in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 9, p. 10.
34 Ding Ling, “Shafei nüshǐ de rìjí” (“Miss Sophia’s diary”), in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 3, pp. 41–78.
36 Ding Ling, “Miss Sophia’s Diary,” Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 3, pp. 41–42. The English translation is from Tani Barlow (ed.), *I Myself a Woman*, p. 51. English renditions of other works included in Barlow’s anthology are also used in this and next chapters.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p. 48.
40 Ibid., p. 62, p. 68.
41 Ibid., pp. 62–63.
42 Ibid., p. 77.
43 Yuan Liangjun (ed.), Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao; Lydia Liu, Translingual Practice, pp. 172–179.
46 Ibid., p. 55.
47 Ibid., p. 67.
48 Ibid.
49 See my discussion of The Peony Pavilion with a focus on its implied aesthetic and ethical impulses that cast a radically different perspective on “tradition.” Haiping Yan, “Theatricality in Chinese Classical Drama,” Theatricality, pp. 65–89.
50 In the 1930s, the Huangpu Park in Shanghai was marked with a note that “the Chinese and dogs are not allowed.” The note is preserved in the Municipal Archives of Shanghai.
52 Ibid., p. 69.
55 For a representative review, see Yi Zhen, “Dangdai nüzuojia lun” (“On contemporary Chinese women writers”), Funü zazhi (Women’s journal), July 1, 1930, vol. 16, issue 7.
58 Ibid., p. 41.
59 Ibid., p. 71.
61 Ibid., p. 183.
62 Ibid., pp. 183–189.
63 That the project of becoming modern has less been about eradicating poverty than classifying it is a large topic in itself for research.
65 Ibid.
68 Ibid., pp. 243, pp. 244–245.
69 Ibid., p. 247.
70 Ibid., p. 242.
73 About this writer, the authorial narrative comments: “There are some readers who, deceived by his writings, felt sorry for him because of his poverty. In reality, he not only lived well but often went to movies, ate chilled fruit cocktail, and bought gourmet candies. Sometimes he just squandered money on a whim.” Ding Ling, “Yi jou san ling nian chun shanghai (zhi yi, zhi er)” (“Shanghai spring, 1930, part one and two,”) in Ding Ling quanji, vol. 3, p. 268.
74 Ding Ling, “Wo de shengping yu xiezuo” (“My life and creative writing”), in Ding Ling quanji, vol. 8, p. 203.
75 Ding Ling, “For young women authors,” in Ding Ling quanji, vol. 8, pp. 124–125.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., pp. 2–3.
78 Ibid., p. 8.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
82 Ding Ling, “Qingyùnli zhongde yijian xiafang li” (“A small room in Qingyün Lane”), *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 3, pp. 191–197.
83 Ding Ling wrote in “Wo de chuang zuo shenghuo” (“My creative writing life”): “Why did I start writing fiction, I think it was due to isolation, unhappiness about a society [where] I had no way to make a living and to make a real life.” *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 7, p. 15. She then probes such a sense of isolation in an enlarged landscape of humanity. See “Guo nian” (“Celebrations of the New Year”), *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 3, pp. 198–210; “Zai xiaohuolun shang” (“On the small steam boat”), *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 3, pp. 221–228; “Shanghai Spring, 1930 (part one and two)”, in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 3, pp. 266–297, pp. 298–338.
84 Ding Ling, “Qingnian zhishi fenzi de xiuyang” (“On the cultivation of the young intellectuals,” January 6, 1946), in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 7, pp. 84–85.
86 Ding Ling, “Yige zhenshi de ren de yisheng” (“The life of a real person”), in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 9, p. 66.
87 Ibid., p. 72.
88 Ibid.
89 Shen Congwen, *Ji Ding Ling*.
93 Collections of works by Ding Ling include *Zai heian zhong* (*In darkness*, 1928), *Zisha riji* (*Diary of suicide*, 1929), *Yige nüren* (*A woman*, 1930), *Yige ren de dansheng* (*The birth of a person*, 1931), and Ding Ling’s first novel *Weihu* (*Weihu*, 1930). Some of Hu Yepin’s writings are included in those collections.
95 Ding Ling, “Qian laile ke de yüeye” (“A moonlit night when an intruder came”), in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 3, p. 155.
96 Ibid.
98 The total number of the executed was about twenty.
100 Ding Ling, “Cong yewuan dao tianliang” (“From midnight to dawn”) *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 3, pp. 339–347. In her “Ms. Sophia’s Second Diary” (unfinished), Ding Ling wrote: “For three whole weeks, I basically did not sleep: I ran in rain, snow, wind, . . . I could not continue to write like this, this was no longer like the form of a diary, and my writing was entirely different as my state of mind entirely altered . . . I thought that I no longer was able to write my early kind of diary. . . . Writing was difficult . . . but to force myself not to run out and run on the streets, writing this diary seemed a good method.” *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 4, pp. 10–11.
102 Sheng Ying and Qiao Yigang, Zhongguo rüxing wenxüe shi, pp. 128–133.
103 Ibid.
104 Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuoan, pp. 231–239.
106 Ding Ling, “Guanỳù zuolian de pianduan huiyi” (“Fragmentary remembrances of the League of the Left Writers”), Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 10, pp. 238–244.
107 Ono Kazuko, Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution.
109 Regardless their value-judgments, Marxist critics and their opponents share this reading of Water, the former positively and the latter critically. Mao Dun, “Nü zuojia Ding Ling” (“Woman writer Ding Ling”), Wényì yüebao (Arts and literature monthly), July 17, 1933, issue 2. Yuan Liangjun (ed.), Ding Ling yanjou ziliao, pp. 252–256.
111 Ibid., pp. 400–401.
112 Ibid., p. 412.
113 Ibid., p. 418.
114 Ibid., pp. 423–424.
115 Ibid., p. 423.
116 Ibid., pp. 428–429.
117 Ibid., p. 429.
118 Ibid., pp. 428–429.
120 Sidney Rittenberg and Amanda Bennett, The Man who Stayed Behind (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993). William Hinton was another and more noted American who went to China in the same capacity.
123 It is a kind of white clay, eaten by famine-victims to appease their hungers.
125 This may well be Ding Ling’s decision to which her mother responded. Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuoan, p. 229.
126 Lu Xun was the leading force behind the publication of Mother. Zheng Boqi and Zhao Jiabi were directly involved. Zhao Jiabi, “Chôngfang Ding Ling yi dangnian,” (“Meeting Ding Ling again and remembrances of the things past: on the publication of Mother”), in Ding Ling de chuangzuo shenghuo (Ding Ling’s writing life, Tianjing: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1984).
127 Ding Ling’s sudden disappearance caused a great stir in Shanghai and beyond: While the CCP forces were mobilized to deal with the crisis (along with Ding Ling there were other casualties), other social, cultural and women’s organizations issued strong protests. Song Qingling, Cai Yuanpei, and Yang Xingfu from the Coalition for Civil Rights Protection lead the emergency efforts to “free Ding Ling.” Roman Roland and other international figures sent telegrams to support the efforts. Since Ding Ling was arrested in the French concession, the concession police protested the KMT’s “violation” of its extraterritoriality. Considerably disturbed, Hu Shi put forth stern inquiry to the Shanghai mayor Hu Tiecheng who denied any knowledge of Ding Ling’s disappearance. Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuoan, pp. 257–260.
Zhao Jiabi, the chief editor, recalls decades later: “About three days after [its author’s] arrest, colleague Zheng Boqi came to me and said quietly: ‘Teacher Lu Xun suggests that we publish Ding Ling’s unfinished manuscript immediately, you can write and attach an editor’s note to it. The faster it is done the better; its public appearance should be accompanied with advertisements in all the major newspapers, we must make sure that people know about it.’” Zhao Jiabi, “Chongfang Ding Ling yi dangnian,” in Ding Ling de chuangzuo shenghuo (Continental news), p. 323.

A portion of the novel’s first chapter was published in the first issue of Dulu xinwen (Continental news). The journal was soon banned by the KMT in 1932. Yuan Liangjun, Ding Ling Yangou ziliao, p. 678. Also see Hang Baiyun, Ding Ling ping zhan (A biography and commentary on Ding Ling, Shanghai: Chunguang shudian, 1934); Zhang Weifu, Guanyu Ding Ling nushi (On Ms. Ding Ling, Beijing: Lida shujü, 1933).


7 Rhythms of the Unreal II

1 Ding Ling, “Zhen” (“Real”), in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 7, p. 41.
3 As I indicate in the Introduction, the notion of “the Real” is relevant to what I attempt to discuss here. What I evoke however is not commensurable with the general postmodern attempt to collapse the Hegelian binary between the “real” and the “unreal” by positing a doubling of the “two sides” on the metaphysical or ontological absence of “the real” itself. The “unreal” here is based on a specific historical phenomenon rather than an issue of Western metaphysics. It refers to what does humanly exist (hence is not “absent”) but is denied social recognition (hence is closer to the notion of “lack”) at both material and symbolic levels.
7 On November 11, 1936, right after the welcome meeting, Mao Zedong wrote a poem for Ding Ling where he evokes the memory of the occasion and compared the power of Ding Ling’s “delicate pen” to that of “three thousands of finest soldiers.” Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 3.
8 Zhang Ailing in the 1940s wrote a seminal essay on fashion in dress where the “qipao” was discussed in relation to paradigmatic shifts in society and power relations featuring, in particular, the emergent image of “modern femininity” highlighted by the style of “qipao.” See “Geng yiji” (“Records on changing fashions”), in Zhang Ailing qüanji, vol. 3, pp. 67–76. A scholarly discourse has developed in the past decade along the line of thought put forth by Zhang Ailing. For most recent discussions on the social aesthetics and politics of the “qipao,” see Zhang Hong, “Qipao yu modern dongfang de shenhua” (“Qipao and the myth of modern orient”), August 17, 2004, “Si yu wen” (“Thought and Writing”) at the Institute of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture Research of East China Normal University, www.chinese-thought.org (accessed 01 September 2005).
9 Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuoan, p. 362.
10 The debate nearly split the left camp of the literary circles. Although a great deal has been said about this event, none has approached it from a Chinese feminist perspective.
11 Wang Ying et al., “Women de xinnian” (“Our Faith”), Nanyang shangbao (Southeast Asia business daily), July 7, 1940.

Xiao Hong, “Ping dadi de nüer” (“On daughter of the earth”), Literary supplementary of Dagong bao (Dagong daily), Hong Kong, June 30, 1940.

See Bing Xin zhuo; Lu Yin zhuo; Bai Wei pingzhuo, all have been cited in early chapters on them.


Chen Yün, Fu Chun, the CCP Central Bureau for Personnel Affairs (Zhongyang zuzhi bu), “Zhongyang zuzhi bu shencha Ding Ling tongzhi beipu beijun jingguo de jielun” (“The conclusion of the investigation regarding comrade Ding Ling’s arrest and house arrest by the Central Bureau for Personnel Affairs”), Ding Ling qianji, vol. 10, pp. 104–106.

For an informative – but in a few important instances inaccurate – narrative of Ding Ling’s situation in 1942, see Dai Qing, Liang Shuming, Wang Shuwei, Chu Anping (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1989).

Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuo, pp. 5–84, pp. 556–566.

Wu Xiru was the other key organizer. For Ding Ling’s writings on the Service Corps, see 20 pieces included in Ding Ling qianji, vol. 5, pp. 46–115.

Works by performance studies scholars such as Elin Diamond, Judith Butler, Joseph Roach are directly relevant here.

The event is narrated by Ding Ling. “Wo yü xijü – Ding Ling xijüji xü” (“I and drama – preface to a selection of plays by Ding Ling”), Ding Ling qianji, vol. 9, p. 161.


The sense of irony at work in this “remembered” role-casting event could be taken as Ding Ling’s way to claim political credit for herself in a context where “laboring people” (laodong renmin) as a class category (of which “maidservant-class origins” is a sub-category) has gained political ascendancy, at least in theory, since 1949. Yet it was in the context of the 1980s that Ding Ling recalled this early event, when “getting rich is glorious” was established as a political slogan and economic policy in market-oriented reforms while the category of “laodong renmin” was losing its social “glory.” Moreover, it was a moment when Ding Ling was just returning from her 25 years of exile in northern rural areas among “laodong renmin” to the center of the national cultural scenes where those who condemned her to exile in the 1950s (such as Zhou Yang) were promoting “humanism” against “class struggle.” The timing of Ding Ling’s publication of her “personal” anecdote from youth remembered here was significantly “untimely” in terms of its relation to the ascending currencies of social and political discourses.

Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuo, pp. 391–392.

Mao Zedong wrote a poem for Ding Ling in 1937, that is indicative of the immense shift taking place in Ding Ling’s life: “Xiri wenxiaojie, jinri wu jiangjun” (“A literary young lady in the past, a military general today”). Ding Ling qianji, vol. 3, p. 2.

Leet, the German military expert, wrote of his impression of Ding Ling at the time: “She was wearing a gray military uniform. She had already taken off her hat and played with it in her hands. Ding Ling was composed while talking, yet I did see in her expression a touch of female shyness.” Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuo, p. 362.

Except for, in the 1950s, overseas visits or trips, Ding Ling never wore the qipao again.

Wang Zhousheng, Ding Ling: feie puhuo (Ding Ling: a moth darting into a flame, Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003).

See photos in Ding Ling qianji, vol. 1 (before Yan’an), and vols 3, 4, and 7 (after Ding Ling arrived in Yan’an, taken in 1937, 1938, 1941). Shi Tianxing, Ding Ling zai xibei (Ding Ling in Northwest, Huazhong tushu gongsi, 1938); Guangzhou xinwen yanjiu she (The society of news studies in Guangzhou, ed.), Ding Ling zai xibei (Ding Ling in
Northwest, Guangzhou xinwen yanjiu she, 1938); Chen Bingyin (ed.), *Ding Ling zhuank* (A biography of Ding Ling, Zhanshi duwu bianyi she, 1938).

32 Led by Ding Ling as its organizer, team-leader, playwright, director, and performer, the Northwest Front Service Corp mounted approximately fifteen spoken dramas. *Ding Ling qianji*, vol. 5, pp. 54–56.

33 Ibid.

34 See the vivid writings ranging from “Xibeizhandi fuwutuan chengli zhiquan” (“Before the founding of the Service Corps”) to “Zhandi fuwutuan zaidu chufa qian yingyou zhi zhuyi” (“Items for attention before Service Corps second tour”), in *Ding Ling qianji*, pp. 46–115.

35 Ding Ling, “Linfen” (“Linfen” is another place where the Service Corps’ performed), in *Ding Ling qianji*, vol. 5, p. 68.

36 For an articulation of the Japanese invasion in China while tracing “a pattern of race war;” see John Dower, *War Without Mercy*.

37 Stefan Tanaka’s *Japan’s Orient*, while provoking different responses, is one of the early seminal works that offer useful empirical material about how China was temporalized by colonial Japan. See Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

38 For Ding Ling’s participation in the protest against Takiji’s treatment in prison, see “Ding Ling shengping nianbiao” (“Chronological table of Ding Ling’s life”), in Yüan Liangjun (ed.), *Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao*, p. 16.


40 Ibid., pp. 370–371.

41 Ibid., pp. 365–372.

42 For a recent publication on this long under-researched topic in modern Chinese history, see Ding Qun, *Kangqi diyü de zhameng: diertiao zhanxian yinghao zhuan* (Shouldering the gate of hell: biographies of heroes and heroines on the second front, Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2003).

43 Among the CCP underground members at the National University (Zhongyang daxüe), for instance, one-third were women; while the percentage of the women CCP members is about 1.5 percent. In the army the percentage was lower. See Hua Bingqing and Li Fei (eds), *Zhongyang daxüe de gongchandang ren* (The CCP at the National University, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2001).

44 The first television documentary on the CCP underground history after the founding of PRC was issued in 2000, titled, indicatively, *Wuming yingxiong* (Heroes without names, eight parts, Nanjing: Jiangsu dianshitai, 2000).

45 For a historically informative and important document, see Xü Qingquan, “Ding Ling lishi wenti jielun de yi po san zhe” (“The turns and twists of the conclusion on Ding Ling’s historical question”), *Bai nian chao* (Waves of a century), July 2000.

46 Shen Zui, *Wu zhe sanshi nian* (My thirty years, Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1983). Shen Zui was in the KMT’s secret service.


48 Shao Yanxiang’s recent article “Guanyu Ding Ling” (“On Ding Ling”) is one of the few that is close to such recognition. See Dagongbao (Dagong daily), Hong Kong, July 28, 2000. Also see www.booktide.com.

49 Mark Selden, *Yan’an Way Revisited*.

50 Wang Ming and his followers arrived in Yan’an in 1938 and their ties with the Third International and Stalin were sources for such tensions. See Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), pp. 31–51; Mark Selden, *Yan’an Way Revisited* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1995). Written from ideological perspectives that are conflictual with both Meisner and Selden, Gao Hua’s book *Hong taiyang shi zenyang sheng qi de*: Yan’an zhengfeng yundong de lai long qu mai (How did the Red Sun rise – a genealogy of the rectification movement in Yan’an, Hong Kong: Chinese University of
Hong Kong Press, 2000) offers informative material; so does Chen Yongfa’s Yan’an de yinying (Shadows of Yan’an, Taipei: Taiwan zhongyang yanjiuyüan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1990).

According to Jiang Zulin, Ding Ling and Hu Yeping’s son, Ding Ling made this request herself because she took Mao Zedong’s suggestion that she “learn more about Marxism and Leninism” to heart. Later, she realized that Mao did not mean for her to literally stay at the Academy to do so, for such learning “could well be done through daily practice and work.” Jiang Zulin and Li Lingyuan, Wo de muqin Ding Ling (My mother Ding Ling, Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 2004), pp. 67–68. In other biographical writings on Ding Ling, it is often somewhat vaguely intimated that she was directed to do so. The different implications of these two scenarios are important, for the former excludes any intimation that Ding Ling’s staying at the Academy was due to a decision made by the Ministry of the CCP Organizational Affairs, which would certainly involve Mao Zedong, as a prelude of the attacks that she soon endured there.

Kang Sheng came to Yan’an with Wang Ming in 1938 but quickly turned away from Wang Ming and gained the crucial position in Yan’an. In the PRC era, he also headed a secret police apparatus within the party. Meisner, Mao’s China and After, p. 77. Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuoan, p. 425.


Guan Lu, “Mao zhuxi he Ding Ling er san shi” (“Mao Zedong and Ding Ling”), in Yu Jundao and Li Jie (eds), Mao Zedong jiaowang lu (Mao Zedong’s social associations, Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991).

For empirically informative works that lend such interpretations a certain amount of historical grounding, see Dai Qing, Liang Shuming, Wang Shiwai, Chu Anping (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1989). Wei Junyi, Lusha de lu (Lusha’s passage, Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1998); Si tong lu (A record of pain in reflection) (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1998).

The Yan’an period is a political target of the neoliberalists. Mark Selden modified some of his articulations after worked through a range of materials that were uncovered and made publicly known in the 1980s about the Yan’an Rectification Movement and other related political tragedies. Nonetheless he concludes in his China in Revolution: The Yanan Way Revisited that, despite of all its traumatic and in one case fatal (à la Wang Shiwei) consequences, what happened in Yan’an during the zhengfeng yündong (Rectification Movement) was not a purge.

Wu Yuzhang was the director. Ai Siqi was a Marxist theorist and author of influential popular textbooks on Marxism.

“Ding Ling nianpu” (“The chronological table of Ding Ling’s life”) in Yuan Liangjun (ed.), Ding Ling yanjiu ziliao, pp. 20–23. Indicating the support from the leadership that Ding Ling still retained, those events register the respect that Ding Ling was gaining among women and others with whom she worked under such circumstances.

Even when she was in the “Great Northern Wildness” (Beidahuang) and worked as a “people’s enemy” under the Red Guards’ abusive surveillance, she maintained her attitude toward those around her, hostile or not. She continued writing in her own mind when she was not allowed to have paper and pen. She worked with and befriended a range of rural women who in the end simply ignored her “identity” as an “enemy.” For her articulations of her determination to live and work as a “revolutionary woman under any circumstances,” see Ding Ling, “Fengxue renjian” (“Human World of Winds and Snows”), in Ding Ling qüanjí, vol. 10, pp. 113–323. For those who remember her in those years, see He Zhiming & the Editors of Zhongguo (China), Ding Ling jinianji.

In the secretary of Nanjing CCP underground organization Chen Xiuliang’s words: “Shanghai’s CCP underground network was destroyed three times over its history due to such renegades. The casualties were immense.” The quote is from an unpublished interview by the author with Chen Xiuliang, December 1, 1997.

Notes
Ding Ling made those comments in a conversation with the author of this book in fall 1983. For a written text that amounts to same meaning, Ding Ling, “Shanbei fengguang jiaohou ji” (“A few thoughts after proof-reading Life in Shanbei”), Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 9, pp. 50–51. At the time of the conversation, I interpreted the gist of her comments as a concealed criticism of those (i.e. Zhou Yang et al.) who, in her eyes, joined the Chinese revolution for power rather than for transforming socially arranged hierarchical human relations. Two decades later, in March 2003, I learned in a conversation with Christine Gilmartin about her interview with Ding Ling that Ding Ling, during the interview, made a passing note of another woman revolutionary as a “putong ganbu,” a category that designates those who are not part of the higher-ranking members of the CCP. Gilmartin interpreted this detail as an indication of how “even Ding Ling” was not free of socially conditioned hierarchical sensitivities. I then remembered Ding Ling’s comments made to me in the 1980s. I do not know if Gilmartin’s interpretation is factually accurate; but I realized that I should take what Ding Ling said to me about how “difficult” it was for her to “become a revolutionary” more seriously. Her critiques of the others may be better understood as insights that are linked with her reflective self-scrutiny.


“New Faith,” “In the Hospital,” and “When I Was in the Morning Glow Village” were all written from 1939 to 1940, although they were published in 1941.


84 “Shanghai laidian” (“Telegraphs from Shanghai”), Dagong daily (Dagong bao), June 19, 1933; Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuān, pp. 260–261.
85 Chen Xiulan, “Huainian youren” (“Remembering my friends”), an unpublished manuscript. The event occurred in 1948, Tilanqiao Prison, Shanghai.
86 The wording of the “Conclusion” is cautious and conditional, certainly not as conclusive as Ding Ling herself would have argued. The questions were posed to those CCP underground members once arrested by the KMT in the 1943 campaign led by Kang Sheng and in subsequent decades: “If you were not a renegade, why the KMT did not execute you?” Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuān, p. 342.
87 The language employed by He Long in the 1940s and Zhou Yang in 1950s is strikingly similar in its gendered texture and intensity.
89 Ibid., p. 232.
90 Chen Yün, Fu Chun, “Conclusion on Ding Ling,” in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 10, 104–106. Ding Ling’s editorship lasted from April 16, 1941 to March 11, 1942.
92 Among those who criticized Wang Shiwei, Ding Ling in the late 1980s was often singled out by authors such as Dai Qing, et al., which raises questions as to the reasons for such a targeted citation bound up with the climate in the late 1980s as much as about “what truly happened” in the 1940s.
93 Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuān, pp. 23–24.
94 Ding Ling, “What happened before and after the Yan’an Forum on Arts and Literature,” in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 10, p. 279.
95 Ding Ling, “Wényí jié duì Wáng Shìwěi yìngyòu de tágǔ jī fánxìng” (“The attitude and reflection that the circle of arts and literature should have toward Wang Shiwei”), in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 7, pp. 74–75. As if responding to the prevailing view in the 1980s that her self-criticism about “Thoughts” in the 1940s was simply a compliatis act for survival, Ding Ling in the 1980s rearticulated and re-confirmed her de-essentializing impulse about “the woman question” in her early self-criticism. Ibid.
96 Ding Ling, “Thoughts on March 8th”, in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 7, p. 63.
98 Ding Ling’s critique of Wang Shiwei also registers the political pressures that she endured as well her implications therein.
99 Mao Zedong’s letter to Ding Ling and Ouyang Shan, in Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 10, photos session.
101 That Ding Ling took the initiative to visit He Long to “hear his criticism” indicates more than a move for survival. Ding Ling had long placed the Chinese peasantry and urban poor at the center of her literary landscape, and aligned her own struggle with their “wretched destiny” in her political life; any criticism about the ways of changing such “destiny” did concern her. Whether He Long learned anything from Ding Ling’s visit is an open question. He Long did return Ding Ling’s initiatives for communications. Zhou Liangpei, Ding Ling zhuān, pp. 438–439.
102 For some of her most insightful thoughts on literature and the arts, see “On creative writing,” May 1946, Ding Ling qüanji, vol. 8, pp. 258–276; “Jiān Qi Qīubāi tongzhī...
yúnan shíyì zhouniàn” (“On eleventh anniversary of Qū Qiubái’s death”), June 1946, *Ding Ling qíanji*, vol. 5, pp. 266–269. Those writings register her reflections on the distinctions and the links between her early writings in Shanghai and her later works in Yan’an.

103 In an essay titled “Weihu jingshen” (“Weihu spirit”), Ding Ling links Qiu Jin’s “Jingwei drama” with what she calls “the Weihu spirit” in Qū Qiubái. “Weihu” is a name of a Buddha who cares for ordinary people. Ding Ling, “Weihu spirit,” in *Ding Ling qíanji*, vol. 8, pp. 91–92.

104 Wei Jùn’yí’s *Si tong lu* (*A record of pains in reflection*, Beijing: Shiyüe wényi chubanshe, 1998) differs from volumes of writings on the immense problems involved in the CCP history in that it astutely registers one of the defining contradictions in the Chinese revolution. A revolution led by a modern political party whose dialectic struggle to undo the gendered, class-fixed, nation-specific effects of modern bioethnic politics was at the same time conditioned by the logic of such politics. For Wei Jùn’yí, the most painful part of the Rectification Movement (1942–1943) was how many in Yan’an assumed that those newly coming from urban China and elite family backgrounds could not be real in their breaking away from their class-based kinship and joining the revolution for radical social transformation and social equality. It is worth exploring to which degree that the central problem in the 1942–1943 Yan’an Rectification Movement and in other critical moments of the CCP politics suggests a generalized modern nature of the problem of identity with its constitutive categories of measurement and naturalizing classification such as “origins” and “authenticity.” For related publications, see Xu Lìxìng, “Huang Kèchéng,” in *Dangshi tiandi* (*History on CCP*, November Issue, 2000); Zen Zhī, *Yīge gemíng de xīngcún zhé* (*A revolutionary survivor*, Guangdong: Guangdong renmín chubenshe, 1999).

105 For paradigmatic examples, see C.T. Xia, Liu Zaifu, David Wang.


107 After the investigation in 1938–1940 and the storm played out around “Thoughts” in 1942, Ding Ling also survived the brutal “Rescuing Campaign” in 1943 which she specifically mentioned in her writing. Ding Ling, “Chairman Mao’s letter to us,” in *Ding Ling qíanji*, vol. 10, p. 286.

108 Ding Ling insisted on this view throughout her life, as registered in all her writings that appeared from the late 1970s to 1986, the year when she died.

109 For a seminal articulation of the complex nature of the Chinese revolution and Chinese Marxists, see Maurice Meisner, *Máo’s China and After*.

110 Insightful in their discussions on the problems of politicization in modern Chinese literary history, Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker or David Der-wei Wang’s works on Ding Ling tend to be conditioned by the “class-centered” rubric that has constrained Chinese literary studies between the 1950s and mid 1970s. So seems a range of interpretations of Ding Ling as “a brain-washed leftist” by critics such as Liu Zaifu during the 1980s in China.


112 Ibid., pp. 262–264.

113 Ibid., p. 273.

114 Ibid., p. 141.


116 Ibid., p. 157–158.

117 Ibid., p. 101.


121 Ibid., p. 240.
122 Ibid., p. 240.
123 Ibid., p. 239.
124 Ibid., p. 248.
125 Ibid., p. 185. I here use the English rendition in Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker’s *Ding Ling’s Fiction* with my own modifications and additions based on the original text.
126 Ibid., pp. 185–194.
128 Ding Ling, *Sanggan River*, in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 2, pp. 185–186.
129 Ibid., pp. 274–275.
132 Ibid., pp. 283–284.
133 Zhou Liangpei, *Ding Ling zhuang*, 3–566.
135 Ibid., pp. 299–300.
136 Ibid., p. 275.
137 Ibid., p. 300.
139 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 296.
140 Ibid., p. 222.
141 Ding Ling, “Thoughts after proof-reading The landscapes of Shanbei,” in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 9, pp. 50–51.
142 Studies of how Ding Ling suffered in the 1950s and the 1960s were extensive during the 1980s. Some of those studies that denounced Ding Ling in the 1980s as “an old leftist ideologue” are often gendered. Such gendered nature can be seen, for instance, in the controversy that has played out around the publication of *Shen Congwen* (Shen Congwen, a biography) by Lin Yu in 1988. For a recent article that touches upon such gendering, see Li Hui, “Shen Congwen yu Ding Ling yuanyuan cangsan” (“Vicissitudes of feelings of gratitude and resentment between Shen Congwen and Ding Ling”), at www.hanlin.com, November 23, 1999.
143 Ding Ling, “Niupeng xiaopin” (“Small pieces on living in ‘cowshed’ [during the Cultural Revolution]”) in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 6, pp. 1–12; “Yang ji yu yang gou: fang mei sanji” (“About raising chicken and feeding pets: journals on the visit to the U.S.”), in *Ding Ling qüanji*, vol. 6, pp. 148–151.
145 After noting that “some people [in the 1980s] felt disappointed that I would not condemn the Chinese revolution and my participation in it [for them],” Ding Ling says: “Those who say that I am the [dirty] leftist these days, are the same ones who condemned and persecuted me as being the [stinking] rightist [in the 1950s or earlier].” Zhou Lianpei, *Ding Ling zhuang*, p. 581.
146 Zhou Lianpei’s *Ding Ling zhuang* offers a detailed account of such “convergence.” *Guancha Ding Ling* (Observing Ding Ling, Beijing: Dazhong wenyi chubanshe, 2001), edited by Yang Guixin, provides a range of historical texts that are specific and informative. See also Li Lingyuan and Jiang Zulin, *Wo de muqin Ding Ling* (My mother Ding Ling, Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 2004).
Afterword

2 Chen Xiulan, Xinhua Hospital, Shanghai, December 5, 1991.
3 Zhou Liangpei, *Ding Ling zhuan*, pp. 1–2.
Abandoned Child (Xiao Hong as Qiao Yin) 136, 137–9, 144
Academy of East Asian Studies 124
After Parting (Bing Xin) 75–6
After Victory (Lu Yin) 94–5
Ai Xia 159–60
Ai Yüese 23
Aidoo, Ama Ata 21–2
Alexander, Jacqui 4
All China Association in Arts and Literature 202, 213
All China Dramatists Association 163
All Quiet on the Western Front (Xixian wu zhanshi) (Remarque, E.M.) 157, 158
Alliance for Women's Rights (Nüqüan yündong tongmenhui) 70
Amid Blood and Fire (Lu Yin) 2
Anglo-American model of nation formation 20
Anhui Province 153
Arendt, Hannah 11
Arts and Literature (Wenyi) 136–7, 147
Association for Women's Political Participation (Nüzi canzheng xiejinhui) 70
Bai Wei 118–19, 122–3, 133–4, 186, 203;
Beautiful Jade (Lin Li) 119–21; Breaking Out of the Ghost Tower (Dachu youlinta) 106–9, 118; extraordinary early life 123–5; foreign experiences 124–5; 'I live but take no possessions,...,' 128; imagery and passion of 105; 'inner fire' of 125–6; Last Night (Zuoye) 127; Living Tragedy (Beiji shengya) 127; My Literary Turn (Bai Wei as Huang Zhang) 124; Northern Expedition 8; Paradise (Letu) 121–2; placelessness and sorrows 124–5; poverty, instability and political oppression 127; Rose Wine (Qiangwei jiu) 103–5, 107; ruins, furies, stirrings 102–9; Sophia (Sufei) 102–3; Suffering Women (Shounan de nüxingmen) 127; survival against all odds 126; Third Class Ward (Sandeng bingfang) 127; transformative imperative in work of 121; volumes of pain and hardship left by 128
Beautiful Jade (Bai Wei) 119–21
Beijing Grand Academy 37, 39, 56
Beijing Morning Post 76, 88
Beijing Normal Women's College 94, 96, 97, 111
Benjamin, Walter 1–2, 240
Benliu (Racing current) 106
Bing Xin 1, 119, 186, 203; After Parting (Biehou) 75–6; 'Bing Xin style' 83, 85, 88–9, 90, 91–2; cognitive caring of specific motherly love with sisterly impulses 76–7; cognitive stance on changing world 98–9; A Diary: Traveling along the Pingsui Railroad (Pingsui yanzhuan lixingji) 93; The Disconsolate (Bing Xin) 92; emerging author from May Fourth movement 87–8; The Ending of a Fiction (Yipian xiaoshuo de jiejü) 81–2; Final Resting (Zuihou de anxi) 90, 91; First Party 93; Fish (Yuè) 91; Good Dreams (Haomeng) 82; Homesickness 92; 'law of human nature' in writing of 91; learning of 'primitive life' from mother 72–4; Letters to the Young Reader (Ji xiaoduzhe) 76, 77, 79, 83–5, 87, 92; literary constellation of the 1920s and 69–99; literary geographies of the 'sacrificed' 80; Lonesome (Jimo) 75; MA in literature 92; May Fourth Movement 8; Miscellanies in the Mountains (Shanzhong zaji) 92; 'modern Chinese women,' making of 88–9; motherly love, cognitive senso-rium of 72–6, 78–9, 90; 'Motherly Love' of, sightng another world 70–79; naming of 87–9; Nora's Way Out, preface
Index

291

to "Nala de chulu xia" 93, 122; One Year Away from Home (Lijia de yinian) 75; Our Lady's Salon (Women taitai de keting) 109; overseas life of 91–3; overseas travel and homecoming 81; Painting – Poetry (Hua – shi) 77; Paper Boats – For Mother (Zhiuchuan – ji muqin) 80, 92; performances with fellow women students 90; 'reality,' confrontation with 82; relational implications of 'caring motherhood 74–5; Returning South (Nangu) 93; revolution in China, high hopes for 93; Sacrificed under the System of Nuclear Family (Xiao jiating zhidu xia de xisheng) 80; St Paul's stories, fondness for 78; Segregation (fen) 85–6; 'sisterly'-cum-equal impulses engendered by 76; socio-economic background 77, 87; standardized as 'feminine' 2; Stars (fanxing) 70, 72; stars of night, in print and as history 87–99; Superman (Chaoren) 82; symbiotic feelings, 'Bing Xin style' 79–87; Things Past II (Wuang shi) 92; Thoughts on the Trial of May 21st (Ershi yi ri tingshen de ganxiang) 88; Treasures that can Never be Lost (Zhishuan le ni) 90, 91; In a Young Refugee's Own Words, preface to (Xiaonanmin zishu xu) 93
bioethnic convictions in China 13–18
bioethnic politics, feminist empowerment and 5–8
biopolitical ideas in China 3–4
The Blue Bird (Maeterlinck, M.) 90
Bo Gu 202
The Book of Songs (Shijin) 35, 152
Boxer Rebellion 13, 162
Breaking Out of the Ghost Tower (Bai Wei) 106–9, 118
Bridge (Xiao Hong) 145
Buddhist symbolism 36
Budding (Menya) 192
Buffalo (Chanying, Y.) 133

Cao Jinhua 148
A Catastrophe at Sea (Lu Yin) 94
Chen Chao 15–16
Chen Fan 52
Chen Hengzhe 70, 98, 192
Chen Tianhua 57
Chen Xifen 5, 12, 14–15, 16–17, 18, 20, 31–2, 51, 52
Chen Xiying 73–4, 119
Chen Yun 212, 223
A Child's Speech (Xiao Hong) 146
China: bioethnic convicts in 13–18; bioethnic doom in 30; bioethnic ideology of nationalism in 46; bioethnic politics of Meiji elite 53; biopolitical ideas in 3–4; Chinese National question, nature of the 18–27; civil examination, abolition of 13; Classical Chinese (wenyan) 83; Constitutional Reform 8, 13, 39; Cultural Revolution 212–13; Eight Route Army 206, 209, 212; film industry in 158–9; First National Revolution 81, 93, 100, 170, 171, 190, 191, 205; flooding by rivers of 196; folk tradition in 29; 'foreigners' and power relations in 16–17; Frontline Service Corps 146; gender-blindness in modern consciousness about women 46; gendered nature of revolution in 44; Great Northern Expedition 8, 100, 126–7, 155–6, 192; human casualties of modern catastrophe in 56; human geography of 41; Jia (family and psychic belonging) 189; layered renditions of Chinese pain 19–20; literary constellation of the 1920s in 69–99; literary cultivation of women in high Qing period 12; Marco Polo Bridge (Lugouqiao) incident 163, 202; missionaries in 13; modern China, envisioning the embodiment of 58–9; mourning as mobilizing, sources of 'we-Chinese-women' 27–32, 52; nation and ethnicity in 21–2; nationalist ideology of 39; Nationalist Party 100–101, 135–6; 'New Life Movement' of Kuomintang 109; Northwest Front Service Corps (xixian zhandi fuwutuan) 204, 206–8, 211, 213; Peasant Rebellion in 55; political reorganization of 135–6; in post-World War I world 88–9; race, blindness to in 21–2; Ratification Movement 222–3; Reform Movement 14; Republican era 109–11; Revolution in 1–2, 5–6, 8–9, 31, 34, 64, 170; Second Coalition between CCP and KMT 202; shaping as a 'nation' in modern history 19; Tanci performance form 61, 63; traumatized 1–2; tuberculosis in 181–2; War of Resistance Against Japanese Invasion 8, 130, 135, 202; Westernization Movement in 23;
White Terror in 93, 101, 155–6, 173; women's transformation in 64; as 'wronged' country 57; Xi'an incident 135–6, 163, 202
China Women's Journal (Zhongguo nübao) 29, 51
Chinese national question, nature of the 18–27
Chinese Volunteer Corps to Resist Russia 57
Chinese Women's Association (Zhonghua funü xiehui) 70
Chinese Women's Culture 4
Chinese Women's Newspaper, Qiu Jin's editorial for the inaugural Issue of 54–5
Chongqing 148
Christianity 77–8
Communist Party of China (CCP) 100, 136–7, 147, 156, 158, 160, 173, 191, 201–2, 220–21; area controls of 206; civil war with Kuomintang 236
On conducting oneself with self-respect and human dignity (Qian Ren) 25
Confucian aesthetic protocols 34, 35
Confucian benevolence 78
Confucian institutions 75
Confucian order of social relations 74
Confucian system of ethics 74
Confucian traditional values 37
Creation Weekly (Chuangzao yuexian) 154
Crescent Moon (Wang Ying) 160
Cultural Struggles (Wenhua douzheng) 192
Dagongbao 51
The Dangers of Women's World (Chen Xiefen) 31–2
Darwinian 'natural selection' 6–7
Datong Academy 44, 45
Daughters of the City of Xian (Wang Ying) 159
Deng Chunlan 70
Diantong (General cinema) film studios 159
A Diary: Traveling along the Pingsui Railroad (Bing Xin) 93
A Diary of Suicide (Ding Ling) 182–3
Ding Chowo 30–31
Ding Ling 2, 19, 119; account of 'preparations' of Northwest Front Service Corps 207–8; army uniform in 'real life' 206; arrest and disappearance of 198–9; bodies of the metropolis 181–9; 'Chinese person (Zhongguoren), idea of 209; Chinese Revolution and story of 200–240; death of Hu Yeping, loss to 192; A Diary of Suicide (Zisha riji) 182–3; distinguished from literary sisters 186–7; escape from Kuomintang 200–201; Evening Gathering (Yelu) 203; feminist constellation, feminist passage 189–99; feminist passage of 168–99; feminized-cum-sexualized 'upward mobilities' 186; Folk Artist Li Pu (Minjian yiren Li Pu) 225; In the Hospital (Zai Tiyuan zhong) 225; imaginative energy of 189; Kouchi Ichiro 209; in literary movements of 1920s 8–9; literary sensorium of 188; Literary Supplement, editorship 222; making fiction, making life 171–81; Master Wang (Wang laoye), part in 206; Menke 171–3, 174–5, 180, 187–8; From Midnight to Dawn (Cong yeyuan dao tianliang) 192; Miss Sophia's Diary (Shafei nüshi de riji) 171, 176–81, 181–2, 188, 226; A Moonlit Night when an Intruder Came (Qian laile ke de yuye) 191; Mother (incomplete work) 198–9; Nanjing years 199, 200–201, 212, 222–3; 'New Faith' novella of 7–8, 215–19, 232; In the North Wind (Bei Fengli) 190–91; 'on the edge of death' 2; performing agency, art of 204–11; The Plough (Beidou), editorship of 193; politics of the (un)imaginable 211–19; profitable object for investment (by literary journals) 186; refusal to work with Kuomintang 200; rejection of 'upward crawling' 188; Remembering Xiao Hong in Wind and Rain (Fengyiu zhong yi Xiao Hong) 224; resilience of fictional figurations 226–7; Reunion (Chongfen) 209–11, 213–14; rhythms of the unreal 219–40; self-criticism 223; Shanghai Spring (Part One) (Yijou sanlingnian chun, Shanghai, zhijy) 185–6; A Small Room in Qingyuan Lane (Qingyuan li zhong de yijian xiaofang li) 188; social history and revolution 214; Songs of Death (Sizhi) 168–9; spirit of Chinese Revolution, relationship to 205–6; Sun (Ri) 183–5, 188, 196–7; The Sun Shining on Sanggan River (Taiyang zhaozai sanggan he shang) 226–40; Team-Leader Wan (Wan duizhang) 225; Thoughts on March 8th (Sanba jie yougan) 219–20, 222–3; transformation the key 'walking beyond self' 214–15; Unexpected Collection (Yiwaiji) 202, 203; 'urban Chinese middle class' 185; Water (Shui) 193–8; When I am in the Morning Glow Village (Wo zai xiacon de shihou) 222, 226,
232; 'women's equality,' class privilege and 205; women's self-transformation 224; working medium, choice of 174; worst times (early 1930s) in modern Chinese history for 192; Yecao 185; Yuan Guangfa 225
On Ding Ling (Shen Congwen) 192
The Disconsolate (Bing Xin) 92
Documentary reference on western women (Ai Yüese) 23
Douyin, Xia 101
Du Qingchi 14

East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere 26
East Han Dynasty 111
Edinburgh University 128
empowerment 1–11; 'embodiment' and 9–10
The Ending of a Fiction (Bing Xin) 81–2
On Equal Rights for Women's Education (Shimoda, U.) 24–5
eugenics 24
Euro-American liberalism 190
Europe: 'advanced cultures' of 23; Chinese womens' societies in 5; history of 3; models of modernity from 18
On the Eve of My Death (Qiu Jin) 2
Evening Gathering (Ding Ling) 203

Fan Wenlan 45
Fausto-Sterling, Anne 3
On Feeling – Written While Traveling in Japan (Qiu Jin) 42
Feelings of the Times (Qiu Jin) 56
Fei Xiaotong 19
feminism 4–5; bioethnic politics and feminist empowerment 5–8; feminist constellation, feminist passage of Ding Ling 189–99; feminist passage of Ding Ling 168–99; modern China, envisioning the embodiment of 58–9; nationalism and 46; passaging toward homepage ('jia') 46–59; personal is political in 72
Feng Keng 122, 191
Feng Wuanjun 192
Feng Xiefeng 203
Feng Yuanjun 70, 98
Ferguson, Margaret 3
Fiction Monthly (Xiaoshuo yuebao) 171
The Field of Life and Death (Xiao Hong) 136, 139–44, 147, 151–2
Final Resting (Bing Xin) 90, 91
First Party (Bing Xin) 93
Fish (Bing Xin) 91
Fisher-Lichte, Erika 9
Folk Artist Li Pu (Ding Ling) 225
folk tradition in China 29
For My Sworn Sister Wu Zhiying (Qiu Jin) 49
For Xu Xiaoshu before Death (Qiu Jin) 59–60
'foreigners' and power relations in China 16–17
Freudian paradigm 27
From Midnight to Dawn (Ding Ling) 192
Full Moon over the Fen River (Xiao Hong) 144–5
gender of the 'weak' 3–5
gendered nature of revolution in China 44
Gilmartin, Christina 101
Goddess of Freedom (Ziyou shen) 159, 161–2
Gong Yuanchang 51
Good Dreams (Bing Xin) 82
Great Northern Expedition 8, 100, 126–7, 155–6, 192
Guangzhou 173
Guidance (Xiang dao) 154
Hangzhou 44
Harbin 136–7, 147
Harding, Sandra 3
Hattori, Shigeko 37, 39, 49, 52, 55–6
Hattori, Unokochi 37, 39, 55–6
He Jian 155–6
He Xiangning 57
Hebei Province 196
Homesickness (Bing Xin) 92
Hong Kong 148–9
Hong Shen 156, 172–3
In the Hospital (Ding Ling) 225
Hu Binxia 51
Hu Yeping 189–90, 191, 192, 193, 198, 199, 221; Light is in Front of Us (Guangming zai women qiantao) 191
Huai River 196
Huang Bizhu 123; see also Bai Wei
Huang Gong 31
Huang Xi 44
Huang Ying 96
Huang Zhang 123–4; see also Bai Wei
Huixing, tragedy of Ms 13
Hunan overseas learning experience (Hunan youxue yibian) 23
Hunan Province 33, 44, 126, 128, 153, 154, 169, 189, 196
Index

In the North Wind (Ding Ling) 190–91
On Independence (Chen Xiefen) 14–15
India 23
Innocence (Wang Ying) 160
International Conference for Women, Yan’an 213
International Post (Guoji xiebao) 137
Irises (Wang Ying) 160

Japan 1, 5, 23, 69
Jia (family and psychic belonging) 189
Jiang Bingzhi 170, 172–4, 189; see also Ding Ling
Jiang Jieshi 100–101, 135–6
Jiang Suixing 14
Jiangnan region 34
Jiangxi Province 44
Jiaxing 44
Jin Shan 164
Journal of women students in Japan (Liuri nüxüesheng bao) 29

Kang Sheng 212, 236
Kang Tongwei 20
Kollwitz, Kathe 193
Kouchi Ichiro (Ding Ling) 209

Kunming 94
 Kuomintang (National People’s Party) 69, 109, 147, 157–8, 161–3, 173, 191–2, 198, 200, 202; area controls of 206; civil war with CCP 236; cultural police of the 226; ‘New Life Movement’ 109; special agency of the 220–221

Last Night (Bai Wei) 127
League of Left Dramatists 158
League of Leftist Writers (Zuolian) 122, 191, 193

legacy, sites of living 8–11
Letters to the Young Reader (Bing Xin) 76, 77, 79, 83–5, 87, 92

Li Bai 35
Li Dazhao 97
Li Fuchun 221
Li Qingzhao 92
Li Qiushi 191

Liu Keqing 20
Lui Wanfang 20
Lu Bicheng 51, 52
Lu Jinqing 192
Lu Xun 106, 137, 147, 193, 202, 203
Lu Yin 70, 94–7, 109–10, 186; May Fourth Movement 8; social workings of Darwinian ‘natural selection’ 6–7
Lu Yin 203; death of 2; delineation of drowned refugees 2

Maeterlinck, Maurice 90
The Maid servant 153
Manchu government 44, 57, 60
Mao Zedong 202, 203, 212, 214, 222–3, 225–6
Marco Polo Bridge (Lugouqiao) incident 163, 202
Marxism, 5, 191, 227

May Forth Movement: legacy of 208
May Fourth Movement 6, 69, 74–5, 87, 90, 94, 170; post-May Fourth movement moment 84–5; women writers of the 98, 109, 122–3

To Mr. Meipo and My Friend Chen Xiefen (Chen Chao) 15–16
Mengke (Ding Ling) 171–3, 174–5, 180, 187–8

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 9
Ming Dynasty 34, 35, 179
Mingxing (Star) film studios 158, 161
Missellaneous in the mountains (Bing Xin) 92
Miss Sophia’s Diary (Ding Ling) 171, 176–81, 181–2, 188, 226

Modern Review (Xiandai Pinglun) 119
Mohanty, Chandra 4, 205
A Moonlit Night when an Intruder Came (Ding Ling) 191

Mother (incomplete work of Ding Ling) 198–9

Mountain Balti (Bati shan) 192

mourning as mobilizing, sources of 'we-Chinese-women' 27–32, 52

Muai ('mother's love and 'motherly love') 72

Murayama, Tomoyoshi 157

My Literary Turn (Bai Wei as Huang Zhang) 124

Nakamura, Kichizo 126

Nanjing 98, 101, 162–3, 198, 212; massacre at 135–6

'natural law' of modern world 24

'natural selection,' Darwin's theory of 6–7

New Faith (Ding Ling) 7–8, 215–19, 232

New Youth (Xin qingnian) 154

Nietzsche, Friedrich 3, 21, 221

Northwest Front Service Corps (xixian zhandi fuwutuan) 204, 206–8, 211, 213

An Old Mute (Xiao Hong) 145

On Traveling by Steamboat (Qiu Jin) 47–8

One Year Away from Home (Bing Xin) 75

Ono, Kazuko 193

Opium Wars 1

Our Faith (Women de xinnian) 202–3

Our Lady's Salon (Bing Xin) 109

Ozaki, Hotsumi 157

Painting – Poetry (Bing Xin) 77

Pan Xüan 20

Pan Ying 52

Paper Boats – For Mother (Bing Xin) 80, 92

Paradise (Bai Wei) 121–2

Pathbreaker (Tuohuang zhe) 192

Peasant Rebellion 55

Pony Pavilion 179

The Plough (Beidou) 193–4

On Precious Sward (Qiu Jin) 58

Prospects (Lu Yin) 109

A Public Letter to Shanghai Audiences against the Illegal Arrest of Anti-War Artists 157–8

Qian Ren 25

Qiao Yin 136; see also Xiao Hong

Qing Dynasty 34, 35, 55, 69, 162

Qing Er in Distress (Wang Ying) 156

Qingdao 147, 191

Qiu Jin 169, 199, 202; 'activist' or 'activating' writing 41–2; aesthetic practices, watershed in 40–41; arrest by Manchu authorities of 44, 45–6; 'blood and tears' of history 3; bodily remaking 39, 40, 42–3; 'boudoir literature' and 'boudoir sorrows' 34–7; breakdown of Chinese civilization, view of 39–40, 57–8; burial in Zhejiang Province 60; on 'Chinese translators,' problematological role of 54–5; clash with Utako Shimoda 26, 52–4; death chosen rather than escape 66–7; death of 2; to do or not to do, the question for 34–46; early writings 34, 41; 'Editorial for the Inaugural Issue of Chinese Women's Newspaper' 54–5; evocation of women warriors 2; execution of 59–60; On Feeling – Written While Traveling in Japan 42; Feelings of the Times 56; feet bound (and unbound) 37, 42–3, 49; feminine literary friendships 48–9; gendered aporia 40; grandparents 34; grief without anger 35; homeplace ('jia'), feminist passaging toward 46–59; imaginary of 33, 57, 60–68; inherited topoi, choice and execution of 35; for Jichen and Xiaoshu, on parting 59–60; lament for equality and humanity 58; life of 33; lifework of 10, 33–68; literary complexity of work of 65–6; literary imagination 56, 58, 64; literary tradition of Chinese gentry-women 36–7; love of writing poetry 34; on mapping, best-known poems 40–41; memories of 33–68; modern China, envisioning the embodiment of 58–9; For My Sworn Sister Wu Zhiying 49; 'nationalist feminist' characterization as 46; paid with her life 31; painful articulations of 47–8, 56; paradigmic case of 29–30; physical exercise 42; placelessness, feeling of 47; On Precious Sward 58; prefiguring womens' critical writing 53; proliferation of writings 43; 'radical ideas' for Chinese republic 54; On Reading Warning Bells 58; recollection of (at Datong Academy) 45; relations with husband, severing of 50; remembrance of 68; Respectfully Speaking to My Sisters 58; Respectfully Speaking to My Two Hundred Million Chinese Sisters 27–9; revolutionary activist and emerging writer 12–13; revolutionary activities of 8, 43–4, 57;
Revolutionary Alliance membership 44, 47, 50–51; on slavery, rooting out the habits of 58; social transformation, struggles for 56; Song of Freedom 58; on 'sorrows' and 'sorrowful woman' 34–6; southern-style narrative 12; Stones of the Jingwei Bird (Jingwei niao) 61–4, 65–6, 67, 87, 199, 202; strong force 29; Tokyo studies of 23, 26; torture of 44; towering figure 5–6; transboundary moves of 40; transformative poetry 44; On Traveling by Steamboat 47; travels of 40–41; trial and conviction of 44–5; Warnings for My Fellow Chinese 58; Western attire of 37–8; 'women comrades' of 51, 52, 56–7; on women's destiny 30–31; 'Women's society of common love' 51–2; Written in the Boat amid the Yellow Sea 46–7; For Xü Xiaoshu before Death 59–60; on 'young Chinese men' pursuing 'modern ideas' 55

Qiu Meilu 20
Qü Qiubai 205

Ratification Movement 222–3
On Reading Warning Bells (Qiu Jin) 58
Reed (Wang Ying) 160
Reform Movement 14
Remarque, Erich Maria 157
Remembering Xiao Hong in Wind and Rain (Ding Ling) 224
Ren Jun 127–8, 130
Respectfully Speaking to My Sisters (Qiu Jin) 58
Respectfully Speaking to My Two Hundred Million Chinese Sisters (Qiu Jin) 27–8
Returning South (Bing Xin) 93
Reunion (Ding Ling) 209–11, 213–14
Revolutionary Alliance 44, 47, 50–51, 57, 58, 59, 64; reconfigured at the Kuomintang 69
Revolutionary Army (gemingjun) 57
rhythms of the unreal 8–11, 219–40
rhythms unseen, sea changes 12–32
Riley, Denise 3
Roads to Humanity (Yuan Changying) 130–33
Rose Wine (Bai Wei) 103–5, 107
Rou Shi 191, 193
Ruan Lingyü 139–60
rupture, in Chinese context 27
Russia 1, 5, 20, 23

Sacrificed under the System of Nuclear Family (Bing Xin) 80

St Matthew's Gospel 77–8
St Paul's Gospel 77, 78
Scott, Joan 3
Seaside Friends (Lu Yin) 94
Seeing Kites (Xiao Hong) 145
Segregation (Bing Xin) 85–6
Separation (Feng Yitianjun) 98
Shangdong Province 69, 191, 196
Shanghai 2, 44, 136, 137, 148, 190, 204–5, 226; Coup by Jiang Jieshi in 155; fall to Japanese of 135; glittering fury and sound of 186; Japanese bombing of 158
Shanghai Dramatists Association 163
Shanghai Film Star Company (Mingxing Gongsi) 173
Shanghai Second Performing Troupe for National Salvation (Shanghai jiuwang yanju erdui) 163–5
Shanghai Society of Artistic Theater (Yishu jushu) 156, 157–8
Shanghai Spring (Part One) (Ding Ling) 185–6
Shanghai Women's Paper (Shanghai nüxue bao) 5
Shanghai Women's Public Academy 13
Shanxi Province 146–7, 148, 201, 204
Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province 33, 44, 60
Shared Sorrows (Tong chou) 159
Shen Congwen 72, 190–91; On Ding Ling (Ji Ding Ling) 192
Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun) 72
Shi Pingmei 192; death of 2
Shimoda, Utao 23–4, 26, 49, 52–4
Shu Qin 137, 147
Shuntian ribao 24–5
Sichuan Province 130
Sino-Japanese War 2, 13, 39, 123
A Small Room in Qingyün Lane (Ding Ling) 188
Smedley, Agnes 157, 203
Smith, Sidonie 3
Song Dynasty 34, 92
Song Jiaoren 57, 69
Song of Freedom (Qiu Jin) 58
Songs of Death (Ding Ling) 2, 168–9
Sophia (Bai Wei) 102–3
sophistication, naifete and 152–3
South Business Daily (Nanyang shangbao) 203
Southeast Flies the Peacock (Yuan Changying) 111–18, 131, 133
Spring Rain (Wang Ying) 160
Stars (Bing Xin) 70, 72
Stones of the Jingwei Bird (Qiu Jin) 61–4, 65–6, 67, 87, 199, 202
Index 297

Strategies of revolution (Sun Zhongshan
Huang Xin and Zhang Taiyan) 44
On the Streets in Early Morning (Xiao Hong) 146
Su Xiuelin 70, 81, 98
Subao 52
Suffering Women (Bai Wei) 127
Sun (Ding Ling) 183–5, 188, 196–7
The Sun Is Shining on Sanggan River (Ding Ling) 226–40
Sun Zhongshan 44, 59, 69, 227
Superman (Bing Xin) 82
The Suspended (Lai Yin) 109

Takiji, Kobayashi 209
A Tale of Red Glass (Xiao Hong) 148, 150
A Tale of Red Tears under Tyrannical Land- rent
(Tieban honglei lu) 159
Tales of Hulan River (Xiao Hong) 2, 146, 150–51
Tanci performance form 61, 63
Tang Caichang 67
Tang Dynasty 12, 35
Tao, benevolence of cosmic 74
Tao Chengzhang 57, 59
Team-Leader Wan (Ding Ling) 225
Things Past II (Bing Xin) 92
Third Class Ward (Bai Wei) 127
Third Son (Bing Xin) 90–91
Thorn Heart (Su Xiuelin) 98
Thoughts on March 8th (Ding Ling) 219–20, 222–3
Thoughts on the Trial of May 21st (Bing Xin) 88
Throwing away a five-colored outfit (Wang Ying) 160
Tian Baoling (Ding Ling) 225
Tian Han 126, 156
Tianjing 40, 52
Tokyo 40, 42, 44, 47, 51–2, 124; Chinese in, passions of 57
Traces of Spring (Feng Yuanjun) 98
Travel East – a week spent in illness (Wang Ying) 160
Treasures that can Never be Lost (Bing Xin) 93–4
Turn and Look (Menhuifou) 57

Unexpected Collection (Ding Ling) 202, 203
United States 5; ‘advanced culture’ of 23
University of Beijing 70
University Women’s Federation 111

Vernacular (Baihuabao) 27–8, 29, 51
Versailles Treaty 69

Wang Heqing 14
Wang Jianhong 170, 173–4, 204–5
Wang Keqing 153, 154; see also Wang Ying
Wang Lan 70
Wang Lian 51
Wang Shize 67
Wang Tingjun 55
Wang Ying 135, 168, 186, 203; All Quiet on
the Western Front (Xixian wu zhanshi), part in 157, 158; birth and early life 153–6; Crescent Moon (Shang xianyi) 160; cross-embodiments of transformation 152–67; in cultural memory of modern China (‘a blue cloth robe for ballroom dancing’) 161; Daughters of the City of Xian (Xian de niurmen) 159; film career 158–9, 160, 161–2; imagination, activating latent potential of 153; Innocence (Tianzhen) 160; Irises (Jian qiuluo) 160; jailed by KMT secret police 162; literary writing, formal launch of 158; The Maidser vant (Haoshen jia de yatou), part in 153; Miners (Tankenfu), part in 156; Put Down Your Whip (Fangxia nide bianzi), part in 165; Qing Er in Distress (Qing er luo nan ji) 156; Reed (Luwei) 160; The Sai Jinhua incident, part in 162–3; Spring Rain (Chunyu) 160; Throwing away a five-colored outfit (Xie chu le yijian wuse de waiyi) 160; Travel East – a week spent in illness (Dongdao lücheng – bin de yizhoujian) 160; ‘Wang Ying paradigm’ 161–2; War of Resistance against Japanese Invasion 8
War of Resistance Against Japanese Invasion 8, 130, 135, 202
Warning Bell (jingshizhong) 57
Warnings for My Fellow Chinese (Qiu Jin) 58
Washington DC 92
Water (Ding Ling) 193–8
Waters in Springtime (Bing Xin) 70, 72
‘weak’: ancient lineage in Chinese vocabulary 18–19; species, feminist empowerment of 7; weak-strong binary 3–4

Wen Gan 101–2
West Wind (Chen Hengzhe) 98
Western ‘foreign’ traditions 76
When I am in the Morning Glow Village (Ding Ling) 22, 226, 232
White Terror in China 93, 101, 155–6, 173
Who Ruined You (Bing Xin) 90, 91
The Wife of Jiao Zhongqing (Jiao Zhongqing qí) 111–18
The Wild Rose (Shi Pingmei, Ed.) 2
women: class difference among 16–17; of czarist Russia 20; 'dangers women face' 6; French revolutionary women 20; gender-blindness in modern Chinese consciousness about 46; gendered slander 13; institutional articulation, challenge of finding 13; juridical classification 17; May Fourth writings, range of concepts 70; Meiji Japan's women radicals 20; 'modern' Chinese women 27; 'motherhood' function of 24, 26–7; rights of and 'modern sovereignty' 21–2; self-transformation of 224; 'sexualized cripples' 24; social justice and oppression of 14–15; social space, challenge of finding 13; socially 'crippled' and humanly 'useless' 18–19; transformation in China 64; 'we-Chinese-women,' sources of 27–32, 52; 'women's equality,' class privilege and 205; womens' journals in China 14; 'women's question,' varied dimensions 25–6; writers' articulation of women's issues 22–3

Women Students (Nüxüesheng) 29
Women's Call to Arms (Nüxing de nahan) 159
Women's Federation (Nüjie lianhehui) 70
Women's Journal (Fanü zazhi) 171, 189
Women's Journal in the Divine Land (Shenzhou nübao) 29
Women's Life (Funü Shenghuo) 127
Women's Monthly (Nüzi yuëkan) 96, 101–2
Women's Paper for Learning (Nüxüebao) 14, 17, 20, 29, 52
Women's Vernacular Journal (Nüzi baihua bao) 29
Women's World (Nüzi shijie) 30
Woolf, Virginia 94
World Congress of Anti-Fascist Youth and Students 165–6
World Culture (Shijie wenxüe) 192
The World of New Chinese women (Zhongguo xinnüjie) 20–21
World War I 69
World War II 202
Written in the Boat amid the Yellow Sea (Qiu Jin) 46–7
Wu Zhiying 49, 58, 59, 60
Wuchang 126–7
Wuhan 148
Wuxü Reform Movement 5

Xia Yan 220
Xia Zhenren 198

Xi'an incident 135–6, 163, 202
Xiang Jingyu 170, 173
Xiangjiang Daily (Xiangjiang ribao) 170
Xiao Hong 135, 153, 156, 167, 203, 224; Abandoned Child (Xiao Hong as Qiao Yin) 136, 137–9, 144; alternative land, lifelong yearning for 148–9, 150; A Child's Speech (Haizi de jiangyan) 146; death of 2, 148; education and early life 136–7; The Field of Life and Death (Shengxi chang) 136, 139–44, 147, 151–2; Full Moon over the Fen River (Fenhe de yuan yue) 144–5; Little Six (Xiao liu) 146; mobile violence, mobile kinships 136–52; An Old Mute (Ya laoren) 145; rendition of starving peasants 2; Seeing Kites (Kan fengzheng) 145; On the Streets in Early Morning (Qingchen de malushang) 146; A Tale of Red Glass (Hong poli de gushi) 148–9; Tales of Hulan River (Hulan he zhuoan) 146, 150–51; War of Resistance against Japanese Invasion 8

Xiao Jun 147
Xiao Lazi 154–5
Xie Bingying 192
Xie Wanying 88–9; see also Bing Xin
Xû Jichen 59–60
Xû Xiaoshu 59–60
Xû Xilin 59
Xû zihua 60
Xûe Jinqin 17, 57
Xûe Shaohui 20

Ya Lu (Liu Yazi) 12, 32, 148
Yamagami, Masatoshi 157
Yan Bin (Lian Shi) 20–22, 24
Yan'an 202–4, 206–11, 212, 213, 219, 222–3
Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art 225
Yangtze River 196
Yellow River 152, 167, 196
Yihua (Arts China) film studios 159
Yin Fu 191
Ying Weiyun 156
Ying Xiuren 221
Yu Manzhen 169–70, 198
Yu Zhihua 153; see also Wang Ying
Yü Zhihua 153; see also Wang Ying
Yüán Changying 105–6, 118, 186; Buffalo (Niu) 133; critical exposure of 'her own kind' 129–30; cross-cultural learning of 128–9; divides, encounters, transit impetus 109–18; Roads to Humanity (Ren zhidao) 130–33; social privilege of 130; Southeast Flies the Peacock (Kongque dongnanfei) 111–18, 131, 133; War of Resistance against Japanese Invasion 8
Index

Yüan Guangfa (Ding Ling) 225
Yūsi (Threads of words) 122

Zhang Ailing 2, 111, 152, 153, 167
Zhang Daofan 162–3
Zhang Naiyin 136–7, 147; see also Xiao Hong
Zhang Taiyan 44
Zhang Wentian 202
Zhang Yunhua 20

Zhang Zhujün 6
Zhejiang Province 33, 34, 44, 47, 59, 60
Zhenshanmei 185–6
Zhongshan University 126–7
Zhou Enlai 202
Zhou Yang 220, 226, 236
Zou Rong 57
Zuolian (League of Leftist Writers) 122, 191, 193
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