

Positioning Women in History

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When the world loses its soul, I lose my gender—Xu Xiaobin

“Female writings in China have served almost as representative voice of Chinese women’s liberation,” one female scholar recently writes in a book on women writers in mainland China.¹ Indeed, since the beginning of 1980s and especially throughout 1990s Chinese women writers have been articulating their concerns with defining feminist issues related to the representation of the female experience in their narratives, especially fictions. The process of development and transformation of Chinese women’s literature has involved much ingenious effort to utilize different tactics for self-expression, and careful appropriation of conventions. As a result, a heteroglossia of texts construct women-centered narratives in order to more directly and intimately engage with the female experience.² Among these women-centered texts a particular narrative connects many works through a similar concern with the mother-daughter relationship, as well as a variety of closely related issues such as the nature of motherhood and daughterhood, the formation and function of maternity, and the definition of femininity. Many of these works embed this basic relationship into historical narratives that expand across generations of women. From Wang Anyi’s *Changhen Ge* (Song of Everlasting Sorrow), to Zhang Jie’s *Wuzi* (Wordless Love), to Jiang Yun’s *Lishu de Qiantu* (Prisoner of Chestnut Oak), to Chi Zijian’s *Yangge* (Rice Planting Songs), to Chen Ran’s *Siren Shenghuo* (Private Life), female writers have created a phantasmagoria of mother-daughter narratives with vigor, ingenuity and bold imagination. Chinese women have begun to write “the great unwritten story.”³

There are two full-length novels that stand out from this group of writings, each is written by a well-acclaimed mainland Chinese woman writer. Tie Ning’s *Meigui Men* (Rose Gate), written in 1988, in a way predates much self-consciously feminist writings in mainland China.⁴ Xu Xiaobin’s *Yushe* (Yushe) was completed in 1998, at a time when the drastic transformation brought by a free market economy altered the nature of literary writing in China.⁵ *Rose Gate* and *Yushe* are compatible because of their grand narrative scope and complexity in characterization and structural design. The two novels share a similar concern with constructing a female subjectivity in a historical discourse that had consistently been subjected to patriarchal system of representation until the recent past. Both novels foreground a powerful female subjectivity against major historical events in modern China through a process of formation and transformation of the female self, and the displacement of the mother-

daughter relationship.

They are also naturally contrastive because of drastic differences in their narrative approach and ideological intent. The differences offer insights into female writer's attitudes and approaches in a larger social context; they also represent two extremes of practice toward constructing a feminine discourse that enables meaningful representation of the female experience. It is possible to say that aesthetically these two texts position themselves at the two ends of a literary paradigm that pivots on the nature of feminist writing: at one end is a more purely instrumental feminist aesthetic that resorts to realism, and at the other is an aesthetically self-conscious experimental approach. Tie Ning creates a text that "easily lends itself to thematic interpretation in terms of positive or negative images of women."⁶ Xu Xiaobin, on the other hand, is not content with the semantic, mimetic and utilitarian function of writing but favors a text that "challenges stylistic conventions and calls into question the established modes of representation" (Felski, 6).

Rose Gate relies on a more linear plot structure and sequential events that connect three generations of Chinese women in the second half of the twentieth century, with a special focus on the time before and during Cultural Revolution. *Yushe*, however, follows a web-like and spatialized structure that weaves nearly a dozen women's stories into an expansive historical time that stretches from the *Tai ping Tianguo* [The Heavenly Kingdom of Peace, 1851–64] period to the present. Stories of five generations of women run parallel to one another, not proceeding chronologically as in typical novels of realist mode. Instead, it forms a communal narrative voice, crossing boundaries of time and space.

Mothers and Daughters

The world of women depicted in each of these novels is far from ideal or even pleasant, even though never dull. They are occupied by a multitude of mothers and daughters who are related by blood but not necessarily bonded in soul. In fact, more often than not mothers do not nurture, daughters cannot love back, and the mother–daughter relationship is forever displaced. Women become alienated from each other, unable to recognize feminine connection that passes on from mothers to daughters. The theme of displacement of mother–daughter relationship lies at the center of both narrative, but also serves as the point of divergence that separates Tie Ning and Xu Xiaobin in their discursive representation of femininity.

The household in *Rose Gate* and *Yushe* is each headed by a strong-minded woman who was abandoned by her husband in favor of prostitutes for one, and officialdom for the other. Si Yiwen in *Rose Gate* is a woman of unique character. She is beautiful, smart, inventive, and she is also selfish, cruel, cunning and shrewd in the extreme. Her strong desire for life is eroded every minute by her shrewd calculations so she cannot celebrate life, nor find pleasure in living. Most of all she is devoid of compassion for all those around her, including her own siblings, so she cannot love. A premarital sexual relationship entombed her unhappy marriage with a man she does not love. Her husband's resentment of marrying a deflowered woman quickly turns into disgust. Unfulfilled desire and hatred propels Si Yiwen to seek ways to exert her revenge. As is the usual case, vengeance is blind and can be misdirected

easily. For Si Yiwen, the target is the world itself, and eventually her own self: she begins to show signs of abnormality. Take, for example, the dubious moments she enjoys with her sister-in-law Guba: reclining on her bed with her eyes closed, her body fully relaxed while Guba cleans her ears. The highly subjective and obscene act repeats itself, bringing moments of obvious physical satisfaction to both. One day, deciding to play wicked joke on her aging and frail father-in-law, she slips into his room, bares herself and forces herself on him. Unable to recover from the shock, he passes away shortly afterward. No wonder critics see Si Yiwen as a direct descendent from Zhang Ailing's Cao Qiqiao, the quintessential evil and lewd woman in modern Chinese literature.⁷⁾

Tie Ning's interrogation of the deeper psychological workings of the feminine through Si Yiwen reveals nothing positive, but filth, ugliness and horrific impulse. Her near misogynistic treatment of Si Yiwen epitomizes a narrative moment in modern Chinese literature when the sacred mother figure falls from the altar of worship.⁸⁾ Si Yiwen is a mother that shows no sign of endearment to her daughter and granddaughter. She pricks up her ear when her son and his wife make love in the next room and analyzes their performance. She neglects the basic needs of food and clothing of her granddaughter's. She schemes to expose the sexual affair between her daughter-in-law Zhuxi and a neighbor Luo Dama's oldest son at the cost of forcing her adolescent grand daughter viewing the naked act. She bargains indifferently with her daughter about the payment for taking care of her granddaughter.

Xuan Ming in *Yushe* is a different kind of matriarch. Xu Xiaobin is usually more sympathetic in her representation of female characters. This is partially because she persistently rejects any moralizing ideology in her narrative, and instead keeps her narrative voice at a distance from value judgment. However, it is not to say that she is not capable of giving harsh critique through her characters. Xuan Ming is similar to Si Yiwen in many ways: her beauty, her wealthy family background, her unhappy marriage and her strong character. Like Si Yiwen, in the absence of a patriarch in the family, she sees herself taking up that authority. The episode in which she takes into her hand to choose an ideal husband for her daughter Ruomu shows a unique female ingenuity at manipulation and oppression to serve a self-interest. Xuan Ming's elaborate scheme to reach her goal at the expense of nearly causing another young woman's life shows the monstrous power of the mother. The deeper irony of the story is that Ruomu ends up in an unhappy marriage while the other woman, her rival, quickly recovers from her loss and succeeds in a fruitful marriage of lifetime. In women-centered narratives powerful mothers often become monstrous. Being referred to as the "phallic mother," these women take on the role of the conventional patriarch unconsciously.⁹⁾ They "internalized patriarchal mores, become the fenders and transmitters of an oppressive system."¹⁰⁾

Not all mothers are such powerful castrating figures. Sometimes they are simply absent. In *Rose Gate*, Meimei's mother Zhuang Chen is absent from most of the narrative. She is defined by her extreme weakness in character. Her uncritical consent to the circumstances, her philosophy of "anything will do" renders her existence meaningless in the face of her daughter. She is unable to be a physical mother or serve any symbolic function. Her presence is an image out of focus, she

merely is. On the contrary, the absent mother Shen Mengtang in *Yushe* is mystified, serving as a powerful symbol of feminine beauty and the essence of maternity in the heart of her daughter. Searching for mother becomes a central plot in the narrative. Because Shen Mengtang exists as an eternal mother, her daughter Jin Wu is able to keep her faith in the nature of the maternal, and continue in her Diaspora. Similarly, it is this belief in the essential virtues of the maternal that enables Yu to continue in her redemptive effort to regain true love from her mother, and refraining from condemning her mother for her obvious dislike of her. Matrophobia is seen as a common discourse in many women-centered narratives.¹¹⁾

These narratives are usually told from the daughter's perspectives, not the mother's because writers of mother–daughter narratives often identify the daughter's position as more progressive and are “dismissive” of mothers.¹²⁾ Although *Rose Gate* is mostly a motherly text, with most part of the story told by an omniscient narrator that focuses on Si Yiwen, several sections of the book are obviously from the daughter's perspective. In the end it is actually the daughter's story that takes over. Meimei, Zhuang Chen's daughter and Si Yiwen's granddaughter, and Zhuxi, Si Yiwen's daughter-in-law, combine to create a daughterly narrative that is full of ambiguity and driven by matricidal impulse.

Zhuang Chen's absence creates a curious vacuum in the narrative as well as an empty space in Meimei's heart. Her place is substituted by Zhuxi, who provides a physical presence very close to the ideal feminine in Meimei's eyes: a warm, sexual, mature female body any adolescent girl would want to identify with. The bonding between Zhuxi and Meimei, however, is through mutual contempt for Si Yiwen and the opportunity to force her to surrender her matriarchal authority. Consistent with Tie Ning's effort to reveal how women are equally corruptible when given full reign to power, Zhuxi and Meimei ally themselves to mock the physical body of Si Yiwen deprived of pride by age and illness. Eventually, Meimei, with her ever-slight extra effort to wipe her grandmother's mouth, fatally sends her to the abyss. Tie Ning seems to doubt that quality of all-embracing and unconditional love as the determining nature of maternity or femininity. Si Yiwen's death comes right before the birth of Meimei's daughter who bears a scar at the same spot and with the same shape as Si Yiwen. It seems to foretell that women's war against each other and against themselves will repeat in a cycle as gendered history, enclosed by its own matrophobia and misogyny.

Instead of constructing a singular female consciousness in the narrative as Tie Ning does in *Rose Gate*, Xu Xiaobin allows several women in *Yushe* to take turns as the focalizer of the narrative, and achieves a multiplicity of female consciousness. Most of these women form a mother–daughter relationship across different generations. The narrative favors a spatialized continuity of mother–daughter experience rather than a linear one, creating a complex structure of female genealogy. In women-centered narratives, daughters seldom want to be like their mothers, thus allowing the ideology of matrophobia to be a determining factor in the construction of the narrative plot. As shown in *Rose Gate*, this has a fundamentally ironic effect, especially when the mother–daughter relationship cannot reach beyond the narrow confinement of home. Xu Xiaobin's feminine discourse consciously resists positioning itself by the

centripetal force of home, and leans toward a centrifugal buildup. Influenced by a postmodern ideology of decentered ontology which became deeply immersed in mainland Chinese literary discourse in 1990s, Xu Xiaobin's text has obviously diverted from Tie Ning's ideology of cultural retrospection, but tends toward a less determined and less moralizing approach. This allows her characters much freedom to interact with the world disregarding conventional narrative principles, and to move beyond the restraint of home which was seen as the center of much of women's repression. This move allows her heroines to seek and determine their own destiny, to establish and remodel their own identities. In that sense the daughters in *Yushe* are able to distance themselves from the destructive force of matrophobia, even temporarily.

Nonetheless it's obvious that the sacred maternal love only exists as symbols and mother-daughter relationship is displaced, severed or distorted. The Si Yiwen-Zhuxi-Meimei plot in *Rose Gate* essentially reveals the feminine psychological desire for vengeance and self-destruction. In the center of *Yushe* Xu Xiaobin also constructs a similar triangulation of women: grandmother Xuan Ming, mother Ruomu and granddaughter Yu. The castrating mother Xuan Ming can be extremely oppressive in her dealings with her daughter. Having caught Ruomu playing the adolescent game of body exposure with a neighbor's boy, she gave Ruomu a corporal punishment so severe it nearly cost her life. Ruomu's virtue became protected and intact, but she turns into a paper figure literally, sitting in her room in the darkness only occasionally shows her face. Yet she internalizes this conventional ideology of enforcing female virtues at whatever cost and patiently waits for her chance to exert her passive aggression at those around her. When the chance for revenge presents itself she quickly jumps at it, and sending her daughter to the operation table for lobotomy: an act that infantilizes Yu to return to be the docile good daughter that she never was, with no temperament, no strong feelings, no secrets, mysteries or stories of her own, a happy living corpse. Yu pays for the deadly crime she commits as a little girl when she took the life of her baby brother in reaction to her mother's elation at finally giving birth to a male heir of the family, her last chance to give birth. Ruomu's inverted matricidal act finally completes itself when Ruomu offers Yu up to give her blood to save Yangyang, the only male heir of the family. Right before her death, Yu asks her mother: "All that I've owed you I've paid them back. Are you happy now?" The question cuts through the heart of the "benignant" mother and brings her to tears (Xu, 341).

The destruction of this mother-daughter relationship in order to engender a male plot, a regressive desire to return to patriarchal domination, reveals the power of gender politics at work and finally threatens to end this female historical discourse that transforms five generations of women. The sad truth is that Yangyang is saved by Yu's blood but will never be able to stand up again as the result of a fatal accident in which his mother was killed. Xu Xiaobin's feminine discourse is ultimately one of ambiguity.

The ending of *Rose Gate* reveals a different kind of matrophobia that is directed not toward the mother but the very essence of the female experience, i.e. the female reproductive power.¹³ Meimei waits impatiently in the hospital for the difficult birth of her own daughter. She shows no signs of happiness, contentment or excitement,

only discomfort and suffering, as if she is already resenting. She names her daughter Gougou, Doggie, after receiving a letter from her sister and learns her sister just performed sterilization on her pet dog whose name is Gougou. In the meantime Zhuxi goes into frenzy at home, trying to choose which pesticide to use to kill the rats: the kind that kills the male or the kind that sterilizes the female. She decides on the latter. Tie Ning's construction of femininity is also defined by ambiguity and anxiety.

Among all the female members in the genealogy of *Yushe*, Yu is the most unique. In Yu Xu Xiaobin creates a character that embodies her interpretation of "the essence of the feminine."¹⁴ Yu is unusual, she is corporal and metaphysical, as mysterious as an ancient witch, as wise as a sage, as innocent as a virgin, as strong as water, as powerful as imagination and yet as vulnerable as a young branch on a tree. To name her is to acknowledge the difficulty to name woman. Her existence is a testimony to ambiguity, indeterminacy and transgression, the nature of femininity. She is the vulnerable daughter doomed at a very young age by her power for symbolic transgression of the most dangerous kind. By taking the life of her baby brother, she unconsciously sentences herself into eternal exile. It's an exile of the heart, so profound, intense and painful that she lives a life like a pilgrim on a long journey forever seeking salvation of the soul. She finds solace in the companionship, trust and physical closeness of Jinwu, another female branch of the same tree of genealogy, and she pines for Zhulong/Yuanguang, the fallen hero. Mostly she seeks ways to mend her estranged relationship with her mother. But unlike many unhappy daughters, she refuses to allow herself to enter into the matrophobia plot that is designed to project all the daughter's suffering onto the mother. She is able to maintain a psychological distance because she is endowed with an innate mysticism, a semi religious spirit. In Xu Xiaobin's texts there is always a "metaphysical meaning of transcendence," i.e. she is able to inject elements of the mystical unknown deep into the daily life experience of the secular.¹⁵ Because of this Yu is able to transcend her alienated relationship with not only her mother but also her entire family, just as she is able to transcend the logic of the real and maintain a fierce independence and self-autonomy.

In this sense, Xu Xiaobin's daughters' narrative is profoundly different from *Rose Gate*. There the daughter's narrative of Meimei is closely immersed in the aesthetics of the real instead of the imaginary, which is the determining factor of Yu's encounter with the world. While Meimei is trapped in her nameless fear and disgust of her own body in the process of reproduction, Yu, by giving her own blood, engenders a new life. In *Rose Gate* the cyclic discourse of feminine matrophobia will continue while in *Yushe* the already dimmed light of the dazzling tree of female genealogy is further darkened.

Discourse of the Feminine Vernacular vs. the Feminine Sublime

Feminists in the west have long been advocating a necessity for women to engage themselves afresh and directly with language and writing as the initial step toward fundamental change. In this regard, writing for women writers is inevitably an act of "revision": the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction..." as defined by Adrienne Rich, one of the foremost feminist theorists in America.¹⁶ *Rose Gate* re-enters a critical historical moment in

modern China, the time around and during the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution by way of a culturally specific, socially constructed and gendered space: the Beijing *hutong* [alley ways] and the numerous *siheyuan* [a compound with houses around a courtyard]. Tie Ning locates a matriarchal household headed by a powerful grandmother figure Si Yiwen, at the center and base of the Beijing social structure. The *hutong* has long been the victim and witness of political power struggles and dynastic changes in modern China. Unlike most *hutong* narratives that appeared in post-Mao literature, Tie Ning feminizes her microscopic delineation of the story set in a particular *siheyuan* and brings to the center a gendered consciousness of history—a textual practice that was to be shared by many women writers in 1990s.

Rose Gate enters history through women and their daily experiences of life. These experiences do not usually exceed physical needs and house chores. Eating, drinking, defecating, and sleeping determine the rhythm of the *siheyuan* and form the basic structure of communication of a semi-private and half open communal space. In particular, history plays itself out through the daily rubbings between two female power centers of one *siheyuan* politics: Si Yiwen, the wealthy widow of a big family, and Luo Dama, the illiterate mother of a worker's family. Divided by class but forced into a communal space under special historical circumstance, each does not want to consent to the other ideologically or psychologically. A never-ending ping-pong game of tremendous psychological depth initiated by Si Yiwen becomes a women's war: Luo Dama proudly shows Si Yiwen the trick to make the right dough for *wotou* [steamed dough made from cornmeal], one of the cheapest staple food at the time; Si Yiwen gets back at Luo Dama by casually offering her the recipe to make steamed fish, a fancy kind of cuisine that was never available to the likes of Luo Dama; Si Yiwen shows off her seamstress' skill by helping Luo Dama make pants for her teenage son; Luo Dama courageously cooks up some dead chicken found in the yard, showing her clever pragmatism... Refusing to be forgotten or brushed aside by the tide of history, women like Si Yiwen seek ways to enter history but often find themselves caught in the circular motion of daily chores. The women's war becomes an awkward "imitation of men's war."¹⁷ It is no surprise that the meaningless grinding of life's detail quickly becomes an experience of degradation and humiliation for women.

Mainland China in 1980s was dominated ideologically by a trend of cultural retrospection, wherein intellectuals took a self-reflective and critical stand to re-examine modern China's cultural formation and its representation. Aesthetically, one of the major motifs was the "shenchou yishi [anti-aesthetics]."¹⁸ In literature, many writers preferred the idiom of *xin xieshi zhuyi* (usually translated simply as realism) to expose the many negative sides of Chinese civilization and the base potential of human nature. The influence of this cultural trend is evident in *Rose Gate*, which was completed towards the end of 1980s.

The women of *Rose Gate* are thus interrogated under the parameter of this realism, which is informed by an unambiguous ideological underpinning. To subjugate all human ugliness to the ideology of total exposure is a temptation hard to resist, but often a very delicate act because of the danger of slipping into mere sensationalism or worse: women become casualties of a kind of "gaze" that is usually attributed to the

omniscient presence of patriarchal system of representation. This is what happens to the women of *Rose Gate*. Si Yiwen, her daughter Zhuang Chen, sister-in-law Guba, daughter-in-law Zhuxi, and Luo Dama, each of the women is attributed with dubious traits of character, each is seen as indulging herself in a kind of devious behavior. Si Yiwen chews cookies and sweets every night in the dark. She farts ignoring time and occasion. Guba strides around the *siheyuan* with a pipe in her hand, and a little gadget that she keeps in her pocket: a small ear pick and bottle filled with the content from all the ears she grabs at random. Zhuxi waits with anxious anticipation at night to the sound of her rattrap catching its prey and falls asleep in contentment.

These seemingly meaningful details quickly become redundant and tiresome, diverging the reader's attention from the initial intent, whatever that maybe. Eventually they fail to signify any meaning and remain superficially descriptive, rendering the effort to reveal a general damnation of the feminine in a system of oppressive patriarchal control lame and random.

In comparison, Xu Xiaobin's *Yushe* takes a macroscopic view of the gendered historical experience. Instead of locating the domesticated *siheyuan* as center of female encounter with history, Xu Xiaobin seeks to transcend specificity of time and space. She explores with a multi-vocal narrative discourse in which different characters of the five generations of women are given their own first-person narrative voice to tell their own stories in the present without any hierarchal order of preference.

Xu Xiaobin carefully avoids any specific designation of time or setting to her story and yet is able to locate precisely the impulse of each historical moment through various mystical and magical experiences of her female characters. From Yang Bingxin's legendary escape from the dangerously oppressive court of the *Tai ping Tianguo*, to Shen Mengtang's shattering appearance as a multilingual translator in Yan'an and her sudden disappearance as a reactionary spy, to Yu's heroic fall from a high rise building in front of party officials after the commemoration (protest in disguise) of April 5th 1976, and her magical recovery, history is both memory and presence. It becomes a feminine discourse of multifarious forces.

By giving her female characters names of ancient Sun Gods such as Yushe, i.e. Yu, Ruomu, and Jinwu, and elevating the position of the narrative focalizer above the mundane world of the daily living experience of women, Xu Xiaobin foregrounds her female genealogy against none-ceasing catastrophic changes of history to map out an unique feminine discourse which forms a sharp contrast to the trivializing discourse of *Rose Gate*. Certainly not every act performed by the roughly twelve characters whose narrative carry more or less equal weight is heroic, grand, or God-like in magnitude and design, but the multiplicity of the narrative voice refuses to succumb to the realist mode of engaging with reality as *Rose Gate*. Instead it combines narrative experiment with mysticism, a sense of sub religious spirituality, and always a strong reliance on aestheticism.¹⁹⁾ *Yushe* constructs a spatialized narrative of history that continues through the permutation of its female characters' intuitive imaginary of history's presence, as if all the historical memories are simultaneously in the process of making, and yet each component is distinct, not to be duplicated. As a result, Xu Xiaobin's feminine discourse of history is more concerned with narratology, the way to tell a story, to imagine in detail and creatively a female act of revision that is open, fluid,

mutational, rather than static and specified. In this way Xu Xiaobin creates an “absolute female history” (Chen Xiaoming, 35).

Take, for example, how she approaches the *Taiping Tianguo* episode. The female character that she chooses to foreground, Yang Bicheng, is a yang woman, one among thousands that serve at the palace. The only difference is her outstanding embroidery work puts to shame all the other embroideries done by several dozen other women. The story of her fell to prey of one of the most powerful and licentious men at the palace, her adventurous escape to freedom with the help of other women follows the traditional of *wuxia xiaoshuo* (marital arts narrative), which had not always been considered as a serious genre in Chinese literary history until recently. Xu Xiaobin appropriates this “lesser” genre by discarding its usually highly exaggerated plot structure and vocabulary, and injecting her hallmark language of mystical lyricism. The result is an obviously “writerly” text given a “readerly” tilt. Disregarding the possibility of whether such an act can be carried out at all in reality, as a projection of subjective truth it is nonetheless believable. In other words, using the *wuxia* genre to articulate this particular escape to freedom plot seems logical and natural, befitting the “female imaginary,” which helps to transform the typical *Taiping Tianguo* patriarchal ideology.²⁰⁾

The feminine historical discourse of *Yushe* is an entity of organic multiplicity, a sharp contrast to the linear delineation in *Rose Gate*. Xu Xiaobin has a wonderful ability to create situations in her stories that give her female characters opportunities to assert their own identity and strength through the female imaginary. In Xu Xiaobin there is also an undeniable preference for an intellectualized yet easily accessible exploration of the female experience. Her refusal to duplicate vernacular everyday speech, her extensive use of complex structures and vocabulary of classic language, and her fascination with the mystical dimension of life in general combine to give her text an unique appeal. In particular there is a strong interest in representing those special and rare aesthetic moments encountered by her female subject, an experience that Xu Xiaobin insists as part and parcel to the completion of articulation of femininity.

Take, for example, Yu’s repeated encounter with the mysterious oyster sitting quietly at the bottom of the lake close to her childhood home, and Xuanming’s repeated assembling and disassembling of the lamp made from hundreds of pieces of purple crystals in the shape of wisteria flower petals. The surreal, intense and terrifying image of the gigantic oyster, so ancient, so alone, and yet seems to communicate something to Yu, slowly opens to the sound and brightness that comes with the shearing voice of thunder, lightening and torrential rain. It’s a power so strong and pure that it entails sheer terror, mystery, ecstasy, seduction and empowerment, a moment that has been defined as the feminine sublime.²¹⁾ Yu is filled with awe, with longing, to be one with the terrific oyster, anxious to see the emptiness when it opens itself to her, as it always does except once when the image occurs on stage, and the soft, feather-like oyster opens to reveal a naked woman. Yu revisits this image of the lake in her childhood, does not expect herself to come to any rational understanding of its symbolic meaning, if there is any, but intuitively understands it as necessary to embrace the moment: it’s not a moment of self-presence

but self-dispersal, when the “soul loses itself in mazes of inward contemplation” (Freeman, 32).

For Xuanming, Yu’s maternal grandmother, each step in the assembling of the dazzling petals of purple crystal brings her closer to another kind of the feminine sublime. As each petal is reattached, Xuanming reaches nearer to her maternal ancestors, to the mysterious, stunningly beautiful, oppressive and decadent palace of the *Tai ping Tianguo* rulers, the hundreds of women, virginal, young and beautiful, devoting their talent through the needlework to create beauty and magic, to her young and incorruptible Auntie who left her with the lamp and its secret code of assembling, to the heroic female knight—the simple-minded and faithful maid who sacrificed her young life in exchange for Auntie’s escape from licentious lechers at the palace ... the ritual of assembling and disassembling thus becomes a simple act of story telling, a moment of empowering, transforming the trivial grinding everyday drag of survival into beauty, allowing Xuanming to relocate herself to history in a process of self-re-identification that is performed only in solitude, that attests to a particular kind of feminine individuality.

Feminist Positioning of Narrative Focalizer

Rose Gate, as well as the other longer narratives that focus on or encompass the mother–daughter relationship, primarily relies on realism as the mode of expression. As discussed earlier, the ideological pursuit to expose the reality of women’s debasement in historical changes is still deeply seeded in the psyche of many women writers. Aware of the fact that gender identity of the writer as well as its close affinity in the text, the implied narrator, presents a problematic to writing, Tie Ning avoids to write from a pure feminine point of view in *Rose Gate*. As she writes in the “Preface” of the book: “I hope to obtain a two-way viewpoint, or a “third sex” viewpoint, which will help me grasp the reality of women’s life environment more precisely.”²²⁾ It is not entirely clear what constitutes this point of view, but the indication seems to be a wish to avoid taking a gendered or feminist narrative position.

This neutral position, however, is often impossible to maintain and can affect the overall design of the narrative. The androgynous character Guba, Si Yiwen’s sister-in-law, in a way materializes this position. Unlike many women who deliberately rejects their socially defined role such mother or wife, Guba takes extreme measures to reject her own gender identity and nearly succeeds at erasing her female self. Abandoned on her wedding night by the groom who was never to show up, she eventually came out of this shock and transformed into a new self: announcing her new androgynous identity through a self-made title and name Guba, a term combines the meaning of both Auntie and Father, a peculiar rejection or appropriation of her own sex. Cutting her hair short, she downs on male attire, takes up the smoking pipe and begins to walk and talk like a man. This gender-neutral appearance, however, eventually cannot save her from being subjected to sexual violence of the worst kind: a gang of teenage boys pushes an iron rod into her private part. Guba died as one of the most tragic female figures in contemporary Chinese literature. The subsequent silence from all those around her creates an oppressive empty space in the text, an indication of ambivalence toward Guba’s act of self-mockery.

Much of the narrative of *Rose Gate* falls to a pattern that does nothing other than trivializing women's experience. The magnification of their concerns with the humdrum details of the everyday life is often applied without careful scrutiny: it becomes an obsessive act itself that signifies nothing and remains compulsively repetitious. Take the beginning chapter, from the extended description of Nier's haircut, to comments on Su Wei's winning over the hotel staff, to the particular way of drinking a Singapore Sling, to eating popcorns served free at bars—none of these details reveal anything important or even relevant to the construction or psychological dimension of each character, nor do they present clues to plot progression, not to mention symbolic meaning in the larger socio-political context. It becomes an undermining rather than empowering force.

Perhaps realizing the diminutive effect of this kind of verisimilitude tactic, Tie Ning inserts several very short and peculiar chapters in the text, each using the first person narrator instead of the third person narrator in the other parts of the book. This first person narrator talks directly to Meimei, suggesting the voice belongs to Meimei's subconscious psyche. This device, however, gives the story a strange texture of unevenness if not intrusive discomfort. These short sections awkwardly disrupt the linear flow of the plot, seemingly to pause to reflect on the deeper layer of reality from Meimei's point of view. However, because of their arbitrary intrusion into the narrative as separate realities, they remain disconnected from the essence of the narrative. At first glance these sections seem to serve the purpose of an ancient voice, a female kind of wisdom, perhaps symbolizing the collective unconscious of the female psyche, but in actuality they only provide more detailed description of particular acts, unable to reach closer to the nature of things. Moreover, the language used in these sections strives to be lyrical, poetical and clearly feminine by using a softer tone. This forms a sharp contrast to the explicitly vernacular speech used in the rest of the book. The text becomes two separate entities each refusing to blend in with the other.

This disjunction perhaps illuminates a narrative problematic faced by many women writers: how to establish a feminine aesthetics that comprises both feminist ideology and aesthetic function of literature. In this regard, Xu Xiaobin's *Yushe* has a more organic and coherent narrative structure despite the difficulty in following its web-like plot. In *Yushe*, Xu Xiaobin imagines a pre-historical tribe of women, who were "the suns and the oceans of ancient times, and were engendered with life itself, and have been in existence with this land" (Xu, 1-2). This tribe is like a tree that grows many beautiful branches, all have different shapes, textures and strengths, forming a complex system of relationships that are full of mystery. The tree is the female genealogy and the branches are the specific blood relationships, the women of the "colony of queens" (Xu, 2).

This imaginary image also seems to be the layout of the structure of *Yushe*, which is built like a three-dimensional space, using three tiers of narrative perspectives: the omniscient third person narrator, the multiplicity of first person narrators, and a first person narrator that only appears at the beginning and the end of the book. This special first person narrator frames the entire text and bridges the aesthetic distance between an intensely intellectual text and the reader, also further foregrounds the

writer's desire to identify with the feminine experience in the text. It is a moment when the female subject re-defines her self, the world and her relation with the world.

The mysterious and splendid wisteria lamp eventually ended up at a corner of a museum—Xuanming assembled all the pieces together right before her death and took the secret code with her. The story of Xu Xiaobin's female genealogy is very much like the lamp, or at least we may assume that the purpose of telling this story of Yushe is precisely to retrieve the memory of the lamp, to tread through its complicated system of disassembling and re-assembling is the only way to invent a future. This is not an uncommon practice among narratives of similar nature. That future, though, is one that belongs to daughters like Jinwu, An Xiaotao and mostly Yun'er, beautiful, mobile, transnational and full of self-confidence. Most of all they will abide by a new set of rules they themselves establish. In that sense they will definitely be freer than their mothers. Whether they will find the eternal love of the maternal, however, remains to be seen.

Xu Xiaobin's female genealogy is thus an exploration for possibilities of constructing a personal interpretation of a female history. In comparison *Rose Gate* is more of an attempt at presenting a description of women's life history when the maternal principles lose to a general human degradation. It favors more a morally defined ideology than artistic expression. Yushe's feminine discourse is fictional and aims at a subjective aesthetic appropriation of history, while *Rose Gate* is factual and influenced by a negative feminine aesthetic.

Endnotes

- 1) Jiang Yunfei, *Shilong de Qiyu* (Prisoners without a Cage), in Huang Lin "Zongxu (General Preface)" to Huang Lin ed., *Zhongguo Nuxing Zhuyi Xueshu Luncong* (Collection of Academic Writings on Chinese Feminisms), (Beijing: Jiuzhou Chubanshe, 2004), 4.
- 2) The amazing surge of creative energy from women writers, to an extent, was certainly incited by the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.
- 3) Andrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1976), 225.
- 4) The edition used in this paper is Tie Ning, *Rose Gate* (Shangxi: Beiyue Wenyi Chubanshe, 2002).
- 5) The edition used in this paper is Xu Xiaobin, *Yushe* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2004). The novel had been published under a different title *Taiyang Shizu* (Tribe of Sun Gods).
- 6) Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 3.
- 7) See Zhang Ling, "Wufa Jinru de Nuxing zhi Men" (Feminine Gates of No Entry), <http://qingyun.com/>, retrieved 4/3/2004.
- 8) Critics have identified this de-sacredization of the mother figure mostly in the writings of Ling Shuhua in 1930s, Zhang Ailing in 1940s, and Chen Ran, Xu Kun, Chi Li, Tie Ning, Xu Xiaobin in 1980s and 1990s. For an extensive discussion refer to Zhu Defa et al, *Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Wenxue Lixing Jingshen* (Rationalism in Twentieth Century Chinese Literature), (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2003), 450–519.
- 9) For a detailed study that relates the "phallic mother" to psychoanalytic theory of castration see Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 79.
- 10) Christine Arkininstall, "Toward a Female Symbolic: Re-Presenting Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Spanish Narrative by Women," in Adalgisa Giorgio ed., *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), 52.
- 11) For detailed observation of this phenomenon refer to Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*:

- Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).
- 12) Heather Ingman argues that in 1960s and 1970s feminists in the west tended to be dismissive of mothers in general because they were seen as “having capitulated to the patriarchy’s construct of femininity.” See Heather Ingman, “Introduction,” in Heather Ingman ed., *Mothers and Daughters in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 16.
 - 13) This is also observed in Dai Jinhua, “Tie Ning: Tongchu de Meigui Men” (Tie Ning: The Painful Rose Gate), in Huang Lin ed., *Hua Yu* (Flower Rain), (Shijiazhuang: Huashan Wenyi Chubanshe, 2001), 174.
 - 14) Xi Huiling, *Xifang Nuxing Zhuyi yu Zhongguo Nu Zuoja Pipan* (A Critique of Western Feminism and Chinese Women Writers), (Shanghai: Shanghai Shehui Kexueyuan Chubanshe, 2003), 145.
 - 15) Chen Xiaoming, “Juedui de Nuxing Lishi: On Xu Xiaobin’s Yushè” (Absolute Female History: on Xu Xiaobin’s Yushè), *Nanfang Wentan* (Southern Literary Arena), 3, (1999), 37.
 - 16) Maggie Humm ed., *Modern Feminisms: Political, Literary, Cultural* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 369.
 - 17) Xu Kun, *Shuandiao Yexing Chuan: Jiushi Niandai de Nuxing Xiezu* (Night Boats: Female Writings of 1990s), (Taiyuan: Shanxi Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1999), 23.
 - 18) Critics are quick to point out the influence of the popular book *Chou’e de Zhongguo Ren* (The Ugly Chinese) by Taiwanese writer BoYang on Si Yiwen’s characterization. See Huang Weilin, *Zhongguo Dangdai Xiaoshuojia Qun Lun* (On Different Groups of Writers in Contemporary China), (Beijing: Zhongyang Bianji Chubanshe, 2004), 317.
 - 19) Critics in mainland China seem to have come to a consent to this typical Xu Xiaobin style.
 - 20) The female imaginary is important for western feminists such as Luce Irigaray because it enables women to affiliate with the mother, to identify with the semiotic mother. It can help disrupt symbolic or social language.
 - 21) Barbara Claire Freeman defines this term as “the female subject’s encounter with and response to an alterity that exceeds, limits, and defines her,” in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2. Freeman explains that comparing with the traditional sublime, the feminine sublime “does not attempt to master its objects of rapture,” but “attests to a relationship with” the otherness. For details refer to Freeman, 1–12.
 - 22) Tie Ning, “Zixu (Preface),” *Rose Gate*, 1.