THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE

Xie Bingying’s *Autobiography of a Chinese Girl* (published 1936) and Ding Ling’s *Diary of Miss Sophie* (published 1927) are two texts produced during the early Republican period in China (1912 to around 1930). This period saw the proliferation of new literary models within a program of modernization that extended to all areas of Chinese culture and society. A comparative discussion of the two texts posits a model of ‘modern’ textual representation that deems certain texts open to a level of analysis to which other texts do not lend themselves. By using Foucault’s concept of the clinical gaze as a tool for a structural analysis of the two texts, this paper will show how the two Chinese women writers deal with similar thematic contents but manage to construct meaning in entirely different ways. When comparing the two texts, one finds that only Ding Ling’s work exhibits a self-reflexive consciousness and an awareness of the limitations of language as a medium for expressing thought. Ding Ling’s text thus provides a ‘Modern’ model of the constructed nature of narrative and a perspective distanced from the given reality. Xie Bingying’s text, on the other hand, displays the classic features of Socialist Realism.

The “gaze,” posited by Foucault as a new mode of perception which defines the cultural and scientific paradigm of modernity (which Foucault locates at the end of the French Revolution in the 18th century) highlights a shift from a “classical” mode of totalizing the observed world in exhaustive descriptions and classificatory tables to seeing the world in terms of “signs” and “symptoms” which point to an invisible reality which must be inferred. The “gaze” thus structures perception through selection and substitution, forming models of reality. When applied to narrative texts, the “gaze” implies the demise of omniscient narration. The gaze refers to the act of seeing not with the biological eye but with the transcendental consciousness which receives perceptions and then translates them via the mediation of language or concepts into a picture or image of the world, emphasizing a synthesis of ‘symptoms’ or ‘signs’ that both seek a subject or ‘body’ and inherently fail to align with its ‘spatio-temporal reality’.

Much has been made of an emerging female subjectivity in the works of the influential early Chinese women writers of the 1920s and 1930s. These

---

discussions often involve comparing changing archetypal models of ‘woman’ as defined by traditional roles in society, with equally stylised images of the new modern girl or woman. Sets of defining characteristics of this new modern image of woman are then formulated that invariably include ‘educated’, ‘political’, ‘empowered’, ‘sexualised’, and ‘urban’. These qualities easily apply to many of the characters depicted by prominent women writers of the 1920s and 1930s, including Ding Ling, Lu Yin, Shi Pingmei and Su Xuelin, but do not necessarily extend to a description of subjectivity beyond the gender concerns. The comparison in this paper focuses more on the way two key contemporary representative texts differ in modes of representation, and the mechanism by which a broader ‘picture’ or ‘structure of reality’ is created that describes, but is not defined by a gendered subjectivity. Whilst bearing many similarities in thematic concerns, Ding Ling’s and Xie Bingying’s autobiographical texts are nonetheless sufficiently different as to make a comparison meaningful.

**Ding Ling’s *Miss Sophie’s Diary* and Xie Bingying’s *Autobiography of a Chinese Girl***

Ding Ling wrote *Miss Sophie’s Diary* in Beijing, in the winter of 1927-28, which is also the time and place in which the *Diary* is set. It is, in its temporal proximity to certain realities of the author’s life, considered ‘autobiographical’ although no claim is made as such by the author. This does not mean, however, that the account was not based on her own experiences, as the often hostile reception authors faced in the wake of the tumultuous politics of 1920s China meant that speaking candidly, or openly, often had dire consequences. Self-styled ‘modern’ authors in China of the 1920s were often blamed for promoting an amoral society, and linked to the moral traits that their characters exhibited. This makes sense in terms of the various ideas about what ‘fiction’ stood for. Fiction was seen, quite literally as imbued with potential transformative powers, as outlined in Liang Qichao’s literary manifesto. Ding Ling was in fact frequently confused with the first person narrator in *Miss Sophie*, and heavily criticised. To the extent that the text was and still is read as autobiographical, its truth-effect can be seen as largely contingent on the consensus in its reception.

Xie Bingying was a less active member in the politicised literary scene than Ding Ling, Hu Shih or Lu Xun. She did serve for a period in a ‘girls’ army’ during the Northern Expedition of 1926, leading to the ‘united front’ forged between the Nationalist and Communist parties. However, this is described as a requirement of the school she was attending, and not her own initiative. Though she did embrace this ‘calling’, she does not display the shrewd awareness (correct political ‘consciousness’) of her distinctly individual place

---