Writing “National Literature”
from a Gendered Transnational Point of View

LI Lisa Yinghong

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The “migrant writer” exists in every culture, every country and every language. Since pre-modern times, writers have for various reasons traveled and settled in places away from their homeland and written in their own native tongue, or if they choose and conditions permit, in an adopted tongue1. The various terms, diaspora, exile, émigré, immigration or expatriation, all indicate the nuanced history of human migration, survival and efforts to overcome. In recent decades, the Chinese diaspora has received increasing attention from the media as well as academia, capturing popular imagination in many places in the world. In the field of literature, some books, in particular autobiographical narratives by Chinese writers of the diaspora, have become near synonymous with “Chinese Literature” despite the fact that the corpus of this category of writing is not written or read in the Chinese language. Partially this interest is due to the fact that these books almost always choose their homeland as the subject matter - China serves as the originary source of their creative imagination. This interest in such narratives is perhaps expected given China’s increasing importance in global politics and economic development.

The Chinese diaspora, like any other kind of diaspora, is essentially a plural experience. The literary expressions of this cultural experience are also anything but singular. If one were to connect all the literary discourses of the Chinese diaspora in North America, Europe, Australia, Singapore and other places, “eclectic” would be a fitting word to modify a “‘China’ literary tradition” (Lee, 10)2. Indeed, not only is this literary tradition diverse and encompassing many cultural and geographical sites, it is also constantly evolving with new members bringing in stories and memories created for a “global theatre of history” (Lee, 28).

In the past two decades or so, many migrant writers from mainland China have successfully established a literary career on the broad world stage3. From Bei Dao to Ha Jin, many of these writers have become well-known and well received. Through their writings
people in the west often receive their first information about important historical episodes in China such as the Cultural Revolution. Adding to these now “familiar” names in the world literature of China are three younger women writers who left mainland China in the more recent past and have drawn serious attention through their writings: Shan Sa (Yan Ni Ni), Lulu Wang and Xiaolu Guo. The focus of this paper will be three novels from them. Shan Sa’s *The Girl Who Played Go* was written and originally published in French (La Joueuse de Go) in 2001. Wang’s *The Lily Theater* was written and published in Dutch (Het Lelieheater) in 1997. Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* was written in English and came out in 2008.

A quick reading of the majority of the works written by migrant Chinese writers in the past two to three decades will yield a general impression that “China” remains the sole source of creative impetus as well as the central subject matter. In particular, recent political movements that have devastated the Chinese people in profound and different ways loom large in these narratives. The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966 ~ 1976) and the 1989 student movement (or the Tiananmen Square Incident as it is more commonly referred to in China) are two primary focuses. Relying on China as the source of imagination and the base of the narrative is understandable given that many of these writers have first-hand experiences in these movements. Another crucial reason has to do with a uniquely Chinese intellectual phenomenon. Many, if not all, modern Chinese writers of the twentieth-century have been captured by what has been aptly phrased as an “obsession with China”, a passion for correctly and seriously representing China that has become a “moral burden” consciously or unconsciously, rightly or wrongly.

This obsession stems from a belief in the function and power of literature, especially fictive writings, to achieve a deep resonance from the reader. The reader will then be able to reflect in a profound sense on the social reality, which in the modern era has been seen as mostly diseased and full of damaging effects. Since the reflective thinking tends to focus on social ills the result is that modern Chinese literature has a distinct quality of heaviness and seriousness. Intellectuals that have left China might still cherish this sentiment and heaviness when they begin writing in a foreign language, willingly or unconsciously.

A closely connected practice in the discourse of modern Chinese literature is that political and moralistic principles, rather than for example psychosexual or purely aesthetic ones, have been the primary framework for Chinese writing. Perhaps as an “addiction” to ideology it is therefore not surprising to find almost a “need” or “duty” among Chinese migrant writers to properly represent China. In his recent book *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin admits that for a while after he began writing seriously in the US he considered himself a “spokesperson
for the downtrodden Chinese” (Ha, 27). For those who have been interested in the diasporic Chinese literature, especially Chinese American literature, Ha’s self-imposed position of spokesperson for China echoes a similar situation that binds two of the forerunners of that genre: Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, the difference being both Kingston and Tan were “chosen” for that position. 7

Given the long historical absence of writers of color in America (or Europe) the desire to appoint “cultural representatives” is understandable and even necessary from the reader’s point of view. In Kingston and Tan’s cases, however, this spokesperson-ship proved to be problematic. The conflict arises when susceptibility for political propaganda becomes pitched against the pursuit of artistic authenticity. Eventually Ha Jin takes a different route to reject his earlier position: after serious considerations of the issue of migration/exile and writing and careful contemplations of other influential migrant writers in modern world history, he concludes: “a writer’s first responsibility is to write well” (Ha, 28). Ha Jin’s The Writer as Migrant came out last year at a time when there is a newly kindled Chinese nationalism fueled by the fever of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and China’s recent ascent in its status as a global player.

Understanding China and its various manifestations in an increasingly interdependent world becomes an urgent issue. In fact Chinese intellectuals of diaspora have been debating the meaning of China and Chineseness for some time now. As the identity of China is going through dramatic changes, its function as the originary source of imagination or subject for migrant writing is necessarily destabilized. Despite his own decision to preclude his role of spokesman, Ha’s readers think or expect of him otherwise (Ha, 28-29). The idea that a writer’s social being is secondary to his/her writing-self striving for “a personal voice” might be too foreign to accept.

Writing on the relationship between exiled Chinese writers and China, the famous Chinese American scholar Leo Ou-fan Lee observes that the “obsession with China” has become a “misplaced obsession” because it “privileges China’s problem as uniquely Chinese, which lays absolute claim to the loyalty of Chinese in all parts of the world” (Leo Lee, 232). Lee then proposes a “true peripheral perspective”, which he explains as involving a kind of “internal exile” that enables “the construction of a sanctuary of the soul” (Leo Lee, 234). The idea of periphery as an empowering position has been a central concept in the intellectual debate on the meaning of being Chinese in the new millennium and has been associated with the Chinese Confucian scholar Professor Tu Wei-ming. In fact Lee’s essay appears in Tu’s seminal book The Living Tree: the Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today. The main argument of the book endorses “the periphery as the center” position as a positive way to seek meaningful understanding and
interaction with China from a distance, whether physical or imaginative.

Obviously the peripheral position as promoted in Tu’s book has limitations in its general argument that need to be addressed. For this paper I am interested in examining the idea of periphery from a slightly different but connected angle, i.e. that of the feminist’s reading of the three novels by Shan Sa, Wang and Guo. The Oxford Dictionary of English defines “periphery” as “a marginal or secondary position in, or aspect of, a group, subject, or sphere of activity.”

Marginality has been used as a crucial term in feminist criticism in the recent past. As anyone familiar with recent cultural or literary studies, especially those inspired by post-colonialism, the marginal, or the marginalized, is usually associated with individual subjects, social groups, or cultural experiences that have been constructed and perceived as the Other by the dominant power structure. The marginalized are often those that have been oppressed in society and underrepresented in official history or any other dominant discourse. Ethnic groups and women are the two prominent members of the marginalized for obvious reasons. The increasing presence of women’s writing as a separate category of creative act has only intensified. This intensity testifies to the need and importance of gaining voice for the underrepresented.

Migrant women writers are equally, if not more, marginalized given their potentially alienating situation, with language, economic status and many other factors. One advantage that sets Shan Sa, Wang and Guo apart from the older generation of Chinese writers of the diaspora like Kingston and Tan, or also Jung Chang, is that they at least are better equipped to deal with the problem of language. They are also less interested in the “immigrant culture”. For those familiar with the writings of Kingston and Tan, the general theme of alienation and assimilation (into the mainstream American society) retains prominence in The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1975) and The Joy Luck Club (1989), two canonical texts of the Chinese American cultural experience. Jung Chang is also closer to Kingston and Tan in her construction of the matrilineal family narrative that critiques the mother-daughter relationship – a strategy proven to be central to many women’s writings regardless of ethnicity or class. In general, Shan Sa, Wang and Guo are pursuing a different kind of cultural configuration for the female experience. Instead of searching for affinity or identification with family, community or motherland, the female self is seen as an independent being, a free spirited individual - an autonomous agency capable of self-meaning.

Manchuria in the 1930s remains a very much underrepresented subject in modern Chinese literature as well as scholarship. The reasons are perhaps understandable if not justified. For one, China’s relationship with Japan has remained extremely sensitive and difficult to engage without emotional interference. The recent scenario involving angry reactions from
the Chinese audience toward mainland movie director Lu Chuan’s attempt at a “humanizing” portrayal of Japanese soldiers in his movie City of Life and Death is a good example.\textsuperscript{10}

For Shan Sa, a young woman born in postsocialist China, Manchuria is a distant memory, though an apparent passion judging from the emotional weight and depth her novel The Girl Who Played Go carries. The marginal positioning of the book is doubly emphasized by the peripheral location of Manchuria and the choice of an ethnic Man woman and a Japanese soldier as protagonists. It is further confirmed by Shan Sa’s creative manipulation of the narrative structure of the book: the book alternates between Her female bildung and His soul-searching journey. The narrative is not directly concerned with the diachronic historical events of the time but builds more on “details” that construct the daily lives lived by the two characters. In this regard, Shan Sa is intuitively in tune with many narratives by women writers in the recent past that seeks a “synchronic” view of history.\textsuperscript{11}

It seems obvious that neither of the two narratives Shan Sa constructs might gain entry into any “official” historical account of the era, which will most likely be determined by a wartime ideology that dichotomizes patriotism/nationalism and betrayal. Indeed, a recent book focusing on Chinese women writers writing about the Manchuria experience clearly demonstrates the limitations and destructive results of such an unsophisticated approach.\textsuperscript{12} It is possible, and meaningful as well, to examine alternative discourses obscured or forgotten by the grand political or military discourse. Here Shan Sa reveals her ability to chart out alternative narratives based on a truly personal, albeit marginal, perspective. Her book examines how forces pertinent to that time and space, i.e. China’s continuing struggles toward modernity, manifest through women when war politics seem to render issues such as women’s liberation, marriage, sexuality, and education, irrelevant. The female bildung structure enables her to underscore a discourse of female agency that endures in tremendous difficulties but triumphs in its formation toward independence.

Therefore the narrative of the sixteen-year old Song of the Night addresses problems pertinent to women at that time as having equal force as the war. Much of the text reveals anxieties and difficulties women face toward marriage, sexual freedom, the confines of conventional family, the newly established public spaces for women – that of girls’ schools and dormitories. We see her rejecting a cousin’s marriage proposal. We see her falling in love with two revolutionary students simultaneously and experiencing the secret pleasure of the body. We see her agonizing over other young women around her: her older sister Pearl Moon trapped in an unhappy marriage with no options and finally destroys herself after a self-willed false pregnancy ruins her desire for life. A classmate, Huong, suffers abuses from a stepmother addicted
to opium smoking and a father that treats her merely as “spilled water” – useless because eventually she is sent off to take care other people’s family – and is ready to marry her off at the earliest chance possible. Huong’s last resort to escaping an arranged marriage by becoming a rich banker’s mistress after he agrees to pay off her Dad is full of ironic implications.

As shown in Resisting Manchukuo, before the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the sweep of Chinese modernity enhanced by the May Fourth spirit had an equal hold over Manchuria as many other places closer to the center. Recent studies on modern China have shown how the so-called “woman question” is part and parcel to the understanding of China’s modernity. “Women’s emancipation came to symbolize a critical distinction between the ‘feudal’ Qing empire and China as a ‘modern’ nation-state” (Smith, 28). In the 1910s in Harbin “students actively debated ‘the relationship between the liberation of women and the nation’, and ‘the relationship between women’s education and society’ (Smith, 31)”]. This is very much in tune with the larger May Fourth spirit promoted by social activists of the time. They condemned Confucian ideas of the “good wife, wise mother” for “enchaining women through the requirements of chastity” (Smith, 30).

The new woman of the May Fourth era was molded from a newly imported icon Nora, Henrik Ibsen’s heroine of A Doll’s House, who made a declaration the first of its kind as a woman: “I have a more sacred duty, my duty to myself.” The woman question becomes more complicated when Manchukuo was established on the premise of Japan’s “civilizing mission”. By the 1930s, “women’s personal conduct and relationships with their families and the stated were subjected to intense scrutiny as cultural functionaries. Good wives, wise mothers were idealized” (Smith, 31). Like Song of the Night and Huong, more young women were able to have a decent education and yet ironically the education available to them was mostly home economics based – the underlining ideology was to encourage women to “go back to the kitchen”. In fact, westernized, liberated women were portrayed mostly negatively by various media of the time.

The forces that constantly undermine Song of the Night’s free spirit are thus symptomatic of a larger reality for women. If we sample representative writings about this time by women writers such as Ding Ling, Ling Shuhua, Xiao Hong, or Manchuria based Mei Niang and others, it is obvious that women’s effort to free themselves from convention defined marriage, familial structure and social roles is constantly frustrated, if not destroyed, by the dominant patriarchal force. Indeed, many of the heroines in these writers’ stories are portrayed as victims or quiet receivers of their oppression.

Distancing herself from this typical view, Shan Sa devices for her heroine a talent that
is not usually endowed to women – Song of the Night is a glorious Go player, able to take on, if not completely destroy, any male opponent. Shan Sa also imagines a public space, The Square of a Thousand Winds, where Song of the Night can enjoy a rare freedom granted to women of the time to simply be herself and away from the constrains of the family or school – neither place is seen as liberating. In recent efforts by women writers to re-enter history, many have seen the separation between the public and the private spheres for women as problematic, as an ideology that keeps women content with their domestication and obedience. Shan Sa’s Square is public but unique in the sense that it is not defined by any important events. In fact, nothing ever happens here except the game Go. It is a space for quiet reflection and observation. Age, gender, class, and, as the book insists, even national identity, all become secondary or even irrelevant. It is here Song of the Night defeats hundreds of men. But more importantly it is here that we witness her own journey into a strong independent being. We hear her thoughts on her first kiss and love-making; her experiences through pregnancy and abortion, betrayal and trauma; her escape from family, falling into enemy’s hands, and most crucially, her real love with a stranger, a Japanese soldier who is also a rare equal at the game of Go.

The Square becomes a sort of a “sanctuary of the soul”, for Song of the Night and also for the Japanese soldier who finds peace, solace and eventually love at the Square. His inner journey is equally traumatic. We see him gradually changing from a good soldier cast with the samurai spirit to a questioning individual, to a dissipated youth, and finally a disillusioned being. We see the Square is the only place that allows him to be true to himself. The conventional notions of nation, family, patriotism, race, gender, language all become powerless at the Square. The simple moves of the black and white stones seem to transcend conflicts constructed by human weakness and false consciousness. Indeed, only when the force that crosses all these boundaries, real or imagined, becomes available that the magic of real love for the two characters becomes possible, even when the only feasible ending is death itself.

Song of the Night demonstrates possibility for female agency to attain self-meaning through an independent spirit. It is also necessary for Chinese women at a time in history when other seemingly more “urgent” events have threatened to erase a newly emergent self – that which is called “woman”. Despite this love story might remain a wishful “dream” as Shan Sa readily admits, what is plausible is her insistence on rejecting to portray either of the characters as simple types, as heroes, villains or victims. She enables a power that transcends and connects two human beings seemingly lost in the political game of war, in history’s relentless progression toward modernity and the ideological advancement of imperialism and its resistance.13

The commercial success of Wild Swans has enabled the publishing of numerous
memoirs by expat Chinese on their experiences of the Cultural Revolution. Obviously Chinese writers located away from mainland China and writing in a foreign language enjoy a freedom that their mainland counterparts lack. This applies especially to sensitive topics such as the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese Communist Party’s final verdict to indict the Gang of Four as entirely responsible for this disaster makes more nuanced writing extremely difficult if not impossible. Wang’s semi-autobiography *The Lily Theater* stands out in several regards: a marginalized thirteen-year old girl’s perspective; a distinct humorous tone; an effort to re-create a cultural experience rather than to chronicle a political disaster from the victim’s viewpoint.

In several ways this book is similar to *The Girl Who Played Go*: the use of first-person narrative form; the choice of locating its narrative consciousness on a very marginal or seemingly unreliable perspective; its conception of a spiritual sanctuary for the female self to freely and truthfully integrate and the theme of diminishing boundaries of different kinds. Memoirs of the Cultural Revolution will probably be judged against *Wild Swans*, the standard setter of this corpus. The slightly heavy-handed and serious tone of that book is very much in accordance of the purpose of writing the book: that certain wrongs must be made public and obvious so that they can be made right.

*The Lily Theater*, especially the first half, has a fresh liveliness and a mischievous sense of humor – it is full of hilarious language and ridiculous details that evoke laughter. Part of the book’s initial success lies in Wang’s ability to bring originality into her language. Reading the English translation it is easy to see how she does this – by inserting all kinds of onomatopoeic words in the text, words common to the ordinary Chinese speech habit. Also there are many word for word translations of politically correctly and semi-required set phrases that reflect the political ideology of the time. One example is the way people address each other and their superiors or when they address Chairman Mao. Set phrases are often used before the surname or to modify the person, so things like “Mao the Savior Star”, “The Father, Mother, Lover, and Mistress All-Rolled into-One”, “Revolutionary Comrade Yang”, or “Merciful Head of the Party Committee” appear frequently on the page. As a result these very awkward, clumsy and ultimately meaningless words constantly stagger the normal speed of reading, creating a distancing and comic effect.

The first half of the book focuses on the young girl Lian’s experience in a reeducation camp, places in the countryside where intellectuals are sent to reform their liberal bourgeois thinking and habits through manual labor. From a child’s naïve and non-political point of view this certainly is like an extended field trip – that is exactly how Wang proceeds to tell the story. Here the advantage of a child’s marginal position becomes obvious. In fact the camp experience
turns out to be entirely liberating and educational, in both physical and metaphysical sense. Living amongst the brightest intellectuals of the time – experts on history, psychology, foreign language – Lian receives a real elitist education in an unconventional way: it is done behind the backs of Party officials and without the “benefits” of official textbooks.

History becomes a major subject and through learning this subject Lian begins her inner journey toward becoming an independent thinker. Like Song of the Night, she finds a “sanctuary of the soul” – a pond surrounded by nature, full of lilies and little animals that she names Lily Theater. Here she finds solace and courage by testing out her own ideas of Chinese history – announcing contradictory views on Chinese civilization and Maoist ideology. Lian’s bildung education is politically incorrect and yet truthful, her experience of the Cultural Revolution is tragic and yet not sad or sentimental. Lian becomes so empowered and enlightened that she is emboldened to take on the role of educator herself to “change” Kim, a girl a couple years older but from an uneducated poor family background. Her eventual failure shows how deeply destructive the false class-consciousness is for the young and venerable. If not for the Lily Theater, Lian would have easily succumbed to the temptation of total cynicism or pessimism.

At a time when politics seem to be dominating every aspect of any individual’s life, this kind of “critical consciousness and resistance” is not only discouraged but extremely dangerous since having dissent views from the official ideology is a political gesture easily taken as reactionary and therefore life threatening. It is precisely to purge this kind of independent and oppositional thinking that Lian’s parents and the teachers at the camp are where they are. After several attempts at coming to terms with a convincing version of China’s history, Lian realizes how difficult it is to do what her teacher Qin tells her to do: “to look at history as an honest human being”(Wang, 50). Blindly preponderant and glorious (the general textbook approach at the time) or irresponsibly derisive (the attitude of those disfavored) are equally dishonest efforts.

One wonders if the extended discussion on the construction and reading of history in the book cannot be read as betraying Wang’s subconscious intention for writing this book. The Cultural Revolution is one of the tumultuous events in China’s modern history, and it would not be exaggerating to say that the devastating madness of that time has traumatized an entire generation of people, if not more. However, as confirmed by a recent study, writers take the “victimization approach” as the norm when they address their experiences of this time.19 To “humanize” the experiences of individuals is an important step toward understanding history “as an honest human being”. Wang deserves to be credited for making more complex readings of historical experiences from a personal point of view. Memory does not serve nostalgic
sentimentality or moral vindictiveness, but is recuperated from history as a new paradigm for searching for truthful understanding. In this regard Wang and Shan Sa share a similar vision of re-engage with history. It originates from a marginalized but powerful position that has the potential to engender the formation of an integrated and independent subject, making possible the triumph over victim psychology and political vindictiveness.

Unlike The Girl Who Played Go and The Lily Theater, Guo’s A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers is very postmodern – a heterogeneous text of mixed styles and genres that encompass dictionary entries written in “bad” and ungrammatical English which improves as the story proceeds, journal style organizations, letters, travel literature and romance. The simple theme of a young woman having a romantic relationship with a (foreign) man in London enables reviewers in the west to label it as a “chick lit” piece despite Guo’s protest.16 Also unlike the other two books, this novel is set in the background of China turning into a capitalist-socialist society. Instead of war and political repression, a dizzying frenzy of energy encapsulates the nation in its rush toward monetary success. China as a nation is going through dramatic changes, a near complete re-constructing of its identity as a modern nation-state. In postsocialist China there is a certain level of individual freedom that is unthinkable in Manchuria or the Cultural Revolution times, for example traveling abroad not for economic reasons. The influence of western feminist ideas is more prominent and enables an openness toward issues such as sexuality that have been near taboo in Chinese tradition. Sexual relations between cosmopolitan Chinese women and foreign men have been publicized in a notorious manner by the extremely popular novel Shanghai Baby (2001), which has been banned by mainland Chinese censorship. Superficially A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers invites a similar reading as a kind of secret-giving “private novel”.17 In fact, it is quite the contrary.

Guo skillfully creates a postmodern female bildung that has a surprising spiritual and emotional complexity. The novel’s heroine Z (so referred to because nobody seems able to pronounce her name correctly) leaves her small town home and travels to London and then to other European cities equipped with only a pocket-size Concise Chinese-English Dictionary and some English pounds that her parents earned from making shoes for exports. For the ordinary Chinese at the turn of the new millennium the “west” has become a familiar object, still extremely attractive but no longer mysterious or unattainable. “Going abroad” no longer designates a decision to leave one’s home or the worries of assimilation but more a temporary state of mind: when worse comes for worst, there is still a “home” to return to, or is there? This is the state from which Z starts her journey to fulfill her parents’ commend to master the English
language.

Z’s change is expected but the result is not as cheerful as one encounters from the usual “chick lit” sentiment. A chance encounter originates from Z’s linguistic incompetence turns into a profound love affair; another casual encounter leaves her pregnant and filled with despair and pain from the subsequent abortion. As her English improves to embrace words such as atheist, bourgeois, and discord, a strong and inquisitive Z comes into being. Linguistic and cultural differences between Z and her London lover, a 42-year old bisexual vegetarian who once was an artist, have not prevented them to communicate in a genuine manner. The questioning Z reflects on the nature of things in a typically postmodern manner but nonetheless full of philosophical insights. She realizes the “west” she had learned in China is not the west she is experiencing. For him the pursuit of art is more important than a middle-class life style that she wants of him.

Eventually they separate, but the incompatibility between them has nothing to do with ethnicity or language. It comes down to different beliefs: Z’s inexperienced outlook of capitalist-style success and his distrust of the material world. Z eventually realizes that her love of him has choked the real life out of him. She decides to go back to China – not her hometown but Beijing where she seeks a new destiny as a writer although “I feel out of place” (Guo, 281). Z gains a critical consciousness and begins to resist the temptation of wealth that she sees all around her. Might it be that his anti-materialist stance at a “post” capitalist time as he sees it has inspired her to look at her motherland with a different lens? The novel ends with him leaving London and settling in the countryside – a home that he finally finds where he will be able to pursue his artist dream. We have a feeling that Z loves him even more and now understands him: perhaps she will also find a real “home” of her own where she can find a true voice as a writer. Here the paradigm that Guo operates from differs in a profound way from the so called “chick lit”. The urban “play girl” obsession with sexual adventure and consumption gives way to a quest for meaning of home, belonging and identity in a postmodern philosophical sense.

As shown in works by Shan Sa, Wang and Guo, “China” as a signifier for migrant writers begins to diverge from its earlier meaning, whether as a mythical source for imagination, a synonymy of suffering and disease, or as a form of political repression, to a much more destabilized entity. Through seemingly lesser historical narratives that are intensely humane and personal, this engagement with China turns a “moral obsession” into a depoliticized, but not dis-political, critical stance that allows a less emotionally invested and more constructive interpretation. This is accomplished from a decidedly marginal position and with an emphasis not on identifying with an imagined community or matriarchal familial continuation, but through the individual effort to achieve agency through critical appraisal of and engagement with reality.18
Endnotes:

1 Ha Jin writes at the beginning of his recent non-fiction book The Writer as Migrant on his personal experiences as a Chinese writer in diaspora: “Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate an exile from an immigrant … my choice of the word ‘migrant’ is meant to be as inclusive as possible – it encompasses all kinds of people who move, or are forced to move, from one country to another, such as exile, emigrants, immigrants, and refugees.” See Ha “Preface”, ix. In this paper I will follow the same approach to address this general experience of transnational movement.


3 The earlier generation of migrant writers from post-Mao China who were in a sense real political exiles included Bei Dao and Yang Lian. Later writers who write in adopted languages include the 2001 Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian (France based), Ha Jin (US based) who has become the leading figure representing Chinese cultural legacy in the so called “translingual literature”, and Dai Sijie (France based) whose fame and popularity is perhaps enhanced by his movie making effort. In more recent times, American-based Qiu Xiaolong and UK-based Diane Wei Liang have produced series of crime fiction whose subject matter is mainland China. The most well-known writer of Chinese diaspora is perhaps UK based Jung Chang whose Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China came out in 1991 and proves a huge commercial success all over the world. Anchee Min’s name usually appears right after Chang in articles about Chinese migrant writers.

4 Shan Sa was the recipient of The Prix Goncourt des Lycéens of 2001.

5 The book was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 2008.


7 Numerous academic books have appeared in the recent past that focuses on Chinese American literature. For a recent study on Kingston and Tan, see Helena Grice “‘The beginning is hers’: The political and Literary Legacies of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan” in A. Robert Lee, 33-55.

8 A collection of essays that address Tu’s idea of “cultural China” as well as the general discourse of Chineseness is gathered in Rey Chow’s Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field.


11 For women’s attempt at writing alternative historical accounts, see Warhol and Herndl, “History” in Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism, 855 – 859.

12 I am referring to Resisting Manchukuo: Chinese Women Writers and the Japanese Occupation.


14 For a similar argument see Paul Clark, The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History.

15 In a recent oral history book written by two Chinese female intellectuals on their experiences curing the Cultural Revolution, the editors write: “The book is unusual in its departure from the frequent
A victimization approach to the Cultural Revolution … the book makes a special contribution.” See “Foreword”, *Growing Up in The People’s Republic: Conversations between Two Daughters of China’s Revolution, III.*

16 For more details on this situation refer to Wenche Ommundsen, “From China with Love: Chick Lit and The New Crossover Fiction” in A Robert Lee, 327-345.


18 Although the moral obsession with China has changed in nature, there is still a sense that it is necessary to “explain” certain politically and culturally specific concepts to the “uninformed” foreign reader. For one example see Tao Yue’s interview with Lulu Wang.

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