Human/Inhuman/Post-human. Female Bodies in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature: Literary Descriptions of Psychological and Social Unease

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The aim of this paper is to identify the ways in which modern and contemporary Chinese literature has depicted the female body, and how this depiction has been used as a tool not only of artistic expression but of sense-making as well. I will especially focus on disruptive and uneasy narratives of the female body provided by Chinese writers.

I will develop my analysis of a range of literary texts within a twofold conceptual frame. On the one hand I will stress the importance of close reading and textual analysis in order to detect the linguistic representation of the female body in terms of descriptive and evocative images. On the other hand, I will try to explore the cognitive function played by literary description, in expressing “the mediation of bodily experience” as a tool to know the world and the human self. Recently, new discoveries in neurosciences have revealed “the existence of structures [in the human brain] that get activated both when undergoing certain mental states and when representing them in others”. Certain literary representations of physical and mental states, therefore, could enable readers to improve their understanding of the human being: “through fiction human cognitive procedures are represented so that readers expand their understanding of the human being through examples rather than theories”.

I will argue that, in some cases, the representation of “inhuman” bodily states is a narrative function meant to enact sharing and understanding. Indeed, experiments measuring empathetic reactions found that “areas underlying the experience of physical pain in its affective aspect [...] were also active when participants received a
signal indicating that a painful stimulus is applied to another person”. This proves that the individual and collective body are connected through a common network of relations. Acclaimed philosophical theories such as those of Foucault and Agamben provide scholars with a variety of approaches, suggesting the existence of a deep connection between body and society, body and politics. However, recently it is the phenomenology of perceptions theorised by Merleau-Ponty that has been rediscovered by the cognitive sciences: his idea of the living body helps us see the body in literature as a powerful means to experience the world. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “redécouverte du corps propre”, or “rediscovery of one’s own body”.5

As far as the research on modern Chinese literature is concerned, one should mention Angela Zito and Tani Barlow,6 Li Rong,7 and recently Carlos Rojas,8 who analyzes the use of the body, especially sick bodies and disease, as a discourse about weakness but also potential transformation, and notes the tendency to signal the inherent contradiction between internal alterity and external community: Nations, families, and even corporeal bodies are fundamentally heterogeneous collectives, and their imagined coherence is predicated on a perpetual tension with sites of internal alterity.9

Apparently, according to many literary texts, the site of this contradiction is often the female body.

The bio-political perspective is prominent in studies such as the ones made by Belinda Kong,10 Yinde Zhang,11 and the abovementioned work by Rojas. As a matter of fact, both in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, writers have shown themselves to be very keen on a body-centred representation of reality. From the “left-wing” writers and the “new sensation school” / 新感觉派 / xin ganjue pai of the 1930s12 to Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911-1942), women’s condition and, more generally, the representation of a socially tormented China have been represented via the body. More recently, it suffices to recall Yu Hua 余华 (b. 1960), Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955), Yan Lianke 阎连科 (b. 1958), and Bi Feiyu 毕飞宇 (b. 1964)’s recent novels and their emphasis on bodily perceptions, which are often exaggerated or even distorted in order to convey deeper meanings, related to the historical and social tensions they reveal. Likewise, the dystopian vision of reality, which has been brilliantly explored by Jeffrey Kinkley in his latest book,13 often refers to the embodied experience represented in the “new historical novels” / 新历史小说 / xin lishi xiaoshuo, in which the body has a disruptive power.

The writers of the “new” or “latest generation” / 晚生代 / wanshengdai also present a body-centred approach: I am referring not only to Chen Ran 陈染 (b. 1962), Lin Bai 林白 (b. 1958) and other female writers who apply a bodily view of the world and of writing itself, but also to writers like Han Dong 韩东 (b. 1961) and Zhu Wen 朱文 (b. 1967), who offer a representation of individually and physically perceived reality.14

Literature seems to be the best site for expressing the body: “The literary, like the somatic and through its relation to the somatic, opens the path to the unbinding of all forms of fixity – those of individual identity as well as the stereotypes and hierarchies that accompany them”.15 Besides, as Hillmann and Maude observe, “Literary thinkers have always been particularly interested in concrete, non-conceptual aspects of knowing and feeling”.16

In my necessarily limited range of collected examples, I have identified some fundamental categories in the representation of women’s body as a carrier of meanings...
and as a constant object of manipulation, tracing a general path that leads the female body from the human to inhuman state.

These categories are: the allegorised body; the animal body; the maternal body; the sexual body; the sick and disabled body; the raped and mutilated body and the metaphorical body.

As regards the corpus of texts scrutinised, I have been working on a range of fictional texts, mostly drawn from the May Fourth period, but also the literature produced in mainland China and Hong Kong over the last twenty years. Interestingly enough, most of the examples are drawn either from modern literature of the 1920s and 1930s or from contemporary Chinese literature from the turn of the 20th century. The reason for this apparently uneven selection is that Chinese fiction of the “seventeen-years period” (1949-66) seldom focuses on purely physical descriptions; moreover, the female body is never exposed in such a merciless and revealing way, highlighting its negative or uncanny meaning. In the 1980s, although we find many instances of “sensorial narratives” (for instance in Wang Anyi 王安忆 (b. 1954) and Han Shaogong 韩少功 (b. 1953) etc.), they are not body-centred; only with the “material turn” in Chinese literature, which occurred during the last decade of the twentieth-century, did a new narrative of the body develop which is connected with the growing individualism and the commodification of the human being in Chinese society at the turn of the century.¹⁷

The allegorised body

If we reconsider the whole history of modern Chinese literature, it is possible to trace the development of the awareness, negation, negotiation or invention of women’s identity through a physical rather than psychological representation. Starting from the early 20th century, the female body has been a vehicle of both “modernity a” and “backwardness”; let’s compare for instance these two kinds of texts:

She was born into a peasant family […]. *She was no more than a simple animal.* […] The day after, before dawn, she slipped out quietly, taking advantage of the fact that her husband hadn’t yet woken up. The west wind was blowing, cutting her face like a knife, but she felt extremely satisfied because the pain was lighter than her husband’s palm. (emphasis mine)¹⁸

Lying on my bed is a *plaster mannequin* like the one displayed in the window of a women’s merchandise store, the red flowers pattern on her chest […] exuded a warm scent. Is this an organism or a non-organism? At night the plastic mannequin is also naked… Is this an organism or a non-organism? It is not a plaster mannequin, nor is it a marble statue or a snowman; it is some flowing lines transplanted from a painting and some cream forming the picture of a humane figure under my sheets. (emphasis mine)²⁰

Using slender ankles as the foundation, one leg standing erect and the other bent, is a platinum statue of a female nude. She stands there, an inorganic statue with no shame, no moral concepts or human desires. She is so metallic and sleek that his
gaze swiftly glides over the lines of the body. This feelingless, emotionless statue stands there waiting for his order.22

The first text is drawn from Ye Shengtao 叶圣陶 (1894-1988)’s denounce short story “This is a Human Being too”, an early instance of critical realism from the “fiction of problems” / 问题小说 / wen ti xiaoshuo genre, while the other three were written by the New Sensation’s writer Mu Shiying 穆时英 (1912-1940), who describes the new style of Chinese life in a “semi-modern, semi-colonised” Shanghai. The female body conveys almost opposite yet very similar meanings in these two texts. In both cases we observe a strategy of externalization and defamiliarisation of the body: through the unfortunate peasant-girl in Ye Shengtao’s story embodies a degree-zero humanity, while the body of the “modern girl”25 which haunts Mu Shiying’s male characters is but a representation of the individual’s reification in modern society.

In the former example the female body is “socialised” or, rather, “ideologised” as a symbol of the oppression exerted by traditional rural culture on the individual, while in the latter, Shih speaks of “eroticization and objectification of the female body”.26 However, in both cases the representation ends up with a similar deformation or dehumanisation of the female body: the above descriptions, no matter what approach to Chinese society they reflect, are both marked by a shade of glumness, as though women’s body bore all the heavy burden of past social inequity as well as the anxiety for an unknown future or an uncanny present. Nevertheless, while for Ye Shengtao and the other writers of the critical realism current,27 the female body conveys a clear social meaning, in the New Sensation School it is rather connected with a sense of “material possession among an array of objects [...] being at the forefront of technological modernity”.28 Indeed, the female body in both cases is allegorised and dehumanised, becoming only a sign.

From this first category we can deduce that in different works within May Fourth literature the female body is a substitute for the individual and the ways in which it is exploited or feared in both traditional and modern China. It does neither represent women’s subjectivity nor does it explore their inner reality, it only serves the purpose of expressing the anxieties of male writers of the time.

Although they belong to two very different literary schools, for both the above-mentioned writers the female body must be de-humanised in order to depict an unstable and troubled society. The scandalous transformation of the woman subject from human to inhuman is only a tool for voicing a critical view of the present,29 and the premise for the utopian desire for a shift backward (or forward in the socially engaged writers’ case) from an inhuman to a human condition. In her seminal book,
Ping Zhu also argues that “the feminine is more of a space of negotiation than a natural essence associated with the female body”.  

**The animal body**

18 Within the category of the animal body I place a variety of uses and depictions of the female body in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. The use of the metamorphic body, transformed into an animal or inanimate thing, was adopted and further developed by modern writers, often with opposite strategies and aims. In this sense, the inhuman reading of the female body is a long-standing practice in male-centred cultures; in the New Sensation School, for instance, the writers’ main attitude is overtly based on the traditional view of woman as a dangerous sexual animal, notoriously represented by the rhetoric of the “fox-spirit” / 狐狸精 / hulijing. In the case of Mu Shiying’s short story [“The Man Who Was Treated as a Plaything”] / 被当作消遣品的男人 (1933), he adopts an animal-body interpretation in order to express the feeling of danger and anxiety conveyed by the modern girl and her sexual attraction:

She is a dangerous animal! She has a snake’s body, a cat’s head, a mixture of softness and danger.

她是危险的动物哪！她有着一个蛇的身子，猫的脑袋，温柔和无限的混合物。

19 The negotiation between male and female desire in modern Shanghai is represented as a hunting trip, but the narrator of the story is not sure who plays the role of the hunter and who that of the prey:

She is a dangerous animal, but I was not a good hunter. Had I captured her now, or was I being captured by her?

她是危险的动物，而我却不是好猎手。现在算是捉到了吗？还是我被抓住了呢？

[...]不能做她的狩猎物的。

20 Animals are constantly associated with women by the female writer Xiao Hong 萧红 as well, who nevertheless does not use this association as an allegory or metaphor, but takes it literally as a real image of the woman/human condition. In Xiao Hong’s works, the female body acquires a cognitive function. Indeed, it is through her own body and that of her characters that she experiences the world and brings readers in contact with their suffering.

21 The gradual transformation of the female body from human into inhuman is achieved by modern writers by means of either a metaphoric or a metonymic strategy. The latter is prevalent in Xiao Hong. The definition of “humanimal” created by Yinde Zhang perfectly suits Xiao Hong’s representational strategy. As others have already noted, in *The Field of Life and Death* / 生死场 (1935), women and animals are associated as they share a common fate and life condition: “in their experience of the body, female animals and women have more in common than men and women do”. However, we can reach a further level: in Xiao Hong’s works, women are compared to animals in a very odd way, for she uses the literary technique of “defamiliarisation” (ostranenie) defined by Shklovsky, but her aim – unlike in the case of the Russian formalist – is not an aesthetic one, namely to reveal the naked literary form, but a cognitive one, insofar as she wishes to make her readers perceive women’s reality in a stronger way. Below are some examples from Xiao Hong’s novel:

Golden Bough is like a sick little chick

金枝好像患者传染病的小鸡一般 (57)
Fifth Sister is like “a small lively pigeon”

Old Mother Pockface “with her hair covering her face, is a female bear! The female bear enters her cave carrying some herbs”

While Old Mother Wang recounts the death of her little daughter, “she is often described as an ‘owl’ by the children surrounding her”

The unexpected comparisons refer to the female body as a strange, almost disgusting creature. I argue that this is not a simple metaphorical transposition, as in the New Sensationists’ adoption of animal metaphors. We can assume that this is a deliberate, cognitive expression of the unbearable dehumanisation of women (and peasants in general) in 1930s rural China: by making the familiar unfamiliar, Xiao Hong seeks to elicit a reaction from her readers.

The connection between women and animals and the metaphor of the hunting trip has been recently used also by a science-fiction writer, who pushes this image into the sphere of the posthuman. In a novelette released on-line and only recently published, Han Song imagines a theme-park for male hunters, a playfield where rich and bored middle-class men can freely hunt beautiful women, artificially created and kept in a sort of original wilderness for this sole purpose. In this dystopian universe where men can arbitrarily dispose of women’s bodies, the author imagines that these prey-women

have got neither a position, nor any legal protection in the human society, they are simply standard-type organisms, batch-produced by genetic-engineering factories. No, of course they are not robots, they are all genuine goods at a fair price, made of blood and flesh [...]. To draw an analogy, they are like eels raised in a pond with contraceptives.

The maternal body

As many scholars point out, the maternal body is one of the most recurrent sites of estrangement and manipulation in literature and sociology. “Of all the human bodily processes, reproduction is among the most politicized”\(^{40}\), therefore “pregnant women are especially vulnerable to coercion and harm. [...] The reproductive body – almost always framed as a woman’s body – is also a socially marginalized body”.\(^{41}\)

Many of the literary descriptions and representations of the female body in twentieth and twenty-first century Chinese literature are based on the perception of maternal bodies and motherhood. It is common knowledge that sociocultural control over the body has always involved women more than men – as in the Chinese practice of foot-binding – issues such as birth control and surrogated motherhood are common subject in the works of both early modern and contemporary Chinese writers, who charge the maternal body with a variety of meanings.

Chinese fiction provides a range of touching and tragic descriptions of motherhood. Interestingly, this depiction is a gendered one, indeed, as it is explained by Clare Hanson: “For female writers, the focus is principally on the subjective experience of maternal embodiment and the difficulty of negotiating the somatic, psychological and...
social changes associated with pregnancy and birth”, while “[m]ale writers, by contrast, regard motherhood from a social point of view, with pregnancy seen as a disruptive event that may threaten the stability of family ties”44 and – I add here – the stability of social order, as in Ma Jian (b. 1953)’s novel The Dark Road / 阴之道 (2012) and Mo Yan’s Frogs / 蛙 (2009).

If we go back to the abovementioned short story by Ye Shengtao, we find that the girl’s young body is forced to give birth to a baby: despite being a traditional custom in old China (and in many other rural cultures), according to modern sensibilities forced or surrogate motherhood is an absurd form of physical and psychological abuse. In Rou Shi’s 柔石 (1902-1931) famous “[A Mother Slave]” / 奴隶的母亲 (1930), the description and the use of the maternal body are completely devoid of any personal identity. In this story, a poor leather-seller “lends” his wife to a rich childless couple who desires to finally have a male heir. Not only does the surrogated mother not have a name (it is never mentioned in the story and when asked by her “borrowing” husband she doesn’t even answer), but the objectification of her body takes the form of a literal synecdoche, a specific case of metonymy in which the part stands for the whole. Throughout the short story the woman’s belly replaces the female protagonist as a subject/object. The husband tells her: “What’s the point of letting you suffer along with me? We’d better think of a way of exploiting your body” / 还是从你底身上设法罢你跟着我挨饿，有什么办法呢？.43 Later, the matchmaker tries to persuade her to accept the deal, by saying: “It suffices that your belly fights to excel, in order to give birth to one or two [children], and everything will be okay” / 只要你肚子争气些，到那边，也养下一二个来，万事都好了.44

The woman’s belly is even compared by the jealous wife of the scholar to that of a female dog: “Perhaps she is like a female dog, her belly filled with puppies” / 恐怕竟和街头的母狗一样，肚皮里有着一肚子的小狗.45 The alienation of the belly (merely used as a means of production) from the woman’s body-mind as a whole is briefly exemplified in this sentence: “The belly kept on growing day by day, as big as a basin” / 肚子一天天地膨胀的如斗那么大.46

We can apply to both cases Mingbao Yue’s analysis of Ye Shengtao’s story: “it exemplifies how the objective mode attitude can become untenable as a revolutionary mode of writing when the narrative focuses on the female body”.47

The female writers adopt a different point of view when depicting motherhood. In Xiao Hong’s case motherhood is neither a common way for expressing women’s potential and the embodiment of a natural function, nor the object of men’s exploitation; on the contrary, the pregnant body is a site of alienation for the woman herself. The pregnant body in her fiction is depicted as unnatural and unfamiliar to the woman herself, in contrast to the deterministic biologic view of the female body as naturally built for reproduction. I will refer here to two of Xiao Hong’s characters: Jinzhi 金枝 (lit. “Golden Bough”) from The Field of Life and Death and Qin 芹 from [“The Abandoned Child”] / 弃儿 (1936). The description of Golden Bough’s pregnancy is laconic: “Golden Bough feels a deep pain, she feels her belly has become a fearful monster, there is something hard inside of her” / 金枝过于痛苦了，觉得肚子变成个可怕的怪物，觉得里面有一块硬的地方.48

In her autobiographical short story [“The Abandoned Child”], Xiao Hong provides us with a rather detailed record of uncomfortable and weird sensations connected with
motherhood: the protagonist is first introduced as “a woman with a mantou-shaped belly” / 一个肚子凸的馒头般的女人. But later in the story the narrator observes that “her belly does not resemble a mantou; it’s a small basin tied onto her belly” / 她的肚子不像馒头，简直是小盆被扣在她肚皮上. In the shabby hotel room where the pregnant woman is secluded, she only feels a gloomy cold on her back. When she enters the single room walking on the dust that covers the floorboard, her legs are just two fake legs made out of wood, or else they are someone else’s legs, forcibly tied to her body, numb, awkward.

Eventually, Qin’s belly becomes bigger and bigger! From a small basin it has become a big basin; from an inanimate thing, an animate one. She can’t sleep on her bed, the mosquitoes are having fun crawling on her legs and that thing is having fun crawling in her belly: she has simply become a circus, a place where everyone can go and play.

Other images enhance the character’s physical estrangement and unease: such as “Qin’s belly is aching badly, on the käng she rolls into a clay figurine” / 芹肚子疼得更厉害了，往土炕上滚成个泥人了, and “her breast grows stiff, as if something had been stuffed inside them” / 奶子胀得硬，里面像盛了什么似的.

One of the most graphic descriptions of unwanted motherhood is the one provided by Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (1920-1995) in her autobiographical novel [Little Reunion] / 小团圆 (2009), where she recounts the tragic episode of the abortion which her narrative alter ego Lili undergoes in the US:

She could feel the string of the suppository hanging down and brushing against her thigh like the fuse of a bomb. After several hours nothing had happened. […] That night, under the bathroom light, she saw a male fetus in the toilet bowl. In her terrified eyes it was at least ten inches long, leaning upright against the white porcelain, partly submerged in the water. The thin smear of bloody liquid on its skin was the light orange color of a newly planed wood. Fresh blood accumulated in its hollows and outlined its form distinctly. A pair of disproportionately large eyes protruded and its arms looked like the retracted wings of the wooden bird that used to perch above the door in Shanghai long ago.

In that moment of horror, Julie flushed the toilet. At first she worried the fetus would not flush away, but it soon disappeared into the billowing vortex.

In modern Chinese literature, many authors, such as Rou Shi, Xiao Hong and her first husband Xiao Jun 萧军 (1907-1988), question the very meaning and aim of motherhood, insisting on cruel depictions of babies rejected or killed. The violence exerted on the maternal body (or on the child, as its extension) is a metonymy for the violence embedded in war and life in general; but, again, the description is a gendered one. Xiao
Jun and Xiao Hong’s novels both represent the act of killing a new-born baby, but the perspective and the bodily sensations reported are strikingly different. In the former case it is a Japanese soldier who kills the infant, by snatching him away from his mother’s bosom, while in the latter, it is the very father of the girl-baby, a Chinese peasant, who pitilessly kills her by dropping her fall into a basin of scalding water. Clearly enough, for Xiao Jun – in his nationalistic drive – the violent death of the baby is but an act of war, an extreme form of political contempt for China, whereas Xiao Hong rather shifts our attention to the social and human meaning of suppressing a girl’s life in China’s backward countryside, denying at the same time the value of such a neglected motherhood.

Women writers of the 1980s, such as Zhang Xinxin 张欣欣 (b. 1957), Wang Anyi and Zhang Jie 张杰 (b. 1937) explore new ways of expressing their female identity by means of more physical, down-to-earth, material elements. But owing to their idealistic approach to literature – typical of the “culture fever” era – they mainly subjectivised and “psychologised” the physical perceptions, as in the following scene of a medical abortion:

“...Oh, it’s a primipara...”. While the doctor mumbles to himself, preparing the surgical instruments, I suddenly feel scared and wish to escape, but it’s too late... The soft and nauseating smell of the chemical disinfectant that permeates the room, the dazzling white light blinding my eyes through the window, the white pillow case beside my head, the white sheet under my body, everything is so ice-cold... the noise of the pedal aspirator pierces my ears then stops. Then it starts again... it’s like I am going to be suctioned out!

Although the use of the first person in recounting the uneasy sensations of the protagonist enables a more direct representation of the female subjectivity, the descriptions are still quite literary.

On the contrary, in his latest novel Frogs, Mo Yan, adopts a mostly corporeal and sensorial style to describe forced abortions and abused female bodies in the Popular Republic of China. The community of Gaomi – the usual setting of Mo Yan’s fiction – is upset by the frequent inspections of officials against illegally pregnant women. In his case, however, the narrative focus is not on the female body per se: what really matters for Mo Yan is the vivid representation of social tensions due to the clash between the state’s demographic control plan and the traditional Chinese vision of motherhood and reproduction.

In contemporary Chinese literature, it is, surprisingly, another male writer that manages to grasp the maternal body’s “alienness” and its cognitive function. In his novel The Dark Road, Ma Jian explores the theme of a ruthless China chasing for pregnant women as the most brutal form of social control on individuals. Rather differently from Mo Yan’s frantic action scenes, Ma Jian’s narration seems to delve deeper into the physiological and subjective sphere of the female body.

I will just quote one of the last scenes from the novel, which is actually littered throughout with detailed representations of women’s bodily perceptions:
With the four fingers of her hand she pushes through the cervix, pierces the amniotic sac, gropes around and finds a foot. As she pushes again with all her strength, her contorted face turns scarlet and milk spurts from her nipples. [...] The lament fills every part of her body then bursts in the air. A rancid, yeasty smell starts to escape from her. After another intense push, blood drips out from her vagina onto the damp deck, forming blossom-like stains, then gushes out with greater force. [...] she cranes her neck down between her legs and sees it lying in a pool of blood, its body as green and shiny as an apple. [...]. “Why is he so green?” Meili says. “He looks like one of those green aliens in the computer games.”

Such a disturbing and alienating record of physical perceptions – which reminds us of Dai Wei, the protagonist of Ma Jian’s previous novel, Beijing Coma, who narrates the “travel” inside his own body’s viscera – and the visual hallucinations in the ending scene of The Dark Road move beyond political accusations levelled against the Chinese government and Chinese traditional culture for their abuse of the female body, to become an experience of “augmented reality” of the female body. Indeed, by means of these powerful descriptions and the adoption of an external viewpoint, that of the unborn baby (Infant Spirit), Ma Jian suggests that the maternal body has a double sensitiveness, for it combines Meili’s with that of the Infant Spirit – indeed, it is as though it possessed a quality of enhanced cognition of reality. At the same time, as was the case with Xiao Hong’s lucid representation of the uncanny feeling a woman gets of carrying another being inside her body, Ma Jian adopts a similar strategy in emphasising the alienness of such an event, birth, that is usually perceived as totally natural.

Finally, another example of de-familiarisation of the maternal body is provided by science fiction literature: in “Story of a Titan” by the female writer Ling Chen 凌晨, a woman gives birth to her child on Saturn, while the whole scene is recorded by cameras and broadcasted on the Earth: the narrator of the story – similarly to the unusual perspective adopted by Ma Jian in The Dark Road with the Infant Spirit – is the baby himself, who comments on the birth process from inside his mother’s uterus in a very scientific manner:

she’d shift her huge body (332)

“妈妈便推动她庞大的身体” (15)

Through the skin of Mama’s belly, I murmured from deep within the womb, relating information obtained from genes and blood – breathing, absorption, excretion, perception, memory. I began from a fertilized egg and developed organs, muscles, skin, and bones (340)

“隔着妈妈的肚皮，我在子宫深处呢喃，叙述从基因和血液中获取的信息——呼吸、吸收、排泄、感知、记忆，我从一颗受精卵开始，发育出器官、肌肉、皮肤、骨骼” (17)

Yes, Mama, don’t worry. I’ll swim smoothly out of the womb and fly into your embrace.

Almost as if the uterus understood me, a strong force suddenly pushed me toward the cervix. (344)
“是的，别担心妈妈，我会顺畅地游出子宫，扑向你的怀抱。好像是子宫听明白了我的话似的，一股强劲的力量忽然将我往子宫口推去。” (17)

“Do they want to play God?” Mama asked with difficulty. She had endured ten hours of contractions and scoffed at the efficiency of the work Papa and the others were doing. Now that my head had slid into the pelvic cavity I was quite uncomfortable. Holes had ruptured all over the placenta that had been protecting me, and the familiar film and fluid flowed on all sides and blocked my exit. I was tired, and I needed to rest a while. (344)

The father watching from outer space, sighs

“My wife’s childbirth is being broadcast live, and I can’t see it!” (349)

The final, crucial moment of the delivery is dryly described by the baby. All emotions and sensations are recorded in a very impersonal way and while the physical pain is reported, it is as though the mother’s body had been de-humanised.

I had entirely entered the birth canal. It was a narrow and bumpy channel with a faint light all the way at the far end. I was squeezed, and I felt incredibly uncomfortable. My pain passed to Mama, and then her whole body was in pain and she cried out. (352)

We can conclude this section by quoting Hanson again: “Such anxious constructions of the maternal body are surely an index of the inchoate fears that contribute to surround reproduction and the lease on the future which it represents”.

The sexual body

Many authors of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, who were partially inspired by Freudian theories from the 1920s onward, represent women through a sexualised body. Although the New Sensationists’ works are replete with descriptions of this kind, I have chosen two very different texts, one by Lu Ling and the other by Lin Bai. In many cases the sexual body is endowed with an uncommon, almost upsetting quality: Lu Ling’s narrative of female sexual desire emphasises its physicality and the phenomenology of the perceptions, which, at the same time, is also the expression of a spiritual hunger, as the title of the novelette...
suggests: ["Hungry Guo Su’e"] / 饥饿的郭素娥 (1942). The following excerpts are just a sample of Lu Ling’s vivid narrative of the phenomenology of female sexuality:

The emotions of that woman, full of sexual desire and dreams, were so acute... 充满情欲和梦的女人的感觉是那样的敏锐..."

Her cheeks were rosy, shining with a feeling of rich, wild joy. A smile of happiness flashed across her fleshy lips showing traces of lust. When she rapidly moved her arm, looking for the hoe, in the sunlight her teeth shined with a white glow, her bosom heaving fast.

Passing by a short tree, he leaned on its trunk and brought his shrinking face down, stuck out his tongue and licked her lips and nose. Guo Su’e, wrapped in his strong male arms, cast away all her worries and melancholy, all her fears and hate. She woke up from the poisoned, silent darkness and laughed uncouthly, lasciviously, impudently.

Every single emotion of the protagonist and even her slightest physical reactions to the external world are recorded with accurate, almost morbid precision. The excessive use of adjectives and adverbs – a hallmark of Lu Ling’s style – builds a strongly mimetic image of the woman, whose inner self and body seem to overlap completely.

Turning to the contemporary writer Lin Bai’s descriptions of the sexual female body, I will provide an excerpt from ["The Time of Cat’s Passion"] / 猫的激情时代 (2001):

In my dreams Cat uses her lithe, slender fingers to stroke my face. She lowered her body close to me, and in a whisper says: Do you know who I love the most? [...] Cat’s cool breath sirs the fine hair on my body, arousing a feeling of tender care. I say I don’t know. She lowers her long eyelashes and says: You can imagine me as a man. I say that if you were one, I wouldn’t have liked you. [...] Cat在我的梦中用她柔软修长的手指抚摸我的脸，她俯身凑近我，用耳语般的声音对我说：你知道我最爱谁吗？ [...] 猫的气息凉凉地吹动我细小的汗毛，使我有一种贴近入微的感觉。我说我不知道。她垂下她长长的睫毛说：你把我想象成男的。我说你当了男的我就不喜欢你了。"
The raped and mutilated female body: women’s controversial agency

This is an incredibly rich category, in modern as well as in contemporary literature: Xiao Jun, Lu Ling, Xiao Hong, and more recently Mo Yan and Ge Fei (b. 1964) – to take only a few authors – present the ravaged female body from a variety of perspectives, ranging from an emphasis on its naked physicality to hints at psychological unease. The famous episode of the young bride raped in the sorghum field from Mo Yan’s [The Clan of Red Sorghum] / 红高粱家族 (1985) has already been studied and treated as an example of misogyny by the Chinese scholar Lu Tonglin. She interprets Mo Yan’s depiction of the raped female body as a sacrificial object representing male desire, deprived of any identity and agency: “the female body, like the landscape with which it identifies, is largely excluded from the world of dynamic movement”.

Similarly, although with very different aims, in a war scene where a young Japanese soldier rapes a Chinese peasant woman, Xiao Jun portrays the violence inflicted upon the female body in order to elicit a nationalistic sense of ire, without really empathising with the character in her physically and psychologically damaged condition. On the contrary, in presenting an analogous episode, where the vicious act is actually perpetrated by a Chinese man on Golden Bough in The Field of Life and Death, Xiao Hong enhances the character’s pathetic hopelessness and manages to instill a sense of sober desperation in the reader.

Nevertheless, in other cases the literary representation of abuses on the female body unexpectedly provides women with a strong agency and power. As Kirk Denton has demonstrated, in Lu Ling’s novelette (“Hungry Guo Su’e”), it is Guo Su’e’s spiritual independence and hunger, and not her body as an objectified sexual target, that is mostly feared and thus violated by men in the final cruel rape and murder scene:

Guo Su’e was dizzy, her whole body was cold, the parts of her which had been branded dripped blood. But Huang Mao’s big hands groped among the blood, over her naked body. With a kind of cowardly wildness he eyed the witheness of her flesh […] he lowered his body and quietly climbed on the top of her.

Whereas the tragic reality of history offered to modern writers a scary and truthful landscape of rapes – such as those associated with the Nanjing massacre (1937) and the war period – it is undeniable that rape is also the greatest and cruellest form of control over the female body, together with mutilation and cannibalism. This is the case in Han Song’s story [The Guide to Hunting for Women], with its island inhabited by artificially created women, brought into being only to satisfy urban men’s craving for strong emotions. The story argues that the female body is not only a prey for the hunters, but that these artificial clones – designed to satisfy men’s sexual fantasies and stereotypes – also represent the male obsession with the elusiveness of the female body. Han Song offers a reflection on the mystery of gendered bodies and men’s essential misunderstanding or ignorance in terms of female organic and bodily life: in one scene of this grotesque hunt for women, one of the hunters, after killing the female prey, eats
her uterus in a final attempt to grasp women’ secret and extinguish his own sexual hunger.

The women on the island were just purebred animals provided with ovaries and uterus, they had not been contaminated yet with the vanity of cosmetics and jewels, and money. Their wild nature was their main feature.

Looking blankly at the woman’s strange abdomen, Xiao Zhao remembered when, 36 years before, he had lived inside a similar flesh cavity. His relation with women was just the relation between a hosting body and a parasite, but maybe this was precisely the nature of all his relations with them.

In the horrific scene towards the end of the novel, the man, who during the fight against the female-clone has castrated himself by mistake, thoroughly appropriates the body of the female clone by eating her reproductive organs, like a parasite appropriates the body of its host.

Indeed, these descriptions of the female body are connected to a post-human, post-socialist view of the individual and of gender, although the scene also echoes the dystopian theme of cannibalism and its long-standing tradition in Chinese literature, from Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) to Mo Yan. The science fiction writer ends the story with a surreal and ambiguous solution to the war between the sexes, envisaging a simultaneously utopian and dystopian society of dis-gendered or post-gendered bodies (“ungendered” / 无性 / wuxing).

Similarly dark and brutal is the description of a female corpse raped by two thugs in Sino-American female writer Yiyun Li’s debut novel The Vagrants (2009): set in a Chinese town just one year after Mao Zedong’s death, the story features a young woman executed for her counter-revolutionary activities. However, the violence exerted on her body, both before and after her death, is not so much a form of political violence as the physical expression of an existential regression of humankind in one of the darkest phases of Chinese history, where the value of an individual, especially if female, has been thoroughly depreciated or erased.

The sick body

Modern and contemporary literature mercilessly shows sick and disabled female bodies, the physical disease often being a sign of psychic unease. According to Larson, as Rong Cai puts it, “[i]n stories by female writers, women who write are often sick, weak, or commit suicide. As a result the female body had to be effaced through sickness or death to allow the emergence of the male activity of writing”. Ping Zhu observes that “[i]f the body is the location of socially manufactured desires, a sick body signifies the denunciation of the desires produced by the masculinist society.”

Another critic, Yang Xin, referring to “Beauty Writers” / 美女作家 such as Chen Ran 陈染 and Annie Baobei reminds us that sickness is a “narrative strategy and imaginative tool for women writers to explore identity in times of rapid social change”.

Le corps dans les littératures modernes d’Asie orientale : discours, représentation, intermédialité
Contrary to this metaphorical interpretation of the sick body, Xiao Hong exposes the female body in all of its outrageousness: in The Field of Life and Death, Yueying, a young and beautiful girl in the village, is mercilessly depicted lying in her bed, paralysed, her body covered with her own faeces.

This is a screeching, dissonant image which clashes with the “New Woman” vision of feminine beauty in the nationalist discourse of the time, as expressed by the so called Jianmei Movement: “healthy curves and national ideals of health and beauty during the Sino-Japanese war were set; women’s strong physiques were promoted as the science of the normal with manipulated, managed and disciplined workout routines”. From a cognitive perspective, Xiao Hong again explores sorrowful human existence by means of the embodiment of pain in her characters.

If we applied here the neuroscientific theories on “shared emotional states”, we could infer that the reader exposed to such sorrowful descriptions can experience similar physical and mental states. On the other hand, the new cognitive sciences have also undergone a narrative turn: it is indeed possible to analyse and describe our perceptions as a narrative.

Finally, I would like to mention the Hong Kong-based female writer Hon Lai-chu’s (Han Lizhu 韩丽珠, b. 1978) novels The Kite Family / 风筝家族 (2008) and Body Sewing / 缝身 (2012): this author makes a completely different choice in the use of the sick or deformed female body. Differently from Xiao Hong, she rejects any realistic interpretation of her narrative, deliberately crossing the border into the unreal, the imaginary. In The Kite Family, she represents a strong existential and social unease through an “unnatural narrative”: the women of the family, whose body grows monstrously until there is not enough space in the house to contain them, are the symbol of a more general spiritual unease in contemporary Hong Kong society. Hon Lai-chu refuses to provide any lifelike details, the physical perceptions of her characters are completely detached from their corpo-reality: bodies, especially female ones, are the signs of a new language. By having the novel embodied by a metaphorically sick body – what is more, a female body – the author provides her text with a simultaneously symbolic and cognitive function, representing women’s uneasy and problematic social condition figuratively.

The body is at the centre of Hon’s anti-mimetic narrative also in the novel Body Sewing, where the long-standing issues of the social recognition of women through marriage and coupling conventions are questioned. Hon describes a dystopian society where
couples are pushed to undergo surgery and have their bodies literally be sewed together, so as to attain a perfect harmony at both the individual and collective level. In this novel, stereotypical social relations and obsolete conventions on marriage and love are placed by Hon within a surreal frame, with an almost Gothic feel to it. In a city reminiscent of contemporary Hong Kong, women are legally encouraged to be physically sewn to the body of a man in order to guarantee themselves a future of socially acknowledged “normality”.

Conclusion

To conclude, images of distorted, abused and uncanny female bodies dominate Chinese fiction in both the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Metaphorical or metonymical strategies underpin two mains literary functions: the symbolic and the cognitive, both of which define the female body as a site of contradiction or negotiation, and a tool for experiencing reality at a deeper level, which deserves to be further explored. This literary practice, strongly based on the corporeality of women’s existence and representation, which links the outer experience (text) to the inner experience (body), can be well explained through Merleau-Ponty’s words:

External perception and the perception of one’s own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act.61
The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be interinvolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them.62

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NOTES

3. “Tramite la narrativa si rappresentano le operazioni cognitive umane e che i lettori esandono così, mediante esempi invece che mediante una teoria, la propria comprensione dell’essere umano” (BALLERIO Stefano, “Stefano Calabrese, Neuronarratologia. Il futuro dell’analisi del racconto”, *Enthymema*, 1:2010, p. 270). Here and in other quoted passages all translations into English are mine unless otherwise stated.
9. Ibid., p. IX.
12. A literary school which flourished in Shanghai in the 1930s, emphasizing sensations and physical perceptions of modern life in the city of Shanghai.
16. Ibid., p. 4.
18. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
24. Ibid., p. 83.
27. This term, similarly to Yan Jiayan's widely accepted definition (“social analysis school” / 社会剖析派 / Shehui pouxi pai), defines a good number of writers who were similarly committed to a critically-oriented writing approach in 1920s and 1930s in China.
37. The page number after each quotation refers to Xiao Hong, The Field of Life and Death / 生死场 / Shengsi chang, in Xiao Hong quanji 萧红全集 (Complete Works), vol. 1, Ha'erbin, Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, 2011 [1935].
41. Ibid., p. 192.
44. Ibid., p. 278.
45. Ibid., p. 282.
47. Xiao, Shengsi chang, op. cit., p. 58.
49. Ibid., p. 134.
50. Ibid., p. 135.
51. Ibid., p. 138.
52. Ibid., p. 141.
53. Ibid., p. 143.
60. MA Jian, The Dark Road / 阴之道, op. cit., p. 333-4.
65. Ibid., p. 39.
66. Ibid., p. 51.
73. ZHU, Gender and Subjectivities in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Culture, op. cit., p. 155.
76. QUOTING Richardson, Alber and Heinze state: “Unnatural narratives violate the ‘mimetic contract’ that had governed conventional fiction for centuries’ as well as the ‘established boundaries of realism’, Unnatural Narratives - Unnatural Narratology, Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter, 2011, p. 4.
77. HON Lai-chu, The Kite Family, Hong Kong, Hong Kong U. P., 2015.
78. HON Lai-chu, The Kite Family, Hong Kong, Hong Kong U. P., 2015.
81. MERLEAU-PONTY, Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit., p. 94.
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