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**Embodiment, Identity, and Political Agency: *The Field of Life and Death* Revisited**

In 1934, the eminent writer Xiao Hong finished writing her debut novel originally entitled *The Wheat Field (Maichang)*; as a young writer as yet to launch her career in the male-dominated field of literature, her manuscript received constant rejections from publishers. Discouraged as she was by the setback, she moved in 1935 to Shanghai in order to acquaintance with Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature, in the hope of having his support for her novel. She succeeded, and established a life-long friendship with Lu Xun. Impressed by her uniquely female perspectives, Lu Xun spoke highly of the novel, and arranged for it to get published in December of 1935 as part of the “Slave Series,” which brought together novels that thematized the national struggles against the Japanese invasion. Prefaced by Lu Xun and with an afterword by another literary giant Hu Feng, Xiao Hong’s novel caused a sensation in the literary field, making her known almost overnight and thus securing her into a seminal writer labeled as an anti-Japanese writer. The novel was retitled into *The Field of Life and Death*, as if the original title were too metaphorical to evoke the life-and-death struggle of the nation against the upcoming outbreak of the anti-Japanese war and the antiwar nationalism.

Set around 1931 in a Manchurian village when the Manchuria area was on the verge of being occupied by Japan, the novel depicts both the harsh life conditions of the village before Japan’s invasion and the worsening situation following the invasion. In a way the novel was over-determined by the discourse and institution of nationalism at the time such that the nuances of the novel did not register or matter to the reader; the

nationalists appropriated the novel in interpreting the novel as a testimony of Japan's evil deeds and of the villagers' fearless battle against the Japanese invasion manifesting a nationalist spirit to be applauded nationally. Lu Xun praises the novel in the preface:

It well captures the fortitude of the people in the North, their longing for life as well as their struggle against death. Her deft ability for details and transgressive style add much refreshing and graceful elements to the novel.<sup>1</sup>

Lu Xun and Hu Feng's endorsements, situated in the high tide of anti-war nationalism, made possible the success of Xiao Hong's novel while conveniently utilizing this literary work in the service of nationalistic mobilization. The novel became institutionalized so much so that the prominence of the female problem in it was never addressed or singled out as an independent issue but only as part and parcel of the harsh conditions of the village. The interpretive history of the novel witnessed an epidemic shift when Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue edited in 1989 the volume entitled *Emerging from the Historical Landscape: Studies of Modern Woman's Literature* in which the grant narratives of nationalism are deconstructed from the feminist perspective. Drawing upon this path-breaking volume, Lydia Liu also offers a revisionary and interventionist interpretation of the novel in order to stage her feminist critique of nationalist discourse. By way of examining the intersection of the female body and nationalist discourse, Liu points out the power imbrications of "nation-oriented and male-centered literary criticism" and, above all, interrogates the problematic of national identity altogether (37).

But Liu's focus on the female body—as will become clear in the rest of the essay—is predicated upon a problematic notion of gender as *nothing but* politics of sexual difference, identity, and recognition. This identity-oriented brand of feminist critique, couched here in Liu's conceptual emphasis upon the visceral, promotes a kind of sexual

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

essentialism that shuts down historical agency, whereby rural women, deprived of political action and re-signification, get perpetually stuck in victimization. The consequence of this theoretical bent is an impoverished, ahistorical and undialectical account of the imposed opposition between nationalism and gender, with its feminist politics grounded on passivity.

Granted that Liu's heuristic reading of the novel does indeed powerfully debunk the nationalist discourse, it nevertheless sets up a false and insurmountable divide between the female body and nationalism. Engaging with Liu's reading, I will then offer my own that situates the novelistic persistence upon the female body *not* in direct opposition to nationalist discourse but instead in a dynamic and dialectical relation to it. Situating my reading unmistakably within the novel's rural setting whose patriarchy will by no means vanish despite the abrupt arrival of nationalist discourse, I resist the easy linkage between the rural patriarchy and nationalist politics, thereby arguing for the latter's future-oriented possibilities of gender equality. I suggest that the disturbing omnipresence of the female body registers the authorial anxiety over the conditions of rural women rather than an utter dismissal of nationalist discourse and that this anxiety could be read as Xiao Hong's call for nationalism not to neglect the equally urgent gender issue against its current preoccupation with anti-Japanese war. On the other hand, the ambivalence of the novel can enable us to articulate a phenomenologically uncompromising notion of embodied subjectivity *and* political agency that cautions against discursive reductionism while *not* foreclosing the emancipatory ability of nationalist sublimation. My analysis aims to push forward Liu's feminist reading beyond the bifurcating frame to one that brings out the novel's articulatory potentials for a

relational account of gender and nationalism, i.e. embodied identity and political agency. I engage with Liu's essay insofar as doing so provides the opportunity to raise theoretical questions; my reading of the novel shall then illuminate my theoretical discussions.

I shall start by discussing the tension between nationalism and identity politics in order to, on the one hand, address theoretical questions relevant to the paper and, on the other, offer a historical context in which nationalism played a role in modern China. Then I will move on to a close reading of the novel as I think through the issues of the female body, identity politics, performance and performativity, and political agency. The paper concludes with a new vision of politics that the novel enables us to articulate, one that takes into consideration both the importance of embodiment and the post-identity imagination which requires a future-oriented notion of politics in Hannah Arendt's sense.

### **Nationalism as Heuristic or/and History: Cutting or Understanding?**

Liu joins Prasenjit Duara in treating Chinese nationalism in the Foucaultian power-discourse nexus. Their central concern centers upon a problematization of nationalism as a collective identity that is necessarily hegemonic and thus subject to power analysis. To bluntly put it, a nation is a discursive formation to be deconstructed, for within nationalist discourse there is a contested space of identity politics. The critical recuperation of this space seeking its recognition entails a kind of history writing that, in Duara's formulation, rescues history from the nationalist hegemony by interrogating the ways in which alternative narratives and discourses in history contested nationalist doctrine. Here *history* counters *History*, with the latter promoting the Enlightenment notion of modernity; "the nation-state is the agency, the subject of History which will realize

modernity” (Duara 20). Enlightenment History became “the principal mode whereby non-nations [like China] were converted into nations” (27). Crucially, history is framed by forms of oppression and resistance, and of identity politics, i.e. identities that are alternative to national collectivity. To the extent that it deconstructs nationalist discourse, feminism as a form of identity theory thus comes in handy to problematize the national appropriation of women and women’s movement. Liu’s reading of *The Field of Life and Death* falls into this feminist category in the 1990s when Foucaultianism itself, ironically, became almost an institutionalized discourse. Reconsidered under the framework of identity politics, nationalism as an analytical category, as in Liu’s account, almost becomes a site for conducting post-structuralist exercise of signs and symbols. Duara and Liu, therefore, aim to split the national subject so as to open up “a useful point of entry to the contradictory space of nationalist discourse” (Liu 40). They are genealogists, whose knowledge “is not for understanding, but for cutting” (Foucault 154). Liu makes it clear that her goal is to “rethink the nation as a territory of struggle between competing subject positions, narratives, and voices where nationalism or nationalisms win” (37).

In theorizing the intersection between memory, trauma, and what he calls “critical historical consciousness” while drawing upon Michael Roth’s work on agency and history, Ban Wang takes issue with the genealogical conception of nationalism on the ground that “it tends to block a sympathetic interpretation of the modern nation as *a vital political community*” (19, emphasis added). Ultimately he defines history writing as “a kind of politics—not just a political act of genealogically exposing the discourse-power nexus, but also an act of working and striving for positive historical directions” (25). While Ban Wang acknowledges the importance of genealogy in our examination of

power and discourse, he challenges us to broaden our imagination of politics as action and praxis. His can be termed *constructive* politics (history)—enactment of collective ideas and interests, in Jacques Ranciere’s sense—in order to distinguish from Duara and Liu’s notion of politics (history) as *deconstructive*. Nationalism, especially in situations of political emergency, can and should thus mobilize constructive politics. Ban Wang seems to be in tune with Benedict Anderson’s formulation of the nation as “an imagined community” in an “anthropological spirit” (5-6). The nation requires our imaginative mediations to emerge as a political community. Nationalism, or national consciousness, enables people, who are strangers to each other, to arrive at politicized intimacy. What sustain this collective bond are chiefly a common identity, a shared history, and a collective future, all of which potentially give rise to emancipatory politics. Anderson avoids reducing nationalism into a simplified ideology or discourse but instead heeds the anthropological conditions of possibility in which it came about. I suggest that genealogical politics and constructive politics are both needed for theory/praxis and that nationalism should be construed both heuristically and as a historical formation.

Liu’s oppositional feminism in establishing the tension between the female body and nationalist discourse is built upon her slippery equation of patriarchal men with nationalists *per se*. In other words, Liu sees the depictions of suffering and oppression in *The Field of Life and Death* as Xiao Hong’s attempt to relentlessly contest nationalist discourse (45). But within the novel’s narrative logic, nationalist discourse itself (to call the village’s awkward awakening of nationalist sentiment as “nationalist discourse” itself is problematic, as I will explain later) is not the source of oppression; nor does national awakening worsen the existing patriarchy, although rape becomes the major form of

violence after Japanese soldiers invade the village. In Liu's analysis, nationalism becomes almost a straw man and an easy target. I would argue, however, that the mechanisms that prevent rural women from finding their political voices are not always political institutions like nationalism but a whole array of cultural and social institutions. Golden Bough's mother, for example, demands a set of moral codes such as chastity from her daughter; Golden Bough's everyday life is thus regulated by a set of cultural codes. A sense of inferiority and subordination felt by rural women is thus imbued long before they even enter adulthood. These cultural and social institutions are penetrated into the discourses and practices of everyday mundane life. To evoke Foucault's expansive concept of power, here the source of power in the regulation of gender system should not be simplistically construed as always coming from the state or political institutions like nationalism. Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* (1980) defines power as everywhere permeating all aspects of life. The novel's predominant focus on the perpetual sexualization of the female body can be read as a critique of patriarchal men before and during anti-Japanese war rather than of nationalism itself. At most it gestures towards a bleak future for rural women, as rural patriarchy will not disappear and yet Japanese soldiers make the situation even worse.

Lydia Liu's insistence on the female body's rhetorical use to contest nationalist discourse derives from her preformed conception of the nation as always already a discourse without conceiving it also as a vital political community. Yet it could be argued that the bleak picture of rural women in the novel is not due to the arrival of nationalist discourse but rather because of the yet inadequate existence of nationalism. The patriarchal system in the village is so structurally and historically deep-rooted and

internalized that it would take institutionalized and nationalist movements in order to open up the possibilities for women liberation and as such to rebuild the village into an integrated part of a real nationalist community where ideally everyone is equal. As Zhang Yu's research into the case of Ding County has showed, the Rural Reconstruction Movement (as part of a nationalist project) transformed the villages into a "space of attraction and empathy" precisely because of its dialogue with the nation as a modern project (48-49). The village in *The Field of Life and Death* would, too, benefit from this rural reconstruction movement initiated by the nation. As of now, the immediate goal for the village is self-preservation when national sovereignty is at stake. Of course upon the arrival of the nationalist discourse rural men are still patriarchal. Here the tension is not between the female body and nationalist discourse *per se*. The tension continues to be between the female body and the traditional patriarchy of the village, which is to be reformed precisely by nationalist projects like the Rural Reconstruction Movement.

The content of nationalism, in other words, should not be watered down to patriarchy that is, in Liu's analysis, represented by the rural men becoming national subjects. The blind insistence on the complicity of patriarchy and nationalism in each other's ideological baggage guarantees a simplified opposition between these two, disabling the latter's progressive goals and results. When we see the building of a more just village in a longer stretch of time, i.e. a future-oriented perspective beyond the novel's narrative temporality, we can appreciate the ways in which nationalism will in time enable a vital political community of which the village is an integrated part. In sum, at the core of the tension undialectically set up between the female body and nationalist discourse in Liu's analysis of the novel is her one-sided notion of the nation, which is

rather symptomatic of genealogical cutting in general. Only when we move along and beyond the power-discourse nexus to construe the nation also as an ethical-political re-direction can we begin to read *The Field of Life and Death* anew in next section.

### **The Body of Rural Women: Identity Complex and Political Agency**

The novel has been much commented on in terms of its strikingly visceral and graphic depictions of women's bodily experiences as well as the dramatic narrative turn plotted by Japanese invasion that changes its narrative tempo. Although the reader follows no focalization of one singular protagonist throughout, a set of female characters are individualized. The episodic and often essayistic features of the novel in effect succeed in presenting a kind of panoramic view of rural life troubled by "poverty, ignorance, class exploitation, imperialism, and the patriarchy," which "reduce the rural people, especially women, to no more than animalistic existence" (Liu 50). There are season-changing markers throughout the first ten chapters to register a sense of being stuck in cyclical and agricultural time that the village is unable to break away from. By way of predominantly narratorial commentary, chapters 10 and 11 signal the abrupt transition to the village during the Japanese invasion. Yet only in the first ten chapters before the arrival of nationalist discourse does the female body figure prominently. This structural arrangement itself seems to suggest that the trope of the body within the narrative scheme functions to effectively foreground patriarchy more as a parallel theme to nationalist awakening than as an opposition to deconstruct nationalist discourse.

As Lydia Liu succinctly puts it, "In their experience of the body, female animals and women have more in common than women and men do" (51). Yet the novel's

reduction of female existence to a bodily and animalistic ontology is subject to critique. This materialist reductionism in its representation of womanhood deprives women of agency. Indeed it was not until modern sexology got introduced to China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the discourse of desire and sexuality became the new regime of identity and self, liberating the female body from patriarchal regulations. And this particular village in the novel seems yet to be modernized. To problematize the novelistic treatment of the body in *The Field of Life and Death*, we can take a cue from scholarship on the female body and agency in pre-modern China. In *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet*, Dorothy Ko embarks on a fascinating exploration of the practice of footbinding in China, explaining its origins, purpose, and spread before the nineteenth century. Most radical and conceptually wise is Ko's departure from post-Enlightenment Euro-American idea of self and being, which "construes the body as a container of the self or as a property owned by the self" (205). In its stead, she theorizes the Chinese *shen* as "body-self," thereby holistically, rather than separately, conceptualizing the relationship between the body and the self. *Shen*, in other words, is an embodied and phenomenological notion of the self: "every self *is* a body that is open to, or even requires, various degrees of manipulation" (206, emphasis original). In short, Ko does not deprive pre-modern women of agency. The fact that the female body became the disciplinary site in which men maintained the patriarchic order and fulfilled their desire does not naturally result in that Chinese women lost their agency altogether. As part of the body, foot here becomes "a frontier of provocation," where women manipulate to "prolong the pleasure of anticipation" on the man's part (221). Compared with Ko's account, however, the body in *The Field of Life and Death* has little space for agency.

Ko's convincing argument about the pre-modern female body fundamentally challenges the ontological and political foundation of Xiao Hong's novelistic vision.

Lydia Liu, however, justifies the novel's troubling representation of the body short of much agency as its symbolic resistance to nationalist discourse; she, ironically enough, considers this gendered representational strategy as the author's political agency in her times "when nationalist discourse constitutes the female body as a privileged signifier and various struggles are waged over the meaning and ownership of that body" (37). Xiao Hong obtains her authorial agency by not allowing her fictional characters agency. Liu's idea of agency thus seems to be defined more in negative terms rather than in politically active ways. For Xiao Hong to endow her characters with active agency is, Liu seems to suggest, to "sublimate or displace the female body", which Xiao Hong refuses (58). Whereas nationalism can serve as a political platform in which women have the option to seek agency outside the patriarchal restrictions, the sublimation of the female body, in Liu's view, damages their female identity. Mother Wang's political agency, for example, is possible because of "her ultimate rejection of female identity" (55). Liu brings up the issue of identity multiple times without a clear definition: "women joining the army, all widows, must *reject their female identity* in a suicidal manner to become Chinese and fight for the nation" (56, emphasis added). Herein Liu sees the zero-sum relationship between "female identity" and becoming Chinese (national subject). But what exactly is this female identity in Liu's logic? In what ways does the novel invite us to think through the relations between the body, gender identity, and agency?

Contemporary feminists have long moved beyond the essentialist and static definition of gender identity precisely thanks to poststructuralism and postmodernism

from which Liu conducts her analysis. Judith Butler is at the forefront of this feminist epistemic shift. Her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) essentially critiques the identity of “woman” and its identity politics. The specific target of her critique is the modernist subject with a stabilizing concept of a core identity. The essentialized idea of woman as a stable identity covers up the social composition of the very entity, naturalizing it as a given and thus structuring a binary view of gender from which human beings are categorized into women and men. Instead Butler proposes to theorize gender as performativity. She asserts a notion of gender identity alternative to “woman.” Gender identity is “tenuously constituted in time, situated through an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (140, emphasis original). The normative performativity then entails a forced process of reiterating norms that constitute the subject. Contingent and vulnerable, however, this performative gender identity can take on a transgressive turn. Lydia Liu’s assertion that Mother Wang rejects her female identity is a conceptual throwback to the stable entity of woman. Quite unlike Liu’s binary and essentialist account of identity, *The Field of Life and Death* in fact invites perspectives into identity as performed and fluid by means of having certain characters violate gender norms and perform alternative genders. The most extreme characters of gender transgression are only mentioned without much focalization such as “a heroine with man’s hat and beard who participated in saving the nation ” (149). Er Liban and Mother Wang nevertheless perform their genders almost in direct confrontation with what they are socially expected. In addition to his disabled and de-masculinized body, Er Liban is so feminized by his over sentimentality and deep attachment to animals that a rhetorical contrast is formed with Mother Wang. Chapter 3 captures Mother Wang’s encounter with

Er Liban on her way to the slaughtering house. Upon knowing that Mother Wang's horse is about to be slaughtered, Er Liban "felt rather sad, suffering from a cramp" (137). To his own goat, his attachment is even more profound. Mother Wang, on the other hand, reorders herself towards the masculinist end of the gender spectrum. When her husband Zhao San joins the "Sickle Group," she acquires a gun for him violating the signifying designation of gun for men. Zhao San "had never imagined that his wife would be so brave...Zhao San gradually came to have great admiration for his woman"(149). Writing against the cultural inscriptions upon "male" and "female" bodies, Xiao Hong experiments with the contingency of masculine and feminine genders.

It could not be emphasized enough that contra Liu it is not a female identity *per se* but instead the culturally designated role that Mother Wang rejects, whereby she opens room for choice, difference, resistance, and political agency. However, Xiao Hong does not have Mother Wang go very far in the progressive direction, for she remains to be a liminal figure between a patriarchal woman and a political warrior. As Liu rightly points out, Mother Wang's authority seems to dwindle as Zhao San becomes empowered by nationalist discourse. Countering Liu's claim that the patriarchal regulation of nationalist discourse hinders Mother Wang's authority, I would argue that her declined authority could be explained by a sudden retreat to (rather than rejection of) her residual essentialist identity despite her constant attempt at a performative identity. At the core of this residual identity is a maternal discourse—the patriarchal code that the value of women is judged by the possession of offspring, especially sons; the death of her son and daughter triggers an existential crisis in Mother Wang that prevents her from imagining a meaningful future. This profoundly felt crisis is common among rural women in the

patriarchal system. As if Mother Wang's declining authority is not tragic enough, an unnamed old woman resorts to suicide. Upon knowing that her son has died in his participation in the Revolutionary Army, the woman burst into tears while blaming Li Qingshan who recruited her son. She kneels down before Mother Wang as if Mother Wang is the only person to understand her grief: "Old sister, you can understand my heart. At the age of 19 I began my life as a widow. For the past few decades, I lived for my son" (202). Soon enough the old woman hangs herself together with her three-year-old granddaughter. The trauma must be so incurable to the old woman that the life crisis makes her put an ultimate end to her and her granddaughter's physical existence. Her patriarchal identity is so internalized that without her son she finds it unable to imagine alternative ways of identity and being in the world.

If the "de-sexualized" bodies of senior women like Mother Wang are less susceptible to rape, then the inescapable sexualization of Golden Bough's body further complicates gender identity. The problem of the body, in my view, poses a challenge to the tendency of discursive reductionism in post-structuralism like Butler's performance theory and to the abstract notion of political agency proposed by post-identity feminists. Butler's performance theory rejects identity politics by deconstructing identity as a stable subject. And the idea of identity politics refers to the organization of political movements around identities such as women and gays instead of political identifications that account for intersectionality, alliances between men and women included. Post-identity feminists see the preoccupation with gender identity (as is the case with Lydia Liu) detrimental to feminism because it shackles feminism in a parochial politics of recognition that hinders its political imagination, discourse, and movements. The post-identity turn in feminist

theory, however, has anti-subjectivist tendencies that define agency as something discursive, disembodied, and abstract. In *Antigone's Claim* (2000), for instance, Butler argues that Antigone's agency is demonstrated by her "linguistic assertion:" "she uses language to claim her deed" (6). Her linguistic performativity is an appropriation of "the very language of the state against which she rebels" (5). This kind of discursive agency also exists in *The Field of Life and Death*: when Li Qingshan mobilizes the village, all the widows reply promptly: "We would participate in this even to risk our lives" (187). Yet their heroic speech act is immediately undermined by the fact that Golden Bough's body is at the mercy of both Chinese and Japanese men. The inharmonious juxtaposition of widows' discursive agency, on the one hand, and Gold Bough's troubled embodied identity, on the other, narrativizes the tension between political agency and embodied subjectivity that lies at the heart of post-identity feminist debates. In her essay "Feminism and Post-identity Politics: The Problem of Agency," Lois McNay problematizes post-identity feminists such as Wendy Brown for defining their "radical political agency through the trope of indeterminacy," something too abstract that neglects women's experiential subjectivity (512). Using the Bourdieusian idea of habitus, McNay proposes "a relational phenomenology whose ultimate challenge is to continue to [rather than to discontinue, as post-identity theorists have suggested so] reconfigure notions of embodied identity and subjectivity in materialist and relational terms in order to work towards the realization of renewed and creative forms of political action" (523-524). Drawing upon McNay, I suggest that the persistence of the female body in the novel could be read as a caution against defining political agency in terms of discursive reductionism rather than against nationalist discourse. The novel's extensive, graphic,

and even cinematic visualization of the female body in pains is difficult to be taken for symbolic consumption. This visceral quality makes it a novel of bodily shock: it shocks the reader's body, at times provoking feelings of disgust. Yet this bodily aesthetics functions to emphasize the visceral and experiential barriers that rural women must overcome to achieve their political agency. In my final analysis, the realization of women's agency transcends identity politics (difference and recognition) in that women can strategically perform self-protective and self-empowering identities like "a heroine with man's hat and beard who participated in saving the nation." Claiming that these heroines reject their female identity like Liu does is vulnerable to the charge of essentializing the notion of identity. Instead these woman warriors *perform* flexible identities as a process of re-signification to participate in broad political movements. When Golden Bough goes to Harbin, she dresses like a dirty old woman, for her mother suggests that "when travelling alone woman should dress herself up in an old or ugly fashion"(189). This act can well be taken as a tactic gender compromise; in moments of crisis, moving towards the masculinist end of the gender spectrum is not a passive rejection of identity.

### **Relational Phenomenology: Feminist and Nationalist Politics Reimagined**

The problem of the body enables Xiao Hong to tactically tuck her feminist intervention into what can be easily read as a nationalist novel. The structural arrangement of the female body in the narrative scheme (before Japanese invasion) suggests that her feminist critique targets the rural patriarchy, which continues to exist even as more and more rural men become national subjects. Patriarchy indeed works itself in one way or another into

nationalism. But nationalism in its progressive and revolutionary mode will also combat patriarchal residues. To hastily read the tension between the body and nationalist discourse as an opposition reflects a one-sided notion of the nation—i.e. a failure to recognize the nation as a politically viable community.

Whereas Lydia Liu conceptualizes the female body in *The Field of Life and Death* as “the symbolic terrain” and “an important site of contestatory meanings”(48), I treat the body phenomenologically in the sense that the intensely visceral depictions of the body move the reader kinetically to the social sites of trauma. Liu follows Joan Scott’s Foucauldian formulation of (bodily) experience. Scott understands that experience is a discursive event. By negating the existence of self-enclosed experience accessible to us without discourse she construes experience as always emerging from and always already constructed in a web of discourse and power. This web of discourse and power is social in character. The experience is only knowable, meaningful, and articulable insofar as it gets signified by language. In a word, to offer an anti-foundationalist account of experience is to *historicize* experience. And to historicize is to deal with language and representation, i.e. to interpret, analyze, and explain the discursive processes whereby experience gets constructed. Experience is not inherent; Scott construes experience as little but identity and subject formations. Scott’s logic is this: experience is not of individuals, but of subjects constituted through experience. Consequently, neither is agency autonomous and inherent. Like Judith Butler, Scott only sees “linguistic agency,” the ways in which we use language to act in the world.

But is there something to our aesthetic experience or to the aesthetic representation of our experience that calls for a post-Foucauldian reading practice? The

phenomenology of the body and its visceral and cinematic qualities invite us to think through this question. In his book *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, for example, has questioned the obsession with “interpretation” in literary studies. This interpretive mode, according to Gumbrecht, is *logocentric*, because it sets to decode discursive formations and focuses on linguistic formalism and misses much of what an aesthetic text enacts. He urges literary scholars to heed the kinds of atmosphere and mood or what is called *Stimmung* in German in order to bring out what a text does to us. Similarly, back in 1966, Susan Sontag has problematized in her now much-noted essay entitled “Against Interpretation” (1966) the impulse to interpret art by pointing out the sensory nature of artistic experience that in fact resists interpretation. She argues:

To understand is to interpret. And to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it. Thus, interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness. In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past. In other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling (quote from the online version of the essay with no paging).

The various bodies in Xiao Hong’s novel bring back the aesthetic of the body to its *phenomenological* and *experiential* terms. That is, refusing to reduce the aesthetic experience into mere discursive and ideological constructs, the novel brings out for readers an aesthetic experience that is ontologically viable and phenomenologically non-discursive (visceral). This novel thus inhabits a kind of mood or atmosphere, inaugurating a kind of artistic event, one that performs before readers, one that elicits emotions, affects, and feelings emerging from our bodily contact with the female characters. The aesthetic making of the bodily experience therefore cannot be reduced to simply discourse.

The phenomenology of the body, in the mean time, results in Xiao Hong's reluctance to render political agency to rural women. In so doing, Xiao Hong entangles the reader in an ethical conundrum where we bear witness to the inescapable sufferings of the female body, on the one hand, and see no political agency ascribed to rural women, on the other. The sense that there is no way out is disturbing at least and suffocating at worse. The problem of the female body has broader theoretical valences. The persistence of the body essentializes a female identity, a kind of sexual essentialism that resists performative identities and hence agency. Xiao Hong's feminist politics in the novel, in other words, resemble identity politics, which tends to "reduce politics to issues of identity and... often proceed from a reductive understanding of agency as directly governed by sexuality" (MacNay 514). Post-identity feminists have intervened to redefine agency and political imagination. Wendy Brown's critique of psycho-social politics of suffering is a case in point. Feminist identity politics, according to Brown, often dwells on an incontestable moral legitimacy to individual suffering, leading to a negative psychic dynamic that restricts political imagination. She calls for a move towards "world rather than self, and involving conversion of one's knowledge of the world from a situated (subject) position into a public idiom." (qtd. in MacNay 513). For Xiao Hong's novel to embrace more agency would perhaps require a move from essentialized female identity to identity as performance, which echoes Hannah Arendt's radical definition of freedom outside pre-existing subjectivity and identity that construes political action and agency as a future-oriented, world-building praxis. It also requires Xiao Hong to place a greater emphasis upon the progressive and liberatory opportunities

enabled by nationalist discourses and movements insofar as nationalism structurally shatters the village culture, opening up political space for rural women.

But of course Xiao Hong has no obligation to produce radical literature, which too often relapses into formulaic leftist literature or even propaganda literature. Her ambivalence on the intersection of feminist and nationalist politics demands our re-readings of this canonical text that move beyond Liu's oppositional frame. The persistence of the body, above all, makes possible the novel's aesthetics of ambivalence that refuses an abstract notion of radical agency around which many post-identity arguments are framed. *The Field of Life and Death* renders a phenomenological underpinning to Arendt's utopian notion of radical action by pointing out the necessary social and cultural conditions for the emergence of national and political agency.

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