Faces of the Self in Modern Chinese Literature

Terry Siu-han Yip
Hong Kong Baptist University

Literature often serves as a mirror and a lamp, to borrow M.H. Abrams's terms, by reflecting social, cultural, moral, political and/or ideological changes in society on the one hand and suggesting new directions or possible ways forward for its readers on the other. A look at representations and explorations of the self in Chinese literature in the first half of the twentieth century shows not only those forces that shaped the formation of the modern Chinese self but also those tensions, anxieties, and aspirations that Chinese writers experienced in the construction of their new selves during the early days of the young republic. Examining representative literary works of this period reveals how the Chinese quest for a modern self, which is quite different from the traditional Confucian self, has been informed and enriched by the Chinese "contact" with foreign literatures and cultures since the late nineteenth century. As Goethe once said, "Left to itself, every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one" ("Some Passages" 8). This has been the case in modern China, whose interests in foreign literatures and cultures have never been random or accidental, but highly conscious and selective. Kwok-kan Tam has rightly observed that the Chinese zest for foreign literatures and cultures in the past century has always been closely linked to the construction of the country, especially as a modern state beginning in 1911 when traditions were challenged and cultural legacies were frowned upon (*A Place* vii). For the first time in Chinese history, the Confucian notion of the self was dismissed by many young writers who expressed their preference for an alternative conception of the self based on the European Romantic ideal. They came to learn that the self is "not a thing, a substantive entity […] but a process of signification within an open system of discursive possibilities" (Butler 7-12), and were eager to explore the notion of the self in their works. Using a number of representative literary works from early twentieth-century

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL JUNE 2018 JUIN RCLC
0319–051x/18/45.2/275

China as examples, this paper discusses the effectiveness of literature as a tool to explore the myriad facets of the self in modern Chinese literature, Chinese writers' aspirations for an alternative self of their own, and the moral positions and writing strategies adopted by writers of the period in their conscious acts of exploring and/or shaping the self against the backdrop of Chinese modernity.

It is worth noting that writers such as Guo Moruo (1892-1978), Tian Han (1898-1968), and Ba Jin (1904-2005), to name a few, understood and promoted the modern Chinese self with European Romanticism in mind. Their sense of the modern was based on their admiration for European literary masters and Western intellectual ideas, and their interest in the problematics of the self in traditional China. Female writers, such as Ding Ling (1904-86) and Xie Bingying (1906-2000), were generally more interested in exploring female subjectivity and the shaping of the female self from a psychosexual or gender perspective. Representative works by these writers demonstrate the transformation of the Chinese self from a traditional Confucian relational model to a more Westernized image characterized by Romantic individualism. The Chinese female self is often noted for its transcultural orientation, characterized by the writers' treatments of female subjectivity, sexuality, and gender politics.

Early modern Chinese writers such as Guo Moruo and Tian Han have always believed that political and moral rigidity and sociocultural conventionality were detrimental to the development of the self. Therefore, at the start of their literary careers in the early twentieth century, they consciously turned to European authors such as Ibsen, Goethe, Schiller, and Byron for inspiration. According to Guo Moruo's, Tian Han's, and Zong Baihua's correspondence published in *San ye ji* [*Kleeblatt*], these young writers sought to liberate the minds of their Chinese readers and promote the European Romantic notion of self, which celebrates individualism and the human free spirit, in the creative works and translation projects they produced in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It must be emphasized here that their efforts to introduce the works of canonical European writers to China at that time reflects not so much their personal interests or literary tastes as the sociocultural needs and ideological shifts of the young generation of writers, and the changing literary interests of Chinese readers. There was a general tendency among Chinese young intellectuals of the time to look for foreign models who would serve as inspirations or catalysts in the revitalization of the Chinese spirit. Such a general tendency or aspiration was most clearly articulated by Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), the president of Peking University since 1917, in a speech to his students in July 1931 in which he acknowledged the impact of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* on the psychology of youth in China (627). In his speech, Cai alluded to the German novel in his advocacy for five new core values (virtue, wisdom, health, citizenship, and beauty) for the development of the modern Chinese self.

Guo Moruo and the Faustian Romantic Self

As a translator and advocate of Goethe's works since the early 1920s, Guo Moruo was among the early Chinese writers who found Goethe's emphasis on the free expression and development of the Romantic self most relevant to the sociocultural needs of China as a young modern state in the early twentieth century. Taking Goethe's Werther and Faust as models of the human free and revolutionary spirit, Guo emphasizes in his own works, such as his 1920 play *Nushen zhi zaisheng* [*The Rebirth of the Goddesses*], the need for individuals to break away from Confucian morality that emphasized the collective, social, and relational aspects of the self, while perpetually minimizing the validity and importance of the individual self. In his retelling of the legendary dispute between Gonggong and Zhuanxu, two rulers in Chinese mythology, and the goddesses' ardent desire for a new sun to replace the old one, Guo glorifies the Faustian free spirit characterized by perseverance and integrity on the one hand and criticizes the reactionary sociopolitical forces of his time that tended to suppress the development of the individual self on the other. Through the goddesses' discussion and decisions in the play, Guo calls for a fundamental ideological change in the country.

Guo's play opens with the concluding lines from Goethe's *Faust*, both in German and in his own Chinese translation. In the play, the legendary ruler Gonggong addresses the folly and futility of absolute power:

> GONGGONG. I don't care for any speech about heaven or hell;
> I only know my own desire to be a king.
> If there is really a god of death,
> That will be me. […]
> After all, I just want to satisfy my own desire of becoming an emperor or king!
> (Guo, *Nushen* 9)[1]

Through the intervention of the goddesses, who end the chaotic situation in the world, Guo highlights the saving grace of love and his yearning for peace, democracy, mercy, and the celebration of universal good will:

> GODDESS 3. The disturbance is too much!
> What shall we do, my sisters?
> Our five-coloured heavenly gem will soon be shattered!
> The tired sun is sleeping in the sky,
> No longer giving out any light.
> GODDESS 1. We have to create new light!
> We cannot be mere goddesses sitting on the temple niches.
> [...]
> ALL. We must go and create a new sun!
> We will not stay in our niches
> And be mere goddesses! (Guo, *Nushen* 6)
> [...]
> VOICES *heard*. Let's create from time to time new light, new heat to nurture it [the new

sun]!
Oh, there are men's corpses lying everywhere under our feet!
What shall we do with them?
To take them to the temple,
And make them into statues for the niches.
Right, let them also play the silent tunes!
How come the new sun is not out yet, sister?
[...]
We want to embrace everything!
We want to welcome the newly created sun with our songs:
"The sun is still far away,
The sun is still far away
In the seawater, one could hear the morning bell chiming:
Dingdong, Dingdong, Dingdong."
[...]
We want to drink a glass of wine,
To toast for the eternity of the new sun… (Guo, *Nushen* 11-13)

With the sky denoting the mythical ruler and the sociopolitical order he represents, Guo reminds his readers/audience of the urgency of replacing the old political order, its conventionality, and the Confucian relational self with a new social and moral order based on love and humanity, and the construction of a new self, symbolized by the new sun and recognizable by its vitality and humanistic traits.

Guo's desire for a new self is made apparent when he creates a Stage Director, who addresses the audience directly at the end of the play, urging them to be proactive in creating a bright future for themselves:

> My fellow countrymen, you must have been tired sitting in this suffocating darkness. You must have been yearning for light. The author of this poetic drama has put his pen down after this scene and run away to create his light and warmth abroad. My fellow countrymen, do you wish to see the birth of a new sun? You'd better go and create one yourself! Let's meet again when the new sun is here! (Guo, *Nushen* 13)

As a young writer with high aspirations, Guo seeks to revive the Chinese spirit by advocating fundamental changes to the social and political institutions of modern China, with Faust as an example to lead the people out of their state of spiritual inertia, their chaotic political situations, and their stifling social and moral conditions. Read in this light, Guo's play signifies a milestone in the development of the modern Chinese self, as Guo openly promotes the Faustian spirit of liberation, progression, and proactivity. For Guo, such qualities are essential to the construction of China as a modern state and to the reconstitution of the Chinese spirit based on a modern notion of the self defined by responsibility, positivity, integrity, resilience, action, progression, and perseverance. As he stated in his postscript to his translation of the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, which was first published in 1947, he aspires to achieve autonomy and self-reliance, not only at the personal level but also at the national level:

> Our road today is very clear [….] The Fausts in China would never get old again, nor would they be blindfolded. They would never die. They would never feel content with reclaimed shore land, nor with the kind of democracy granted them by their feudal lords. Rather, they would only be content when all of China has become an ocean of democracy with her people becoming their own masters. (386)

This Romantic ideal reinforces what he first advocated in *Fenghuang niepan* [*The Nirvana of the Phoenixes*] written a few months earlier and revised in 1928. This short play uses the rebirth of the phoenix as an emblem of the need for spiritual rebirth. Through the metamorphosis of the phoenixes from an existence deadened by the corrupt world into new beings, Guo voices his frustrations over the reactionary forces that are preventing changes in the country and states his mission as an enlightened writer earnestly calling for a fundamental change to the social and moral structures of China. The phoenixes' conscious act of realization and rejuvenation clearly reinforces Guo's vision of self-awareness and actualization.

Tian Han and the Ibsenian Assertive Self

The road to developing an individual self with distinct subjectivity and a progressive outlook of life, as promoted by Guo, has never been smooth and easy for young men and women in China. It can easily be obstructed by parental or familial forces that demanded adherence to strict social and moral norms and to traditional familial and cultural values, despite the individual's desire for freedom and love. Few literary works of this time depicted the family as a haven from the *Sturm und Drang* of society. Rather, the family has often been the locus of a power struggle between the younger generation who yearned for self-liberation and the autocratic older generation who resisted social and cultural changes. Tensions became inevitable when the young fought desperately for autonomy and self-fulfillment, while the old often held stubbornly to stringent Confucian morality that demanded the absolute obedience and submission of the young toward their elders.

The desire for a new self, particularly a female self, is the focus of Tian Han's (1898-1968) one-act play *Hushang de beiju* (*Tragedy on the Lake*), published in 1929. The parental home is a microcosm of the social forces and traditional values that restrict women to conventional gender-based roles (Barlow 7). In order to preserve her honour and integrity and remain loyal to her college boyfriend Yang Mengmei, who is studying abroad, the play's protagonist, Baiwei, would rather die than give in to her parents' desire to arrange a marriage for her. She attempts to commit suicide by drowning herself, only to be saved by a fisherman. After her attempted suicide, Baiwei decides to allow everyone to believe she is dead, so as to avoid further confrontation with her parents. She also hopes that she will meet her lover Yang again one day. However, her dream is shattered when she finds out, years later, that Yang has given in to parental pressure and accepted a marriage arranged by his parents

shortly after his graduation. On learning that Yang has settled down with a loving wife and a charming son, Baiwei realizes that her struggle for freedom in love and marriage has left her alone. She thought that her lover would have fought hard like herself against prevailing sociocultural norms in order to achieve personhood characterized by freedom, autonomy, honesty, and integrity. The stark truth, however, is that she has no allies in her lonely battle for freedom and selfhood in society. Like Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Baiwei chooses to stand firm in her opposition to a hostile world that confined women to a life of domesticity and submission to patriarchal authorities. With her developed sense of her individual self, Baiwei is determined to preserve her newly gained selfhood, defined not by Confucian morality or feudal conventionality, but by individualism and freedom. As a new woman awakened to her sense of individuality, Baiwei chooses to end her life rather than live a self-less life that demands her total submission to the will and wishes of her father, the embodiment of orthodox Confucian morality and feudalistic values.

In her suicide scene, Baiwei laments the fate of Chinese women in the prevalent social and moral climates of her time. This scene not only elucidates the tragic situation of an awakened Chinese woman who finds no space for herself in a hostile society, but also celebrates her assertion of herself as an individual who is willing to pay a high price to be her own master. In the final scene, she makes her moral position clear to Yang by asking him to complete the novel he is writing—the novel that delineates their struggles for freedom in love and marriage and a young woman's suicide as a way of demonstrating her integrity as a person, her emerging individualistic self as a liberated woman, her defiance against arranged marriage, and her devotion to her lover:

> No, no, I was not disappointed. Your story is going to be a very touching piece. [...] It's going to be a precious record of love. A woman's life would not have been futile if she had made an impact on the one she loved, helping him to make a contribution to his people [through his moving story]. What's more, I have counted myself lucky and happy to have had the chance, before I die, to learn about your true love for me as you had expressed [in writing] after my previous "death."
> [...]
> No, no, Mengmei, you can't destroy your manuscript. If you really love me, you'd better finish it, treating it as a testimony of our sorrowful love. You'd said that the story was your tears you had shed for me. So please make your teardrops bullets to crush all those forces that have caused our separation and my death. If you could accomplish this solemn piece of testimony, I would rest in peace. (26)

Baiwei's final words can thus be interpreted as a spiritually awakened Chinese woman's open protest against a feudalistic society and an insistence on integrity and autonomy. As a "new woman" with a heightened sense of selfhood, Baiwei represents a generation of women who uncompromisingly struggle against traditional Chinese social institutions, including family and marriage, that tended to define women in gendered terms.

Ding Ling and the Psychosexual Self

The Western notion of the self inspired many young writers, especially women, from the 1920s onward to examine the self from psychological and/or sexual perspectives. Unlike their male counterparts who often centred their discussions on the importance of women's self-awakening and individual moral choice, modern female writers such as Ding Ling were more concerned with issues relevant to women and female subjectivity. Ding Ling's *Shafei nushi de riji* (*Diary of Miss Sophie*, 1927), for example, outlines the series of emotional and psychosexual crises and frustration in love faced by its protagonist, Sophie. Ding Ling's narrative, presented in the form of a diary, reflects Sophie's difficulties in dealing with her sexual desires and her fear of acknowledging her awakening sexuality.

In contrast to Tian Han's emphasis on women's freedom to choose a marriage partner, Ding Ling focuses her first-person narrative on an educated and enlightened young woman who suffers from psychological turmoil, sexual repression, and emotional frustration. Her refusal to conform to or compromise with the prevailing social and moral order that offered her nothing but communal security and parental protection immediately puts her at odds with others in her family and community. In her March 13 diary entry, for example, Sophie expresses her strong sense of frustration and alienation amidst a world of conforming and disapproving superiors at school and at home:

> All the while, I had no courage to frown or sigh before other people although they had unconditionally showered me with their "good" words like honest or weird. Actually I did not want to complain; I just wanted to cry. I just wanted to cry in the arms of someone, telling him that "I have ruined myself again!" But who was there to understand me, to hold me, to comfort me? That's why I could only hold and hide my cries that "I have ruined myself again" in my own laughter. (49)

The diary form allows Ding Ling to engage her readers in Sophie's psychological journey, charting the sources of her troubles and the stages of her internal struggles as a newly emancipated woman resisting traditions and conventions that tend to subvert the development of her individual self and suppress any expression of her sexuality. In her March 24 entry, Sophie yearns for physical intimacy with the man she loves, but is fully aware that her thoughts are considered "filthy" and morally improper:

> When he was alone with me, I would stare intensely at that face and listened attentively to that musical voice, while I felt my heart pounding painfully by my stirred-up emotions! Why couldn't I rush up to him and kiss him on his lips, on his brows, on his […] any part? Really, there were moments when I was on the verge of saying, "My Lord, please let me kiss him once!" But then my rational mind, no, I had never been rational, but my sense of dignity would censor my thoughts, holding me back. Oh, no matter how wicked his thoughts could be, he had made me fall madly in love with him […] Why couldn't I acknowledge the fact that I had fallen in love with him? What's more, I was quite certain that if he were to hold me tightly in his arms and let me kiss his entire body and then throw me into the sea, into the fire, I would have closed my eyes and waited happily

> for that moment, knowing all along that I could preserve my love to the moment of my death. (61)

Ding Ling illustrates Sophie's attempts to deal with her sexually awakened body as reflected in her growing sexual desire and erotic fantasy for a handsome man, as well as her self-imposed censorship of her mind and body brought about by her moral conscience. By detailing the cause(s) of Sophie's frustrations and misery, Ding Ling elucidates a young Chinese woman's moral dilemma and her attempt to understand her own self, including her sexual self, in relation to others.

As revealed in her diary entries, Sophie ardently seeks a distinct self, but finds her thoughts and behaviours perpetually scrutinized by her family, criticized by society, and indicted by her own moral being. Sophie suffers intense agony when she feels compelled to suppress her free expression of her sexual desire, deny her female self, and disavow her free expression of love for a young man. By highlighting Sophie's emotional and psychosexual frustrations and deteriorating health, Ding Ling draws the readers' attention to the social and moral "illness" of Chinese society of the time. Read in this light, Ding Ling's narrative signifies a breakthrough in the representation of self as it calls for a full liberation of the female self, open acknowledgement of women's spiritual, emotional, and sexual needs, and recognition of women's sexuality. Through the dynamic interplay between Sophie's inner struggle for expression of love and recognition of the self, including her sexual self, on the one hand and her repeated clashes with existing sociocultural institutions such as family and school on the other, Ding Ling successfully constructs a distinct female self with a strong sense of subjectivity who is both critical of prevailing social and moral practices and morally reflective of her own role(s) within that rigid system. Using Sophie as her spokeswoman, Ding Ling registers the voice of a sexually awakened Chinese woman, who struggles with two seemingly irreconcilable forces within the self—the unconscious and the conscious, the imprisoned body and the liberated mind, the cries of a tormented soul and the calm outward composure of an "obedient" young girl.

Ba Jin and the Moral Self in Crisis

Sophie's moral dilemma in Ding Ling's novel is similar to that which Ba Jin (1904-2005) expresses in his novel *Jia* (*Family*, 1933). The three brothers in Ba Jin's novel represent three distinct moral positions taken by many Chinese in the 1930s as part of the process of self-fashioning. The brothers were raised in a very traditional Gao family in Chengdu, and serve as Ba Jin's critiques of the social and moral aspects of the self. The eldest brother, Juexin, is susceptible to prevailing social customs and cultural practices, while the second brother, Juemin, asserts his rights in an oppressive setting symbolized by their grandfather, an embodiment of Confucian morality and patriarchal practices. The youngest brother, Juehui, represents Ba Jin's desire for

a better China characterized by freedom, hope, and opportunity, depicted in his progressive views and decision to leave home for Shanghai at the end of the novel.

The names of the three brothers delineate the different stages of shaping the Chinese self. The eldest brother, Juexin, implies an awareness of things new, and yet he fails to live up to the expectation embedded in his name, which means "conscious of new things." Although he was educated in modern Western ways, Juexin has chosen to conform and take a complacent attitude toward social and moral changes. His awareness of the new social order has had no effect on his actions, for he remains a typical Confucian son who succumbs to social and familial obligations and submissively practices self-repression, self-sacrifice, and non-resistance. He dutifully upholds Confucian morality and observes social conventions, even at the cost of his personal love and happiness. Presented as a weakling and the sort of character whom Ba Jin despises, Juexin always appears to be agreeable, unassuming, and non-confrontational. He passively gives himself up to the prevailing wind, allowing it to take him to whatever destiny fate assigns him. Juexin's attitude typifies many young people of the time, but Ba Jin considers such a compromising, accommodating, and non-assertive attitude problematic and detrimental to the development of the self. Juexin's adherence to outdated feudalistic Confucian practices entraps him in a life of suffering and remorse. Furthermore, his passivity as a person and inability to acknowledge and assert his rights subsequently lead to his beloved Cousin Mei's deteriorating health and eventual death on the one hand, and to the lifelong suffering of his wife Ruiyu, who is trapped in a loveless marriage with him, on the other. Juexin brings to mind Charles Taylor's observation that "nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning [the person and those involved in the relationship] in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (25). Juexin's tragic fate is not caused so much by reactionary forces as by his own moral inertia, fear of confrontation, and refusal to face inevitable social changes.

The name of the second brother, Juemin, means "enlightened people." His moral dilemma is having to choose between being an obedient son and being his own master. There are moments in which Juemin seems to waver because his desire to preserve his moral integrity demands a break from his comfortable life at home. Unlike his eldest brother, Juemin shows his resilience and courage by refusing the arranged marriage proposed by his parents, and shows his determination by protecting his lover Cousin Qin and preserving his integrity as an individual. When Juexin tries to persuade him to accept the arranged marriage, Juemin replies: "Do you want me to repeat your tragedy one more time? […] Don't talk to me about Grandpa. I want to go my own way" (276). Juemin's assertion and moral decision to fight for his love and happiness are explicit when he consciously rejects his eldest brother's example of a puppet-like life characterized by obedience, submission, compliance, and obligation. For him, the family has become a battlefield in which he must fight to preserve his self, love, moral integrity, and sanity:

> [Juemin] just had a long talk with Juehui on the matter [Juemin's arranged marriage]. Both had come to the following decision: rebellion. If his rebellion failed, then he would leave home. He would never submit. Juehui had strongly encouraged Juemin. […] he would like Juemin to set a precedent case in the family, to create a new path for himself and his other brothers. (276)

Juemin's quest for an authentic self and his desire to be the master of his own fate serve as examples of how many young men of Ba Jin's time have struggled to free themselves from familial and social shackles that bound them morally and psychologically to lives of servitude and passivity. Juemin's attempts to address the irreconcilable clash between tradition and modernity and the moral crisis he faces are typical of the experiences of many Chinese young people who contemplated a break from their restrictive Confucian relational selves in order to fully embrace their individual selves and freedoms. Supported by his lover Cousin Qin and his younger brother Juehui, Juemin declares war on unconditional filial piety and self-sacrifice.

Ba Jin's interest in European literature, particularly Russian literature as well as the works of Emile Zola, is most apparent in his characterization of the youngest brother, Juehui, whose name means "the wise and the enlightened." Depicted as an intellectually progressive young man, Juehui demonstrates a distinct subjectivity and a heightened sense of individuality amongst a family of submissive weaklings and arrogant hypocrites. A sensitive, conscious, and socially responsible individual with a strong desire to discover a mode of activity through which the personal self can be fully expressed, Juehui tries to find his way among persisting traditions and conventions. His progressive attitude and Western outlook on life place him at odds with the traditional social groups represented by his grandfather and his associates, who expect the young to adhere to their relational roles. Witnessing his eldest brother's submission and subsequent suffering, and his second brother's defiance against feudalistic practices and the autocratic rule of his hypocritical superiors, Juehui eventually comes to see that he has no place in the Gao family as an enlightened youth, and he has no choice but to embark on a road of no return if he decides to become an active agent in the reformation of Chinese society. He confides in Juexin:

> In the past my eyes were not really opened yet. In the past I did not have enough courage [to leave]. What's more, there were still a few people whom I really loved in this family in the past. Now what's left here but my enemies? (352)

The suicide of the bondmaid Mingfeng, who drowned herself when forced to become a concubine of a sixty-year-old friend of the Gao family, shows Juehui the moral decadence and hopeless situation of his feudalistic family. As Kristin Stapleton observes in *Facts of Fiction*, "Mingfeng does not have revenge against her masters in mind when she jumps, but […] she is reluctant to stay at the Gao residence" (24). Juehui comes to see the "cannibalistic" nature of the prevailing social institutions that relentlessly devour the free spirit of innocent individuals. He admires Mingfeng's courage to preserve her integrity even if it means an early death, and pities people like

his eldest brother who have fallen prey to the "man-eating" tradition, to borrow Lu Xun's term, by failing to assert themselves and protect their loved ones, as indicated in his questioning of Juexin:

> We were close to understanding each other at one time in the past, but now we are far apart. Naturally, you have loved Sister-in-law [Ruijue] and Cousin Mei much more than I did, and yet I don't quite understand why you have allowed other people to manipulate them as they liked, especially in matters concerning Sister-in-law. If you were just a bit more courageous then, you could have saved her life. Now it is too late. You still talk to me about submission. You still want me to follow your example. I hope you will never give me this kind of advice again, or else I will hate you. I don't want you to become my enemy too. (352)

With the deaths of his loved ones, Juehui has no more emotional ties to his family. His departure for Shanghai at the end can thus be interpreted as his ultimate assertion of himself, simultaneously pointing out the irresoluble tension between family and self, tradition and modernity, conformity and defiance, and Confucian collectivism and Romantic individualism. Using Juehui as his spokesman, Ba Jin advocates a total break from Confucian mores and norms in the construction of the modern Chinese self. By tracing Juehui's difficult journey toward finding and embracing his identity, Ba Jin celebrates the emergence of a new self amongst the younger generation. Juehui's departure thus signifies the young man's conscious departure from the Confucian self, which was often defined by a person's relational or role identity, governed by a set of moral ethics and cultivated "in the spirit of filial piety, brotherhood, friendship, discipleship, and loyalty" (Tu 232).

Xie Bingying and the Emancipated Self

While Ba Jin examines the various moral choices of the Gao brothers in *Family*, Xie Bingying describes the transformation of a young woman in *Yige nubing de zizhuan* (*The Autobiography of a Girl Soldier*) from a romantic dreamer to a revolutionary woman-soldier. Xie's story presents the Chinese self within a period of political upheaval in the mid-1930s. Like many of her predecessors, Xie places her female protagonist in a conflicting relationship with her parents, who arranged a marriage for the young narrator when she was only three years old (49). *Yige nubing de zizhuan* centres on the narrator's subjectivity and her growing sense of women's rights and independent thought. It traces the narrator's intellectual growth and self-assertion against such feudalistic practices as Chinese women's foot binding (56), arranged marriage, gendered roles at home (57-60), and limited education opportunities for women:

> In those days, I could not tell what good education would bring. I knew nothing about equality between the sexes either. I had no idea as to what an educated woman could do in society. I only knew that I wanted to study, that I needed knowledge just as much as

> I needed food and clothing. What I did not understand was why a woman could only aspire to become somebody's wife after birth, and why she had to bear children for her husband and be bullied by her parents-in-law, just like what had happened to my sister. (61)

The young narrator questions the stereotypical gender roles assigned to women that often restricted them to lives of servitude, submission, domesticity, and mothering. She feels deeply troubled when she finds, to her great surprise, that she has fallen secretly in love with a young teacher who taught in her school for a term. She agonizes over her intense feelings for him, which seem to have overwhelmed her entire being:

> I felt so miserable when I found that a man had succeeded in occupying my mind that I wanted to commit suicide. I did not understand why I always saw that smiling face of his appear before me. I could no longer study quietly; I could no longer pass my days in a happy and carefree way. I hated him and I hated my third brother, who introduced him to me. I wanted to destroy that image in my mind, but in vain. […]
>
> Very often I would wake up in the middle of the night and I would hit my head hard and curse myself: "You useless thing! You'd better go and kill yourself. Why do you hide in your pure maiden heart an image of the opposite sex? How unfortunate! Your future would be swept away by that image of his, just like by a whirlwind. Your life would be devoured by that image of his too. How dangerous! In this boundless sea of bitterness, better turn back and head for the shore. It would be the end of you if you fail to realize this." (76-77)

Her lovesickness is cured when she joins the 1926 Campaign against the warlords, seeing it as an escape from her imminent arranged marriage:

> Woman, you are good for nothing! Time has changed and you are still snoring in your sleep. All those romantic stories about young scholars and beautiful young women are more or less the same. You should have thrown them away a long time ago. You are an enlightened woman and an enthusiast of New Literature. Why didn't you read revolutionary works? (79)

Supported by her two brothers, the narrator escapes the marriage by enlisting in the army. Her third brother encourages her: "Go, be a soldier! That will build your physical strength, train your mind, and offer materials for your writings" (79). Her second brother agrees that joining the army seems to be her key to emancipation and the only "solution" (79) to the problem of the arranged marriage.

The narrator joins the revolution in order to save herself from the traditional gender roles in which she would otherwise be trapped. She also believes that her revolutionary act would pave the way for other Chinese women in their fight for autonomy, equality, honour, recognition, and selfhood. She is so determined to become a girl soldier that she adopts a new name, Xie Bingying, and lies about her home province in order to enlist, due to the limited quota for each province (85):

> What women earnestly sought at the time could be summarized in one word—revolution! They placed their future and happiness all on this revolutionary cause. One had to

> create everlasting happiness in life—happiness that could be enjoyed by all. Romantic love was a personal matter. At a time when everyone firmly believed in offering their lives for the betterment of the country and the nation, personal love affairs seemed sheer entertainment or pastime for the few spoiled young men and women. (91)

By charting the narrator's social awakening and her rugged road to independence through suffering, struggles, and repeated failures, Xie Bingying unfolds the history of Chinese women's conscious fight for emancipation. She emphasizes the narrator's defiance, resilience, determination, and unwavering effort in becoming her own master, and presents the girl-soldier as one of the awakened women who consciously engage themselves in the battle against Confucian conventionality in order to liberate their body and spirit. Xie's autobiography can thus be read as a record of a Chinese woman's victory over her own sentimental temperament as a young girl and her earlier self-destructive inclination. The Northern Expedition and revolution gave many young women like her a sense of mission and a direction in life, and they were determined to fight for a better future for women through the social, moral, and political betterment of the young Republic.

The texts discussed in this essay demonstrate some of the many manifestations of the new Chinese self, and the constant shaping and reshaping of China as a nation-state in the early decades of the twentieth century. What is apparent from an examination of these works is that the family has often been presented as the locus of power struggles between the young and the old and between men and women. While many writers appear to be exploring the notion of the self at the personal level, a closer look at their works reveals that their discussions of the self have often transcended the personal to embrace broader social, national, and cultural dimensions of selfhood. A close reading of the examined texts allows readers to understand the major concerns of these writers with regard to the treatment and representation of the self in modern Chinese literature, the influence of foreign literature on the reformation of the Chinese self, and the moral positions these authors take in addressing the issues of selfhood. The gradual shift among modern Chinese writers from examining the self from a sociocultural perspective to psychosexual and self-reflexive points of view, with increasing emphasis on subjectivity and gender politics, is also noteworthy. As Sandra Bermann comments in her discussion of the emergence of young nation-states in Europe in the nineteenth century: "Together, they thrived, offering new ways to consider literary and cultural issues at a moment of political transformation, ways that would transcend national literatures without muting the individual qualities these literatures presented" (170). Bermann's observation is equally applicable to the reading of modern Chinese literature. At a time when China was emerging as a young nation-state, such explorations of the self, which were informed by its contact with world literature, have indeed offered many Chinese writers new ways of understanding, defining, or representing the self that transcended Confucian views and practices. What is more, such cultural contacts have also enriched modern Chinese literature as a whole.

Note

1. All translations in this article are mine.

Works Cited

Ba Jin. *Jia* [*Family*]. 1933. Cosmos Books, 1991.

Barlow, Tani. "Introduction: Gender, Writing, Feminism, China." *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1986, pp. 123-42.

Bermann, Sandra. "World Literature and Comparative Literature." *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, Routledge, 2011, pp. 169-79

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Cai Yuanpei. "Sanshiwu nianlai zhi Zhongguo xinwenhua" ["China's New Culture in the Past Thirty-Five Years"]. *Cai Yuanpei xiansheng chuanji* [*The Complete works of Mr. Cai Yuanpei*], Commercial P, 1968, pp. 612-29.

Damrosch, David. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton UP, 2003.

D'haen, Theo, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, editors. *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*. Routledge, 2011.

Ding Ling. *Shafei nushi de riji* [*Diary of Miss Sophie*]. *Zhongguo xin wenxue dashi mingzuo shangxi 10: Ding Ling* [*Critical Appreciations of the Works of the Great Masters of Chinese New Literature 10: Ding Ling*]. Haifeng chuban youxian gongsi, 1994, pp. 21-79.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust, Part One*. Translated by Philip Wayne, 1949. Penguin, 1978.

---. *Faust, Part Two*. Translated by Philip Wayne, 1959. Penguin, 1977.

---. "Some Passages Pertaining to the Concept of World Literature." *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, edited by Hans-Joachim Schultz and Philip Rhein, U of North Carolina P, 1973, pp. 1-11.

---. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Translated by Michael Hulse, Penguin, 1989.

Guo Moruo. *Nushen zhi zaisheng* [*The Rebirth of the Goddesses*]. 1920. *Nushen* [*Goddesses*], Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1977, pp. 4-12.

---. *Fenghuang niepan*. *Nushen* [*Goddesses*], 1920. Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1977, pp. 30-42.

---, translator. "Di er bu yi houji" ["Postscript to the Translation of Part II"]. *Fushide* [*Faust*], Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1978.

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House and Other Plays*. Translated by Peter Watts, 1965. Penguin, 1986.

Lu Xun. "Kuangren riji" ["A Madman's Diary"]. *The New-Year Sacrifice and Other Stories*, Chinese-English Bilingual Edition, translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Chinese UP, 2002, pp. 1-32.

Schultz, Hans-Joachim and Philip Rhein, editors. *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*. U of North Carolina P, 1973.

Stapleton, Kristin. *Facts of Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family*. Stanford UP, 2016.

Tam, Kwok-kan. "Ibsenism and Feminist Awakenings among Early Modern Chinese Writers." *Interlitteraria*, vol. 1, 2006, pp. 113-28.

---, et al., editors. *A Place of One's Own: Stories of Self in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore*. Oxford UP, 1999.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard UP, 1989.

Tian Han. *Hushang de beiju* [*Tragedy on the Lake*]. *Tian Han wenji 2* [*Collected works of Tian Han 2*], Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1983, pp. 1-28.

---, Zong Baihua, and Guo Moruo. *San ye ji* [*Kleeblatt*]. Yadong tushuguuan, 1920.

Tu Weiming. "Selfhood and Otherness in Confucian Thought." *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*, edited by Anthony Marsella, George Devos, and Francis Hsu, Tavistock, 1985, pp. 231-51.

Xie Bingying. *Yige nubing de zizhuan* [*The Autobiography of a Girl Soldier*]. 1936. *Yige nubing de zizhuan* [*The Autobiography of a Girl Soldier*], Huaxia chubanshe, 2009, pp. 47-140.