
Nature, Woman and Lyrical Ambiguity in Shen Congwen's Writing

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The traditional Chinese philosophical belief in man's intimate relationship with nature has deep implications for classical Chinese literature. While nature connotes the cosmic and the universal, "wen文" (pattern, literature) is regarded as "born together with Heaven and Earth" (Owen 187). The ideal poetry is believed to be the one that "partakes of the creative and invigorating force of the cosmic principle" (Yu 298). This idea of a dialogism that permeates the relationship between the poet and nature speaks to "the almost mystical Chinese exaltation at the processes of nature itself"; it is presumed to be a recognition of nature as being autonomous and amoral (Elvin 77). Lyricism arises from the tension between the poet's passion to embrace nature and his recognition of its irreducible autonomy and intransigence, between the two paradoxical poetic impulses inspired by nature: immersion and distantiation. A detailed discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet we do see nature-inspired lyricism take abundant and diverse forms in classical Chinese poetry as well as in prose—it germinates and thrives in *Shi jing* 詩經 [*The Book of Songs*], gains philosophical depth in the Daoist text of Zhuangzi 莊子 (369-286 BCE), takes on a divine wildness in the poetry of Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340 BCE – 278 BCE) and then Li Bai 李白 (701-762), assumes stately restraint and elegance in Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 (365-427) pastoral pieces, scintillates as the pure "phenomenon" in the Buddhist-influenced poems of Wang Wei 王維 (701-761), and transforms into the uncanny in dreams and fantasies that haunt Pu Songling's 蒲鬆齡 (1640-1645) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (*The Strange Tales of Liaozhai*).

Nature continued to occupy an important place in Chinese literary imagination in modern times. Yet it was no longer able to inspire "transcendental idealism"—for lack of a better term. Nor could it function as a countervailing force against the worldly and the conventional. Like earlier European romantics, modern Chinese writers turned to nature to seek interiority, to find inspirations for social idealism, and to critique modern culture. However, also like the Europeans, they finally turned away from nature and went to search for humanist-Enlightenment solutions for their less fortunate fellow countryman. The idea of timeless nature was gradually eclipsed and replaced by the more modern notion of native land,

country home, and traditional rural life. Nature was nativized and “historicized”; it decayed as time passed. As the rise of modernity widened the socio-economic gap between town and country, nature in literature was increasingly associated with a homeland lost to the past.¹ In the native-soil literature (*xiangtu wenxue* 乡土文学) of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, intimacy and harmony with nature could only be re-experienced through remembrances, often childhood memories. Populating some of Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 (1881-1936) most memorable lyrical pieces are his childhood friends from the countryside—native boys who are resourceful about nature and animals: Runtu in “Guxiang” 故鄉 [“Hometown”] (1921) who knows how to catch birds in winter and who chases watermelon-stealing groundhogs with a pitchfork in summer; fishermen’s sons in “Shexi” 社戲 [“Village Opera”] (1922) who befriend the young I-narrator and take him on a boat trip to see a late night village opera show. Reading these stories, however, one feels as if everything were cast under the spell of time and frozen in the past. The disappearance of the benevolent Nature—the idyllic—is not only tied to the loss of childhood innocence; it also coincides with the bankruptcy of local agriculture and the degeneration of traditional rural life under the pressure of modernization. As Prasenjit Duara points out, Lu Xun’s evocation of memory is not supposed to restore or preserve the past but to suggest the need for reform and transformation (Duara 25). His lyrical text carries an implicit social message that is in agreement with his larger vision for literary works—their function to “call to arms” for nation building.² One unresolved issue is that in order for nativist lyricism to work well in the nationalist discourse, the local “must embody some abiding worth” so that it can become “the repository of national authenticity” (Duara 27). In Lu Xun’s writings, such abiding worth of the local is irrevocably lost to the past. It therefore takes a leap of faith and some “literary manipulation” (*qubi* 曲筆) for the writer to end a story like “Hometown” where the past, seen from a child’s anticipatory and dreamy eyes, seamlessly merges with an adult’s utopian vision for the future.³

It is in this context that one finds the lyrical work of Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988) exemplary and extraordinary. Shen is best known for his writings set in West Hunan 湘西 (*Xiangxi*), his half-real half-fictional frontier homeland. Like his fellow native-soil writers, he also often adopts the persona of a returned native son whose witnessing of drastic changes in his hometown sparks copious remembrances. Yet Shen sees temporal changes as part of the evolution of natural history, not particular to an era and affecting only a certain social class. Shen’s depiction of his hometown not only projects an idealized view of the past, but it also offers refreshing values relevant to the present. It is part of his effort to ground his oppositional stance against the decrepitude of Confucianist morality and the

corruption of modernity. West Hunan's natural beauty and cultural vitality, its "primitive" nobility and innocence, and its unconventional social mores, open up an imaginary space for his contemporaries to envisage a different kind of China that "was wholly new yet ancient, the antithesis of the West yet non-Confucian, distinctively 'Chinese' yet individualistic" (Oakes 94). Paradoxically, however, Shen's literary regionalism is rendered in such a way that it attains an aesthetic universalism that makes his work impossible to be fully appropriated by nationalist discourse or, indeed, by any political discourse. At the core of this regionalist universalism is a lyrical ambiguity derived from his distinctive approach to nature. In the first part of this paper, I discuss how this ambiguity allows him to create a vacillating language that distinguishes itself from the more authoritative social realist mode of the mainstream May Fourth literature.

In fact, much has been written about the critical power embedded in Shen's lyricism and his ambiguous "in-between" identities that enable this lyrical mode. Jeffrey Kinkley discovers the "structural irony" in his innocent country folk's "strange incapacities and unorthodox insights" that "cast a bittersweet perspective on modern change. . . ." (169); David Der-wei Wang perceives in Shen's "critical realism and his discourse of imaginary nostalgia" a double image of West Hunan, which oscillates between "thematic polarities as geographical locus versus textual landscape, reality versus memory, and history versus myth" (21); Janet Ng views the issue of Shen's ambiguity in terms of authorial identity. In her study of Shen's autobiographical writings, Ng argues that the self-criticism in Shen's work, which comes from his fluid subjectivity "between Miao and Han, country and city, the illiterate and the lettered, the dominated and the dominator," enables the writer to overcome the moral impasse in representing the native other (93-94). One important pair of opposites, however, is missing from Ng's list of Shen's double position—that between the writer's "imaginary femininity" and his male authorial subjectivity.

Inspired by Andrew Huyssen's notion of "imaginary femininity" and Teresa De Lauretis's feminist-semiotic reading of women and femininity in the mythical-textual patterns of fictional narratives, I focus the second part of this paper on Shen's ambiguity towards woman. I argue that while Shen's "imaginary femininity" helps him create intriguingly complex female characters and achieve an extraordinary lyricism in his writing, the author formulates his (male) authorial subjectivity upon an essentialization of female body and sexuality and often upon an inscription of woman into the silent and dark sphere of nature and death. Shen's gendered "double perspective" is in the end not free of the moral impasse that often afflicts the fictional representations of the native Other.

1. *Shuqing* 抒情: wandering off without getting lost

In *Congwen zizhuan* 從文自傳 [*The Autobiography of Shen Congwen*; hereafter *Autobiography*] (1934), Shen uses the expression “fluid and free” (*liudong er bu ninggu* 流動而不凝固) to describe his authorial temperament (252).⁴ He also often talks about how important water is to him: “Water is there in my life, in my education, and in my works” (“Yige chuanqi de benshi” 一個傳奇的本事[“The talent of storytelling”] 215). But before it became a literary “style,” “wandering off” was the writer’s incorrigible habit, as a child, to escape from books and school. In her biography on Shen Congwen, Hua-ling Nieh thus describes the little truant:

From the beginning, Shen found school a nuisance, something he tried to avoid whenever he could. He ignored, ably and with contempt, those teachers who tried to harness his energies and redirect his mind. Books were more interesting than books; the classroom was to be avoided like the plague. Nature beckoned, and nothing seemed more natural than to run free in the woods or to wade in the river. (15-16)

Paternal reprimand and punishment cannot “wean him from the out-of-doors” and make him read Confucian classics (Nieh 16). In *Autobiography*, Shen also recalls how his younger self eagerly embraces the bustling life in town. On his way to school, he stops to observe, with riveted attention, how people slaughter cattle, weave bamboo mats, make iron tools and whatnot. The young boy also relishes watching tofu-makers, pork butchers, funerary artisans, and how flood scavengers go about their business. This insatiable curiosity about the empirical world and his profound desire to know things inside out made Shen a keen observer and, to a great extent, prepared him for his career as a writer:

The smell of dead snakes and rotten grasses, the odor of the butcher’s body, and the scent arising from the bowl-making kilns after the rain, all these smells, if you ask me, could not be described by me with words at the time. Yet I’m sure I would tell them apart instantly. The squeak of bats, the sigh let out by the yellow ox when the butcher’s knife sank into its throat, the rattle of yellow-throat snakes hidden in fields and caves, the faint sound of the fish splashing onto the surface of the water in the dark, these sounds weighed upon my ears differently. That’s how I remembered them so clearly. When I got home at night, I dreamt of all kinds of bizarre dreams that, twenty years later, still often stirred my sleep at midnight. (*Autobiography* 261)

In the humblest forms of life, in the plainest types of crafts making, and in the most ephemeral sensuous experience, Shen has discovered a world imbued with dignity and meaning.

If “wandering off” was his boyish way of exploring the world, it later became

part of his life as a young soldier. From the age of thirteen until he turned twenty, Shen served in the local army of West Hunan. He traveled with different regiments in Hunan, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, trekking trails in the mountain forests of the region and sailing its rivers. His vision of the world was expanded enormously; it also took on dark hues of violence and death. Many of his earlier “strange” stories were drawn upon his military experience during this time.

“Wandering-off” also shaped Shen Congwen’s writing in terms of aesthetic form. His prose often flows like a river: vast, polymorphous, teeming with life; on its way, it disperses into rivulets of reveries, fantasies, dreams, myths, and legends. Yet, he is able to anchor his narratives with a cool, distant perspective. In Chinese, the word for “the lyrical” is *shuqing* 抒情. A successful evocation of the lyrical relies on a certain loss of self in the other as well as an effort to sustain an aesthetic distance between the two. Without the “loss,” there would be no lyrical moment; without the “distance,” the lyrical could easily slip into the mawkish. Shen’s talent in keeping the two tendencies in balance can be seen in one of his most well-known travelogues, *Xiangxing sanji* 湘行散記 [*Random Sketches on Travels to West Hunan*; hereafter *Random Sketches*] (1934).

In fact, *Random Sketches* is a collection of love letters Shen wrote to his wife on a trip to his hometown after an absence of over ten years. Just as he had to adapt to various types of make-shift desks on various small boats, he wrote from various “positionalities:” as a passenger on the boat and a friend of sailors, as a university professor from Peking and a native son returning to his hometown, as a lover whose loneliness and passion for the absent spouse inspires epistolary enthusiasm and a traveler who finds pleasure and peace in solitude. In much of the travelogue, the subject wanders between memory and imagination, often with a subdued melancholy and an almost self-abandoning empathy for the Other. The chapter entitled “Yakewei de ye” 鴨窠圍的夜 [“A Night at Mallard-nest Village”] provides a good example. On a snowy night at Yakewei, sailors disembark from the boat to seek warmth and merriment in brothels and hostels on the river bank; the I-narrator stays on board:

I am watching from the front of the boat. The river is quiet. Flames of bonfire on the rafts diminished. Few lights are still on. Things far and near could not be differentiated if not for the dim light of reflections on the surface of the water. The voice of a singsong girl is heard from another river house. The lamp light glimmers amidst the noise of drinking games. I guess that in that place of light and sound there are the headmen of rafts, sailors and small-time merchants. Perhaps on the woman’s finger is a golden ring given by some sailor from Changde. She is singing with that hand touching her hair. What a beautiful sight! I know their joys. I share

with them everything. Seeing them in tears and laughter, I feel both far away and yet so close. (*Random Sketches* 246)

Later, the sound of the drum beats from afar makes him imagine the ceremony of Shaman dancing and praying. But perhaps the most bizarre things he “sees” in his entranced moment of memory and imagination are the name cards that people pasted under family tablets at a guest house. Zooming in on these little pieces of paper through his mind’s eye, the I-narrator wonders where all these sojourners are now; these tidbits they have left seem to be the only evidences and traces of their existence. But although he traverses time and space with an imaginatively agile mind, he clings to a position of “staying on the boat” and thereby retains an anchoring sobriety and focus.

This insistence on lyrical distance makes Shen’s narrative voice sometimes sound calm to a fault and borders on apathy. In “Taoyuan and Yuanzhou” 桃源和沅州, another chapter in *Random Sketches*, he paints a collective portrait of the “gentlemen” (*fengya ren* 風雅人) who flock to Taoyuan 桃源, a place known to have inspired “Taohuayuan ji” 桃花源記 [“The Story of Peach Blossom Spring”], Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (365-427 A.D.) intriguing piece about an agrarian utopia. Literary pilgrimage, the narrator points out, is merely a pretext for these men to visit the cheap and widely available prostitutes in the town. After this jab at the hypocrisy of the pretentious and prurient males, he launches into a generic account about the life of Taoyuan prostitutes. His tone, however, betrays little sympathy for the women:

They were good at burning opium and singing popular ditties. If the customer was a military man, the prostitute would sing some military song or party song as well as some hits from a new movie’s soundtrack to curry favor and enliven the atmosphere. Some of them could earn 20 or 30 silver coins; some could only get one or even less for the whole night. Being sick was not a big deal. If one got seriously ill and could not do business as usual, she would sometimes go to the pharmacy to get a shot or two of 606 or 303. . . . When one became too sick and the situation became hopeless, she would ask busboys to take her to those old women who lived alone on those empty boats, where she could stay to breathe her last breath. (*Random Sketches* 235)

The narrator then goes on, with a gazetteer’s curiosity and comprehensiveness, to discuss various subjects of exotic nature and peculiarities: the tobacco trade, oversized chicken eggs, types of boats, etc. He also reminds the reader that the great local poet Qu Yuan 屈原 once rode the boat along the same river and wrote poems about the orchids hanging from the cliffs on the riverbank. As if sensing his tour-guide tone, he swiftly breaks off to dispel the charm: those who are inspired by his

report and actually travel to Yuanzhou 沅州 to see those beautiful flowers will also be greeted by the sight of blood stains on the city gate, the vestige and evidence of a violent military crackdown on riotous local peasants (*Random Sketches* 238).

Czech sinologist Jaroslav Průšek describes Shen Congwen's "whole oeuvre" as suffering from "an unhealthy spontaneity" (95). Yet, it seems that Shen's lyrical mode is precisely the type that rids itself of May Fourth writers' moral-intellectual subjectivism that Průšek questions.⁵ Shen's focus on multitudinous, disjointed, but irreducibly specific local details shows not only a stylistic signature, but also his recognition of the autonomy and heterogeneity of the native life. Such a life is bound with nature, which is both life-giving and life-taking, abundant yet essentially impenetrable, responsive yet also indifferent. In Shen's writing, nature is viewed as a repository of divine forces. The natives find Life (*shengming*)—the life force of a higher order—everywhere in nature and it is therefore able to partake of divinity (Kinkley 223). Passion, innocence, and integrity seem to be "natural" qualities rather than traits that belong to a certain social class. This religiously colored transcendentalist outlook partly explains why Shen, unlike some other native-soil writers, neither offers a social message nor confers political meaning upon the native lives he depicts. In particular, his amoral non-judgmental approach to his native characters stands in stark contrast to the social-moralistic stance assumed by writers like Lu Xun. Formally, while Lu Xun's writing—terse, somber, and often bristling with angst—gives the impression of black-and-white woodcuts, Shen's work is more like water-color paintings. His prose can be at once detailed and impressionistic, down-to-earth, while also subtle, immediate but also suggestive. The sheer number and robust heterogeneity of his work match the thickets of the West Hunan mountains. This fact makes Shen's writing defy easy categorization and abstraction. Attuned to the traditional aesthetic sentiment that emphasizes the cosmic-universal meaning of nature, his writing is however too unruly to be labeled classicist; its spirit unmistakably modern, it nonetheless deviates from social realist aesthetics that became the hallmark of Chinese literary modernity.

2. "Imaginary Femininity" and the Gendered "Double Vision"

Shen is clear about the dark side of nature, its fickleness and intransigence. Without the counterbalancing force of an effective modern social-economic system, local natives find themselves mired in brutal poverty and squalor and subject to futile struggles and fortuitous deaths. Beneath the lyrical calm of Shen's prose, one detects pathos in his recognition of the reality of the natives' lives. In various places in *Random Sketches*, the writer ponders over the idea that the natives

in West Hunan seem to “have nothing to do with history” (253, 278). To tell stories about them is his privilege, as both an insider and an outsider. Interestingly, as we will see below, this difference between his native characters and his authorial subjectivity takes on gender significance. In so many instances, it is the native woman rather than the man who becomes the opposite of the free authorial being. This observation becomes all the more important when we consider the prominent place of “imaginary femininity” in Shen’s fiction, i.e., when we notice how good the writer is at impersonating women, especially young girls.

Shen Congwen indeed seems to have a narrative voice tuned in perfect pitch to portray adolescent girls on the cusp of sexual awakening. They are naïve but also inscrutable, sensitive, almost brittle, guileless to the point of being childish. The sound of their names, composed of reduplicative syllables—Cui Cui, San San, Xiao Xiao, etc., manifests their girlishness and conveys an intimacy the narrator/author feels towards them. Shen also favors the use of nature images and metaphors in his depiction of these female characters: the form-shifting sunflower that Xiaoxiao, the child bride, awakes to every morning in “Xiaoxiao” 蕭蕭 [“Xiaoxiao”] (1930); the jumping fish that disturbs Sansan’s reveries in “Sansan” 三三 [“Sansan”] (1931), and the tiger-eared grass that Cuicui 翠翠 plucks in her dreams in *Biancheng* 邊城 [Border Town] (1934). Such imagery adds layers of lyrical unsettledness, opacity, and elasticity to the text.

Nature images help to accentuate vivid psychological activities of female characters, while they also add layers of lyrical unsettledness, opacity, and elasticity to the text. In “Xiaoxiao,” Shen thus describes the child bride’s discovery of her pregnancy after being seduced by a laborer working for her in-laws: “When Motley took her, it was May, when the wheat was brown; by July, the plums had ripened—how fond she was of plums! She felt a change in her body, so when she bumped into Motley on the mountain, she told him about her situation, and asked what she should do” (Shen, “Xiaoxiao” 106). This brief summary of the story’s development, which leapfrogs time in seasonal terms, is preceded by a slower paced, detailed scene where Xiaoxiao, after Motley convinced her to have sex, comforts her child husband who returns from playing and complains about his finger that has been stung by “a furry insect” and “was swelling up” (106). The simplicity and the suggestiveness of the language with which the writer interweaves simultaneous human activities and nature remind us of the traditional Chinese poetic device of “*xing*” 興. With “*xing*,” the poet aims at capturing “the spontaneity of the intuitively grasped association between the natural world and the human world by simply and quietly paralleling one world to the other without overtly stating their implicit correspondence” (Sun 332). Amazingly, after giving

us this little sexually suggestive detail of insect bite, which is almost unnoticeable because of its natural place in the text, Shen resumes with the figure of caterpillar a few pages later. Here he uses it both metaphorically and metonymically to describe the emotional turmoil in the mind of the abandoned girl. Now that Motley is no longer there, the insect sting becomes the memory shared by Xiaoxiao and her Little Husband. But if the Little Husband remembers only the physical wound, in Xiaoxiao's mind it is both a blocker and a reminder of the shame and resentment she now feels about her first sexual encounter:

She remember [sic] the oath that Motley swore, as well as what happened besides. It was now autumn, and the caterpillars were changing into chrysalises of various kinds and colors all around the house. Her husband, as if deliberately taunting her, would bring up the incident when he had been stung by the furry insect—that brought up unpleasant memories. Ever since that day, she had hated caterpillars, and whenever she saw one she had to step on it. (108)

It is clear that Shen's lyrical approach departs from the "politically conscientious realism" of the left-wing native-soil writers (Lee 160). But the question arises, "can his aesthetic appropriation of nature and native femininity sustain its lyrical universalism without slipping into essentialism?"

Andrew Huysen's notion of "imaginary femininity" serves as a useful reference point, although his study is based on European modernist texts. While Huysen considers male writers' fictional impersonation as a distinctive aesthetic attribute of Western modernism, what truly interests him is not imaginary femininity as a modernist articulation per se, but the gendered modern realities that are inscribed in this aesthetic articulation, especially the gendering of the "ominous expansion" of the modern mass culture as feminine and inferior (47). The case of Shen Congwen is quite different. The gender inscription of Shen's lyricism is linked less with the perceived perils of the effeminate mass culture than with the crisis of an emasculated China under the assault of Western imperialism. Male writers' identification with the female takes on a nationalistic twist in the Chinese context. Shen's idealization of the fragile femininity of pubescent country girls parallels his romanticized view of native male machismo. They are two sides of the same coin.

In his article, "Shen Congwen's Literary Regionalism and the Gendered Landscape of Chinese Modernity," Timothy Oakes thus describes the native men in West Hunan:

Centuries of colonization in China's southern peripheries had produced landscapes of discrimination and fear in the mountains. . . . The men of Shen's region certainly did their part to keep the frontier a fearful place for the Chinese,

and they overtly retained the celebrated vitality of primitive culture perhaps to an even greater extent than the frontier women (99).

In Shen's stories, frontier men distinguish themselves by their prowess and by their readiness to resort to physical violence in a dignified, righteous and ritualistic manner (Kinkley 134). The writer shows a proclivity for vagabond sailors. He is also aware of the brutal and dangerous lives these men live. Drowning in river rapids is common. Aging and illness inevitably spell the tragic end. Still to Shen, their lives on the river represent freedom and simplicity. In *Random Sketches*, we meet many young men who, like Baizi 柏子, are strong, cheerful, and carefree to the point of being naïve and foolhardy.⁶ Another type of Western Hunanese male who frequently appears in Shen's writings is the local military man. Shen's ambivalence towards the military world to which he once belonged is very much a part of his ambivalent feelings towards West Hunan masculinity. While he admires the life-invigorating force it represents, he is aware of its darker side of destructive aggressiveness. As a soldier, Shen was repulsed by the unrestrained violence that the military unleashed on local towns and villages. His decision to leave the military and his later belief in pacifism were in large part owing to his experience as a soldier.⁷ Yet Shen also clung to an idealized view of officers, whose physical strength was considered to agree with their inner moral integrity. Although by the 1940s he himself had long given up his own military career, Shen still felt that "the hope of his region lay with its brave and idealistic young military officers" (Kinkley134).

In contrast to the vigor and mobility associated with male figures, a pronounced passivity afflicts native female characters in Shen's native-soil fiction. If we accept that, whether or not heroes' characters are defined by their decisions and articulations (speech), the pervasive inability of Shen's female characters to articulate ideas and thoughts perhaps shows the limit of Shen's "imaginary femininity." In addition, the woman's passive and inferior position is naturalized and mystified as it is displayed in correspondence to the fictional topographical relationship Shen sets up between his male and female characters. This may be seen, for example, in the gendered topographical-symbolic pattern associated with water. Shen identifies, in himself and in his male characters, the spirit of the river—forever rushing forward. He perceives this condition to be a male privilege. Thus, in Shen's fiction, whereas a country boy's youthful restlessness takes him to places far and wide, a girl's passion for freedom only leads her to the river's edge, to nowhere; whereas he completes his passage to adulthood on the water, she is stranded and drowned by it:

If we trace the backgrounds of these women, many of them have a similar story like that of Qiaoxiu 巧秀. Out of “purlblind” enthusiasm and untamed passion, they ran away from the village and its rural conventions. Using water as a metaphor, one would say this is like “running to the bank of the Yellow River before accepting one’s lot.” Yet most of these mountain spring brooks do not have a chance to flow into Dongting Lake. Often they would get stuck in small cities and towns, along piers and ports, to live out the rest of their lives. To rush forward is impossible. And yet withdrawing backward is impossible as well. Thus they are done for in more or less the same way. (*Changhe* 417)

Is this generic tale of native women myth or reality? There is no easy answer. One nevertheless notices that, in terms of the plot-space, the division between those characters who are mobile and enjoy freedom and those who are immobile and represent the “space” is always already gendered in Shen’s work. The different topological spaces that males and females are assigned in his stories resemble the mythical-textual patterns that Jurij Lotman has identified in Western mythical narratives: “Characters can be divided into those who are mobile, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier, the basic topological feature of this space, and those who are immobile, who represent, in fact, a function of this space” (167). Female characters frequently occupy the empty and dark space of the “cave” in Shen’s fictional world. In his early stories such as “Meijin, baozi, yu na yang” 媚金, 豹子, 與那羊 [“Meijing, Baozi, and the Kid”] (1929), “Sange nanren he yige nuren” 三個男人和一個女人 [“Three Men and One Woman”] (1930), and “Yisheng” 醫生 [“The Doctor”] (1931), the cave reappears as the place where the dead body of a woman rests. From a semiotian-feminist’s point of view, the woman and the cave have a similar function. She/it is the ultimate boundary that the male subject has to cross—“Inasmuch as closed space can be interpreted as a ‘a cave’, ‘the grave’, ‘a house’, ‘woman’ (and, correspondingly, be allotted the features of darkness, warmth, dampness), entry into it is interpreted on various levels as ‘death’, ‘conception’, ‘return home’ and so on; moreover all these acts are thought of as mutually identical” (Lotman 168). The woman, thus placed in the enclosed space, becomes interchangeable with the deadly “nature” signifying its “immobility” and “immortality.” Teresa de Lauretis astutely points out that what underlines the mythical structuration is the sexual difference:

In this mythical-textual mechanics, then, the hero must be male, regardless of the gender of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its personification, is morphologically female and indeed, simply, the womb. The implication here is not inconsequential. For if the work of the mythical structuration is to establish

distinctions, the primary distinction on which all others depend is not, say, life and death, but rather sexual difference. . . . In so doing the hero . . . is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter. (118-19)

Taxonomically identified with space and nature, woman is fixed on the landscape of Shen's West Hunan. In fact, the topographic-symbolic significance of woman-as-nature diminishes the differences between the two opposite archetypes of femininity in his work: virgin and prostitute. This can be seen in his 1934 magnum opus, *Biancheng* 邊城 [*Border Town*].

3. Border Town: What will become of Cuicui?

Orphan of a star-crossed couple, Cuicui lives a simple and carefree life with her doting grandfather who manages a ferryboat on the river in front of their house. The appearance of Cuicui evokes the perfect image of a "noble savage":

Her skin was dark, begotten from the sun and wind under which she grew up. Her eyes were clear as crystal, begotten from the verdant mountains and emerald-colored waters they beheld. Nourished and educated by nature, she was innocent and lively, like a little animal in every way. Gentle as a mountain fawn, she knew no cruelty, distress, or anger. If some stranger on the ferryboat looked at her, she would stare straight back at him with those shining eyes as if she would turn tail to flee to the depth of the mountain at any instant. But once she saw that the person meant no harm, she would resume her play on the riverbank, carefree and cheerful. (64)

At first sight Cuicui, the beautiful and dreamy adolescent, seems to dwell in a pastoral world, geographically and symbolically separated from women in pleasure quarters. Her "naturalness" stands in sharp contrast with the "artificiality" of the latter, who wear heavy makeup and clothes made of imported fabrics. The verdant nature that reflects and protects Cuicui's innocence is a world away from the brothels in "*diaojiao lou*" 吊腳樓, the "dangling feet houses" on the river bank favored by merchants, sailors and soldiers. However, a closer look at Cuicui the virgin and at local prostitutes reveals that they not only reside in proximity in this fictional space; they also share a deeper affinity. This affinity is hidden at the plot level and is to surface in what awaits Cuicui after her grandpa's death.

Indeed, a question hovering over the characters in the story is, "what will become of Cuicui when Grandpa dies?" In the latter's case, his imminent death is an urgent issue that has to be resolved practically. The solution is to find Cuicui a

husband—to “ferry” her to the other side of the river. The girl’s future hinges upon a smooth transition of guardianship from Grandpa to the spouse. As it turns out, Cuicui attracts two men, Tianbao and his younger brother Nuosong. Competition between the two suitors, which starts cheerfully with Nuosong serenading Cuicui an entire night, ends tragically. Knowing that he is no rival to his talented and handsome brother, Tianbao abandons the plan to court Cuicui and leaves on a boat trip. At a place called Ci Tan 茨滩, he is drowned in the river. Shunshun, the father of Tianbao and Nuosong, blames Grandpa for meddling in the brothers’ courting of Cuicui and thus indirectly causing Tianbao’s death. Meanwhile, Cuicui falls out of favor with her father-in-law to be. Although Nuosong, whom Cuicui secretly desires, is still interested in marrying her, Shunshun opposes the idea and sends his younger son away on a business trip. After Grandpa, her provider and the only person who can broker her marriage, died at night during a thunderstorm, Cuicui’s future becomes precariously uncertain. Her only hope, as the narrator suggests, is that Nuosong will come back to claim her. But the story’s ending is thrown wide open: “Perhaps this man will never come back. Perhaps he will ‘tomorrow’!” (152).

What if Nuosong does not come back? Will Cuicui become a prostitute, a *diaojiao lou* woman? This is a possibility hinted at in the text. In the first Dragon Boat Festival (*Duanwu jie* 端午節) scene, Cuicui watches a boat race while anxiously awaiting her grandfather. She is suddenly seized by the fear that he might already have died. The idea begins to bother her again when she eavesdrops on two sailors chatting about a prostitute “up there,” whose father has been stabbed seventeen times at Cotton Grove (*Mianhua po* 棉花坡). In a note Shen wrote in 1948, we find proof of the hidden connection between Cuicui the virgin and the prostitute woman (Shen, “Xing tiji” 60).⁸ There are two “memories” that Shen claims that lie behind the story of *Border Town*: the first goes back to 1921 during which time he, as a soldier, walked by a place called Cotton Grove. There he saw a group of men being robbed and killed. The second memory is that of a young girl walking with a banner in a funeral procession in Qingdao twelve years later. It seems that a deep anxiety over the consequences of the death of the “father” figure, both in real life and in the symbolic sense, is partly what drives Shen to combine the two memories in this story. The idyll of Shen’s West Hunan correlates with the symbolic order built upon and manifested through the idealized relationship between the loving and protective “father” and the good obedient daughter. In *Border Town*, the death of the former not only foreshadows the nebulous future of Cuicui’s sexual innocence, but also the loss of an entire world of uncorrupted values and “natural” relationships.

A reading of the topographical positions of characters also reveals that the line between Cuicui the innocent and the public women in *diaojiao lou* is thinner than what it first appears. It is telling that, when Cuicui joins the crowd for the Dragon Boat Festival, she becomes extremely self-conscious of her position in the public space. In such a promiscuous place, her intrinsic value as a virtuous woman becomes immediately obscure. Just as the public woman likes to display herself up there in *diaojiao lou*, Cuicui the virgin is obliged to stay down in her “original place.” Yet, she cannot prevent the verbal excess that embroils her as the two sailors chat unscrupulously about their common female friend. It is significant that it is in this context that Cuicui has her first encounter and her only verbal exchange with Nuosong. The mistake Cuicui makes—thinking that Nuosong’s invitation to go “upstairs” is an indecent proposal—is not a trivial detail. For in the Dragon Boat Festival of the following year, Cuicui is in fact invited to stand up there on the balcony of Nuosong’s family house. On a topographic-symbolic level, the position she then occupies is not much different from that of the women upstairs in *diaojiao lou*—watching the spectacle and being watched as a spectacle. In a general sense, the local women, both domestic and public, establish the points of departure and destination for the itinerant native males. With men coming and going freely and frequently, the women are identified with fixed “properties.” While local prostitutes are tied to *diaojiao lou*, the abodes for sexual encounters, Cuicui is referred to in the men’s discussion of Nuosong’s marriage as “the ferryboat,” to be distinguished from another female candidate referred to as “the mill.” In the end, fixed in space, the women are always there waiting the return of the men—*diaojiao lou* women for their sailor lovers and Cuicui for Nuosong.

This connection between the two seemingly opposite archetypal female figures is further illustrated by their shared place in the symbolic system of culture as *the silent other*. Cuicui is not expected to speak but to be spoken about. While the very private information about that young prostitute “upstairs” is exchanged among her clients, Cuicui’s future is enthusiastically discussed by men engaged in marriage proposals and negotiations. One notes that during the process, Cuicui’s silent naïveté allows her to remain in a state of blissful ignorance. Eventually, however, it also renders her helpless because she cannot speak on her own behalf or for her own interests. Cuicui’s reticence stands in sharp contrast to the musical eloquence of Nuosong and of her own diseased parents who fell in love singing duets. Her silence also corresponds to the sexually “primitive” state she stays in. The jouissance she experiences in dreams, triggered by Nuosong’s serenades, is close to something between tactile sensation and subconscious cognition: “In the dream her soul was buoyed by the beautiful song. It floated around, up onto the

white pagoda, down to the vegetable garden, and back to the boat. And then again it flew over the mid-slope of the cliff—to do what? To collect “*hu'er cao*” (tiger-eared grass)!” (122). Through nature images and metaphors, Shen is able to delve into the girl’s inner world to express her unspeakable joy and pain. And for a brief spell of a novella’s length, he is able to evoke a pastoral world that convinces and wins us over by setting the human loss of sensuous innocence in perfect rhyme with seasonal changes and cultural rites. Yet, by depriving Cuicui of a voice to speak at critical moments, Shen also aborts the possibility of creating a full human being, a historical and ethical being.

4. “Fenghuang”: West Hunan Female Hysterias

Shen’s tendency to mythologize native sexual differences and associate female sexuality with the cultural mystique of West Hunan takes a fetishizing turn in “Fenghuang” 鳳凰 [“Phoenix”] (1939). In this ethnographical piece, he delineates three kinds of female hysterias (*sanzhong nǚxing de xiesidiliya* 三種女性的歇斯底裡亞) (*Xiangxi* [West Hunan]; hereafter *West Hunan*). The first kind is found among “*gupo*” 蠱婆 [“poison hag”], older women who wield power by placing poisonous insects (*fanggu* 放蠱) in food to make a child sick and then removes them (*shougu* 收蠱) to make the child well again. Shen regards this female hysteria as a depressed and impoverished woman’s vengeful effort to channel her anti-social sentiments. He also suggests that another reason for this hysteria is the bizarre encounter between the collective need for a scapegoat and a woman’s fantasy of self-empowerment, between the communal zeal for witch-hunting and an individual’s willing surrender to guilt. The second type of female hysteria is seen in “*wu*” 巫 [“witch”], women in their thirties who work as religious intermediaries to rid cyclic bouts of mania. While in certain cases, these two types of women might be respected by the community for their presumably supernatural capabilities, in others they can become targets of persecution and punishment. The third kind of hysteria afflicts those young girls who commit suicide by jumping into caves—“*luodong*” 落洞. Shen attributes it to the repressive local military culture that imposes strict sexual codes on women and to the influence of pan-deism among Miao people. For a nymphomaniac, jumping into a cave leads to the ultimate union with the god of the cave.

The three types of collective sexual anomalies, Shen concludes, constitute an important part of the regional “essence” of West Hunan: “Poison hags, witches, and cave-jumping nymphomaniacs represent three generations of West Hunan women. These three kinds of female hysteria form a part of West Hunan mystique. Hidden behind the mystique are stirring tragedies and affecting poetry” (*West*

Hunan 401). As important as these women might appear to Shen, they nonetheless never found their way into his fictional works. Is it because their madness is beyond the pale or is it that their hysterias may only be recorded and registered but not mimed and imagined? It is clear however that the in-between position, as the local insider and the traveling outsider Shen often assumes, is nowhere to be found in this text. Throughout the essay the author remains mainly as an observer with an ethnographer's curiosity and passion for detail. Shen's objectivity should not surprise us. After all, "Fenghuang" is composed as one of a string of pieces to be included in *West Hunan*, a book written with the aim to educate local youths [emphasis is mine] about the region. Such knowledge is introduced through an eclectic mix of ethnographic-flavored peculiarities that ranges from the very exotic (e.g., the custom of corpse-walking in "Yuanlin de ren" 沅陵的人 ["People of Yuanling"]), to the very mundane (e.g., boats in "Changde de chuan" 常德的船 ["Boats of Changde"]). But it is rather difficult to explain Shen's choice of the male counterpart for these three types of women—not local sex-crazed men but righteous and brave knight errant types: "Romantic feelings, combined with religious sentiments, are released in women in the ways described above. In men, they naturally manifest as a knight errant spirit [*youxia jingshen* 游俠精神]" (*West Hunan* 402). One wonders how this romanticized view about male knight errant fits in with Shen's other observations of local males in the same book, especially the part concerning male chauvinism and military officers' practice of double standards with regards to sexual fidelity (*West Hunan* 398-400). In addition, one should note that female hysterias, which Shen regards as an important part of West Hunan mystique, is a rather minor phenomenon compared with the surprisingly prevalent female prowess and resilience shown in the local women, something Shen speaks about with great admiration in one of the above mentioned pieces, "People of Yuanling."

Interestingly, over half a century later, in *Maqiao cidian* 馬橋詞典 [*The Dictionary of Maqiao*] (1996), a hybrid fictional work written by another Hunanese writer Han Shaogong 韓少功 (1953-), one finds a contemporary version of native female hysteria. The writer seems less interested in describing the strangeness of the woman than in analyzing the local community's response to it. Featured in the dictionary entry of "Meng Po" 夢婆 ["Dream-Woman"], Shuishui is a mentally ill woman who is a local legend because, through her predictions as a seer, she has made many of her clients, lottery ticket buyers, rich. Han, appropriating the Freudian theory on dream and the unconscious, thus comments on local people's "contradictory attitude" towards dream-women: "one of pity, at times when logical behavior produced results, but also of veneration, at times when the

secrets of heaven's will were unfathomable" (89). As the foremost writer of "search for roots" literature of the 1980s (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学) and influenced by Shen Congwen, Han Shaogong rejects the mystification surrounding abnormal native femininity and regards it as a manifestation of the local collective's "anti-intellectualism" (89). He affirms the appropriateness of giving the appellation "dream-woman" to women like Shuishui. (The power of the mad is indeed derived from dreams.) For Han Shaogong, dreams do not originate in the woman's brain solely. Rather they are "the deepest repositories of normal people's insanity," i.e., a projection of collective irrationality and fear (89). It is unsurprising to hear these words written by a writer who knows "mass madness" first hand because he lived the Cultural Revolution. With *Maqiao cidian*, Han's parodic use of the form of a fictional encyclopedia affirms and undermines simultaneously the ethnographic effort to catalogue, define, and frame the strange and the mysterious, the attempt to turn them into rational and scientific knowledge. One also realizes how little has changed in the collective psyche about "crazy women" since Shen first introduced his urban readers to the intriguing tale of female hysterics in *West Hunan*.

Conclusion

Shen Congwen's lyrical ambiguity allows him to reject the literary mode that may lend itself to ideological and political purposes. In particular, his aesthetic appropriation of nature and his use of imaginary femininity allow him not only to create psychologically complex female characters, but also render a sensuous and unsettling lyricism to his writing. Shen's lyrical ambiguity does not guarantee freedom from epistemic limitations in representing the native when the issue of gender is taken into consideration. In constructing the West Hunan mystique and his (male) lyrical subjectivity, Shen relegates native female figures to the silent, the corporeal, and the mythical. While her body becomes the spatial marker on the journey of the male subject to assume his place in the historical-symbolic, the woman is forced down into the semiotic world of non speech, unable to articulate her subjectivity. My reading of Shen's text *Border Town* and his ethnographic essay on native female hysterics show the limits of the writer's lyrical ambiguity and the limits of its critical power.

The case of Shen Congwen's lyrical ambiguity took on a particular tragic poignancy and irony as he was later *silenced* by communist revolutionaries and forced to relinquish his authorial subjectivity. By the 1940s, as modern Chinese literature shifted its ground towards moral clarity, political allegiance, socialist solutions, and ideological rigidity, Shen was alienated by moralists and ideologues. Criticized by leftists for his eroticism and in despair because communists had taken

over the country, Shen unsuccessfully attempted suicide in 1949 and thereafter gave up writing altogether. With his works labeled as “passé,” Shen, together with other politically unengaged writers, were soon brushed into the dustbin of literary history in the post-1949 China. His works were banned in Communist China and in Nationalist Taiwan since the 1950s. Even in the post-Mao era his name was still left out of literary histories (Kinkley’s notes 330). It was not until the 1980s that Shen was “rediscovered” in the People’s Republic of China. His legacy was enthusiastically sought and claimed by some younger Hunan writers and those engaged in the “search for roots” literature.⁹ His works have been reprinted many times and canonized in various compendia of modern Chinese literature. But neither the enthusiasm nor the reverence for the writer should prevent us from looking into the complex and at times obscure, even contradictory, elements in his literary corpus—the part that resists easy interpretation. For one who believes in the literary significance and relevance of Shen Congwen work, I tried in this study to better understand this complex writer and to honor his unique standing in modern Chinese literature.¹⁰

Notes

¹ In *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen*, David Der-wei Wang describes Chinese native-soil literature as “a rootless literature, a kind of literature whose meaning hinges on the simultaneous (re)discovery and erasure of the treasured image of the homeland” (250).

² The title of the short story collection that includes “My Old Home” and “The Village Opera” is *Call to Arms (Na Han 呐喊)*.

³ In his Preface to *Call to Arms 呐喊自序*, Lu Xun uses the word “*qubi*” (literally “crooked pen”; meaning “literary manipulation or distortions”) to describe how he adds a hopeful note to the sorrowful endings of two of his stories, “Medicine” and “Tomorrow.” In “Hometown,” there also seems to be a noticeable effort to lift the spirits at the end of the story.

⁴ All translations of Shen Congwen’s writings quoted in this article, except “Xiaoxiao,” are mine.

⁵ In his groundbreaking work, *The Lyrical and the Epic*, Czech sinologist Jaroslav Průšek uses the notion of “the lyrical” (*shuqing*) to describe the continuity between traditional Chinese literature and the May Fourth “New Literature.” To Průšek, the lyrical occupies a foremost place in traditional literati literature and persists in modern Chinese literature in the form of literary subjectivism and individualism. Viewing the lyrical as a “personal gesture” rooted in subjective experience, Průšek emphasizes the authorial endeavor towards transcendence and remastery of reality. In fact, it is exactly on this epistemic premise that the sinologist is able to establish “subjectivism” as a key feature of the lyrical mode linking European individualism and native Chinese literati intellectualism as two converging influences on modern Chinese literature. Such

a notion of the lyrical mode, however, does not take into account the elements in Chinese lyrical tradition that do not valorize a moral-intellectual subjectivity. One notices the omission of the significant role of “nature” in Průšek’s discussion of the lyrical.

⁶ In *Random Sketches*, Shen Congwen introduces several sailors who resemble the eponymous character of his short story Baizi (1928), such as Niubao 牛保 in “Yige duoqing shuishou yu yige duoqing furen” 一個多情水手和一個多情婦人 [“A passionate sailor and a passionate woman”]. Most young sailors in *Random Sketches* are either nameless or are given generic names.

⁷ See Shen’s *Autobiography* and Chapter Two of Kinkley’s *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*.

⁸ The handwritten note was published in 2002 when *Shen Congwen quanji* (*The Complete Works of Shen Congwen*) was released.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of Shen’s legacy in the mainland, see Kinkley’s “Shen Congwen’s Legacy in Chinese Literature of the 1980s.” Shen’s influence has also been traced in some Taiwanese writers’ works. See David Der-wei Wang’s “Imaginary Nostalgia: Shen Congwen, Song Zelai, Mo Yan, and Li Yongping.” Both articles are collected in *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in the Twentieth-century China*. Eds. Ellen Wildma and David Der-wei Wang. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

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