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Urban Nowhere: Loss of Self in Lydia Davis' Stories and Wang Anyi's *Brothers*

By Xue Wei¹ and Kate Rose²

Abstract

This paper focuses on how contemporary literary works by women authors in China and the U.S. reverse the individualist West/collectivist China assumption. It mainly compares the works of Lydia Davis and Wang Anyi with regards to urban women's identities. Under the inspiration of revolutionary ideologies that characterize 20th century China, female characters are striving for meaning in their lives as individuals. In U.S.-American writings, however, the individual is becoming more anonymous and interchangeable, particularly in urban spaces. This article traces possible reasons and implications for this contrast.

Keywords: Identity and selfhood, women authors, China, Collectivism, Individualism

Introduction

Although many political, economic, cultural and ideological differences between China and the US are sharp and clear, there is one questionable popular belief in both countries: the US (and the West in general) is individual-oriented, whereas China is collective.³ Typical Western criticism about China is that there is limited space for the individual, whose own goals are shadowed by the large, absolute national power. We shall focus on how literary works from the 1980s to recent years show a tendency to negate the Self in Western novels, and to affirm the Self in their Chinese counterparts.

The loss or negation of the Self appears as a major theme in Western literature beginning in the latter half of the 20th century. Self is understood here in Jungian terms: it is the person in all of his or her integrity, without the masks required by society or others' expectations. It is where the deepest desires reside for individual realization, as well as the impulse to fulfill them (Jung 1958). The Self is constructed or destroyed in parallel to the evolving social norms governing the

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³ This is in keeping with the Cultural Dimensions Theory developed by Hofstede, which places individualism as one of the five factors that can be used to distinguish and classify cultures. This theory is popular in both China and the West.

collective. This is clearly seen in US-American women's literature of the past 60 years.

In Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), the female characters become frustrated and give up their individualist fight against men and society; likewise, several women in Alice Munro's *Runaway* do run away, but return to their subjugated, Self-less lives with only additional frustrations. Perhaps the most revealing examples are found in short stories by Lydia Davis: individuals are constantly facing a loss of Self; particularly in urban spaces, where they are troubled by a nameless and placeless situation from which they cannot escape. In contrast, the individual in many contemporary Chinese works shows strong Self-affirmation. Although the political or social background is so overwhelming that no individual can entirely escape it, such a situation may actually stimulate Self-awareness for these characters.

Rhetoric of Revolution and Social Control

Since the 1980s, in Chinese cinema and literature alike, women authors have created female characters who are torn between individual desires and national obligations, as described by Shuqin Cui: "In films made by women directors, we find evidence of a female consciousness: the exploration of a Self, split between submission to sociopolitical ideology and allegiance to personal desire" (Cui 200). The production of Chinese novels parallels that of films, with many made explicitly to participate in the cause of nation-building. Such films and novels shed light not only on China's goals, but also on how individuals conjugate new identities in keeping with the revolutionary outlook of their nation. In recent years, some of China's "fifth generation" national allegories have been well-received internationally: "turning national identity and cultural history into visual images, this small, radical group of newcomers to world cinema initiated a transnational engagement in which Chinese productions for the first time drew serious attention from the West" (Cui 99). Less attention has been given to novels in which women writers also reflect on national identity, cultural history, and China's rapid changes towards a future largely unknown.

In *Emerald*, Zhang Jie suggests that with an improvement of the socio-political situation (society becoming more stable and material life more comfortable) Chinese people can develop their sense of Self and live meaningful individual lives. *Emerald* takes place during a transitional period in Chinese socio-political history; this is also the case of *Brothers*, a novella by Wang Anyi. Both texts reflect the new, post-1980s era of increased opportunity.

A brief look at modern Chinese history can shed light on the socio-political situation allegorized in novellas such as *Brothers*. Before the establishment of a nationwide socialist system in 1949⁴, China had already experienced half a century of capitalist democratic revolution. The main turning point was in 1912, when dynastic China officially gave way to the Republic of China. Revolutionary culture became a part of modern Chinese culture. It was instrumental in ending the Japanese occupation and other foreign threats. Later Mao Zedong, as the country's leader, put new wind in the revolutionary sails, with a political philosophy based on the proletariat revolting against the bourgeoisie. The legacy of a century of revolutions can be seen all over China, on monuments, in speeches, and not least of all in TV shows, movies, and historical novels. Wearing their red scarves in remembrance of the communist blood that was spilled, students go to libraries, memorial halls or statues to learn revolutionary history and philosophy, and to show their respects to the late revolutionaries. Such a revolutionary culture may require the loyalty to one ideology,

⁴ Although in Western countries China is generally referred to as a communist country, the Chinese government and its people consider it a socialist country, although ruled by the Communist Party. See Xi Jinping, *On the Governance of China*.

which many Westerners abhor. It can nonetheless be an inspiration and encouragement towards individuality, because revolution implies sticking to one's own beliefs or ideals against overwhelming odds.

Before the May 4th Movement in 1919, there was absolute gender segregation in social life, and women had to stop education after high school because they were banned from universities or colleges.⁵ But just two months after the Movement, Peking University first broke the prohibition and two years later women could be admitted into most universities with full membership and free social contact with men, much earlier than most Western colleges went co-ed.

The US-American journalist Edgar Snow was the first Western reporter to spend time in the “red” (communist) China region in 1936. He reported a strong sense of individuality among the people and particularly the communist revolutionaries. The pessimistic satisfaction toward this world which was predominant in other parts of China was rare here, as revolutionary culture liberated people from low self-esteem and humility stemming from poverty and traditional Chinese culture: “I had never before seen so much personal dignity in any Chinese youngsters. [They are] cheerful, gay, energetic and loyal—the living spirit of an astonishing crusade of youth” (Snow 118). Likewise, many literary works by and about women showed radical, rebellious, and spirited individual traits. For example, the 1928 novel *莎菲女士日记/Miss Sophia's Diary* by Ding Ling (1904-1986) focuses on a typical rebellious woman who was a strong individualist and feminist in ideology, and an idealist toward love. The protagonist's psychological condition and her romantic and sexual relations with men are depicted openly and explicitly, breaking with tradition. Ding Ling eventually moved to the red capital Yan'an (a city in Northwest China, center of the region controlled by the communist party against the official government at that time), where she took part in the communist revolution.

With a dramatic decrease in ideological control, young writers in the 1980s experienced a free and puzzling period, which “overthrew all disciplines” (Wang 133). Holding onto the self-awareness inspired by previous revolutionary teachings, they were nonetheless free from the specifics of one ideology. Contemporary novels reflect on this trend: “From reform to revolution, from revolution to reform: the century-long struggle for identity illustrates a tortuous path of identity reconstruction as well as a reflection on the consequences of reform and revolution” (Qin 264). Such reconstruction is reflected in the individual identities and struggles for autonomy in characters by female novelists such as Wang Anyi. In the West, however, ruling mechanisms (as described by Michel Foucault, Herbert Marcuse, and many others) have been more subtle than in China. Loss of Self in the characters of writers such as Lydia Davis also signifies the loss of meaning in a postmodern landscape wherein oppression is felt, but no oppressor can be named.

Foucault has described the Western ruling mechanism as a technology of subtle, effective economic powers which is more efficient than the sumptuous expenditure and display of power of the tyrannical sovereign (102). The loss of Self in Lydia Davis' stories illustrates the hidden, disguised ruling mechanisms that homogenize ideologies and use technology to conquer dissenting forces, resulting in what Marcuse has named “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” (3). Describing the mechanisms of social control in the “free world,” including through “free market” capitalism and the pacifying goods it delivers, Marcuse suggests that the West does not need a totalitarian government to manipulate the masses. This can be achieved more subtly, through consumerism and mass-media, wherein the “agents of oppression” are also the

⁵ There were women's schools to cultivate mainly teachers, such as the famous school in Beijing that later grew into Beijing Normal University. But at that time, such schools were for secondary education rather than higher learning.

desired commodities. This system is characterized by the difficulty in naming the oppression, or the agents of “unfreedom,” especially as they seem to be freely chosen by each free individual. Davis’ stories may be an attempt to describe such a situation of unspoken, unacknowledged oppression. In the world that she creates, social needs are transplanted onto individual needs, social pathologies likewise pinned on “deviant” individuals, as the Self fades into the “growing integration of industrial society” (Marcuse xlv). Based on the efficient and reductive paradigm of industry (of the factory), this “integration” may explain the dehumanizing nameless and placelessness of Davis’ protagonists, and their inability to effectively name a problem, let alone an oppressor.

Love, Marriage, Divorce: Alongside Strangers

Davis wrote many stories about failures or troubles in love relations and marriage in contemporary cities. The usual themes of anonymity, dehumanization and interchangeability are all the more painfully felt with regards individuals who are supposed to be close to oneself. Protagonists find no one to fight against, nothing to fight for, and no way to regain control over their own lives. As Davis stated in an interview, “love relationships exert the greatest amount of pressure on alterity and singularity, as the ideology of love calls up the greatest drive towards fusion” (Lee 116). Stripped of individuality by the urban environment and its mechanisms of social control, female characters are further alienated by love relations, not least of all because of the unkept promise of fusion, salvation, and Self-validation. As Sue-Im Lee has put it: “Although we are contiguous, the fact that I am sitting next to you ... that we are/ were lovers/ friends, leads to no possibility of transparency ... alterity consistently appears as the insurmountable problem” (Lee 117). No matter what peoples’ relationship and however intimate it seems, they cannot know each other as individual Selves. The Self-less vision of oneself is reflected back in the mirror of the Other, leading to a vague, ubiquitous anxiety and absence of autonomous identity.

Similarly, Marjorie Perloff (1989) suggests that the alienation from others and from a place (even while living together or while in the heart of the city) points to a deeper alienation between words and what is described: “the word can never approximate the world. And yet—each and every language event continues to yearn for such approximation” (Perloff 200). This tension between language and identity is evident in Davis’ story “The Sock,” which begins with a sort of paradox: “My husband is married to a different woman now” (129). The woman’s identity resting on her possession of a husband, on being his wife and the mother of their child, she is not able to move on and become an autonomous Self. After divorce, and even after his remarriage, she still recognizes him as “my husband” throughout the story. She is used again and again by her “husband” and even by his new wife. She says she is doing it all for her son “who is his and mine” (129), although she is clearly the one taking care of him. Biological fatherhood determines his right to use her, and divorce excuses him from contributing to what she still considers to be a family unit. A similar pattern is explored in the works of French writer Marie NDiaye. This suggests a postmodern loss of Self that reinforces traditional gender roles, while obscuring them and making recognition of the problem more difficult.

Winner of France’s most prestigious literary award the Goncourt Prize (for a novel she wrote when still in high school), and the only Black woman (and one of very few women) whose work has been staged in France’s national theater La Comédie Française, NDiaye also explores themes of namelessness, interchangeability, and urban disorientation, quite similar to those of Davis. In NDiaye’s play “Papa Must Eat,” the father leaves the family and only returns to receive

material sustenance from the mother of his children, and later from his children when they are grown. Most of NDiaye's works revolve around themes of interchangeable and disposable identities, recomposed families, and bureaucratic catch-22s. NDiaye's success may be due not only to her innovative and eloquent style, but also to her touching on a social nerve regarding race, class, and gender. Female characters are the first to suffer loss of Self, as traditional norms oppress them, yet (post) modernity (and postfeminism) further isolates them from support structures available in the past; all of this with the backdrop of liberation supposedly already accomplished (if she is oppressed, it is now entirely her own fault). In the characters of NDiaye, as with Davis, there is no awareness of a social phenomenon, but only of individual suffering in a bleak and dehumanizing landscape. This trend in Western literatures, particularly by women, relates to a loss of Self caused by the continued advancement of subtle means of social control, described by Marcuse as industrial capitalism. The characters do not understand what is happening to them, though the narrator suggests issues of class, gender, and race exacerbating the urban unrest and postmodern interchangeability. The agents of women's oppression, like the social mechanism described by Marcuse, are now invisible.

Along with the nameless interchangeability of characters, places are also anonymous, unknown, impersonal: "in the eastern part of the city in a Vietnamese ghetto, by the massage parlors, and none of us really knew this city but we were all here together and it was odd" (Davis 131). During the gathering in "The Sock," the ex-wife feels lost in a city nearby yet unknown, just as she doesn't know where to go in her relations with those around her. She passively allows her fate, her actions, to be determined by others. Her loss of Self is, Davis suggests, linked to gender roles (female Self-sacrifice as wife, even after divorce), and postmodern urbanity (her own city is unknown to her, beyond her grasp). The protagonists lack awareness of these factors and do not question, or even recognize, their oppression.

Whereas the ex-wife in "The Sock" keeps her tiredness and sorrow in her own heart, the three protagonists in Wang Anyi's novella 弟兄们/ *Brothers* actively resist being reduced to the anonymous, self-sacrificing role of (ex)wife and mother. Wang Anyi (1954-) belongs to a generation that experienced social upheavals from the Maoist age to the opening-up and reform era. In *Brothers*, the three women stand for an entire generation: they are high school students in the late 1960s, then they must go to remote, rural farms as part of the Cultural Revolution. There, they grow from teenage students into tough laborers. This turbulent history ends and universities re-open, so the three protagonists pick up their old books and prepare for the college entrance examination after work. Here is where the novella begins: three women from factory or farm, all married, come to a university to study art and are roommates. Free from past sufferings, their excitement and eagerness to live, to explore deeply into their own souls, to accomplish their Self is so strong that sometimes their thoughts seem to be illusory. As the writer says of the time-period she depicts: "这是一个推翻一切准则的短暂的自由时代，我们没有法度，没有宗教，只有前辈们痛苦的经验警戒着我们，使我们格外地向往快乐。" / "It was a short, free age which overthrew all disciplines. We had no law, no religion, yet the suffering experienced by the older generation was warning us and urging us to embrace happiness with particular eagerness" (Wang 133).⁶

For the three women in *Brothers*, their free happy age lasts for four short college years (11 out of 59 pages), their golden age as individual Selves. Their lives as art students are rich and colorful. They climb mountains, explore wilderness, enjoy sunrises and beautiful landscapes. They

⁶From the novella *Uncle's Story*, included in the Chinese edition of *Brothers*. All translations are by the authors.

hold conversations all night, talking about life, humanity, marriage, love, the universe and their deep Selves, with the strong belief that their lives mean something. They eat, sleep and wake up whenever they want, totally ignorant of a time schedule. Just as they are intellectually jubilant, they are lazy in domestic life, reluctant to live as a stereotypical kind of woman. They leave washing dishes and doing laundry until the last possible minute.

After graduation, they begin ordinary lives which restrict their individuality and are hostile to their personal dreams. They cannot make clear or realistic plans, but fall into depression, with the vague dream of running away. Lao Wang's husband is fully aware of the problem, but is not supportive of her:

他知她比她知自己还清楚，他知道这一个女人身体里多了一股力量，是没地方发挥的。而这一个女人又少了一份理智去管辖这股力量，所以这力量就像堤坝里的洪水一般。……可他并不担心这洪水有朝一日会冲垮堤坝，这并不是因为他对她的理智抱有任何幻想，而是因为他深知这一道堤坝不仅由她的理智组成，而是由其他许多人的理智合成，其中也包括他的。/He knows her better than she knows herself. He knows that there's a power in this woman's body, which she has no outlet for. This woman lacks a sense of how to govern this power, so it becomes flood between embankments. ... But he doesn't worry that one day the flood will burst out of the embankment. It is not because he has any illusionary hope that she will see reason, but rather because that he knows deeply that this embankment consists not only of her reasoning, but of many other people's, including his. (242)

Many other people's reasoning refers to social rules or customs that trap the heroines within ordinary life. Lao Li's husband is busy furthering his own career, while Lao Li, who is an artist by nature and more talented than her husband, is confined to dead-end jobs and housework. He is presented as a traditional husband, happy when the house is tidy and supper is on the table when he comes home from his battlefield. Unlike Davis' characters, they reflect on and resist such notions. These women are resisting their husbands when they resist ordinary life, which is built with "many other people's reasoning," including their husbands'. Nonetheless, they rely on their husbands to shelter them from the harsh fight for survival, so they can still think about their Self-worth and dream of Self-accomplishment, which are luxurious things for most Chinese in that age (1980s to 90s), or even today. Somewhat like the US-American housewife of the 1950s described by Betty Friedan, they experience "a hunger that food cannot fill" (24); surprisingly, since the US-Americans were "dissatisfied with a lot that women of other lands can only dream of;" (ibid) and which clearly has not been reached by Wang's characters. In spite of poverty, these women formulate plans to be artists and live together without men, affirming female friendship and Self-hood. Even though they fail at last, their losing is an uneasy one. They are the ones who "still remembered painfully giving up those dreams," (ibid 16) rather than dropping into total Self-unawareness.

Nameless and Placeless

Most of Lydia Davis' characters are nameless, with only the identity that society or other people impose on them. The Self gradually fades behind this constant labeling. In "Two Sisters," there are *one* and *the other*; in "The Housemaid," *I/the housemaid*, and in "Wife in the Country,"

wife one and wife two.

There is also namelessness in *Brothers*, yet it affirms rather than negates the Self. The protagonists comprise an all-female collective which reinforces both individual and group identities. This is akin to the use of *elles* (feminine plural) as the protagonist in Monique Wittig's 1969 epic *Les Guérillères*. Wang innovates linguistically in order to universalize female identities and experiences, claiming them as a central human prototype (the One rather than the Other). The three women in Wang's novel deliberately call their group "弟兄们/brothers," and name each other "老大/Lao Da," "老二/Lao Er" and "老三/Lao San," (the eldest, the second and the third, a traditional way to name siblings). After Lao San returns to her hometown with her husband and leaves the group forever, to avoid the numbers to remind them of the absence of the third, the remaining two call each other "老李/Lao Li" and "老王/Lao Wang," which is literally "old" plus their family name. Such nicknames are usually used for a man rather than a woman. Their husbands are nameless, referred to as 老李家的/Lao Li's or 老王家的/Lao Wang's, which usually signifies a man's wife. The women thereby manifest their independence and Self-respect. As Wittig describes in *The Straight Mind* (particularly the essay "Homo Sum") such gestures reclaim a generic human status usually reserved for men. Davis, however, is writing at time when the Western feminist wave of the 1960s and 70s has retreated into postmodernism.

Living in their own cities and even their own houses, the characters in Davis' stories feel displaced. In masculine history and culture, women's role is closely linked to the home (Crang 48); men either choose by themselves or are forced to wander into the outside world, to be homeless. They always achieve something in the outside world and come back honorably. For Odysseus, there is a home with Penelope waiting in it forever. As women, however, they are the keepers, not the owners of the home. Davis describes this female homelessness:

From where they cowered in the kitchen the man and woman heard small explosions. "The wind," said the woman. "Hunters," said the man. "The rain," said the woman. "The army," said the man. The woman wanted to go home, but she was already home, there in the middle of the country in a house besieged. (Davis 66)

The man's words betray a "masculine" outlook on the world, prevalent in US-American society. According to linguist Deborah Tannen, US-American language, particularly when used by males, reflects a tendency to describe everything in terms of war: "Our fondness for the fight scenarios leads us to frame many complex human interactions as a battle between two sides" (Tannen 17). This linguistic tendency is also reflected in the work of Davis. In this very short piece, the woman is peaceful, but locked inside a masculine worldview in which she has no say. This fairytale-like episode may be seen as an allegory for greater US-American society, with its sociolinguistic norms based on a military outlook. A similar emphasis on male-dominated institutions such as the military is identified by Virginia Woolf regarding Britain, in her 1938 essay *Three Guineas*. Just like the protagonist in Davis' "In a House Besieged," Woolf has called attention to women's "homelessness" in a male-dominated world: "as a woman, she has no country" (Woolf 214), although the liberating end of that commentary ("her country is the whole world") is absent in Davis' work. Here, there is no world beyond the scope of this home. In her longer story "The Fear of Mrs. Orlando," Davis examines placelessness or homelessness in one's own city and house on a more social level. In both cases, male-domination in postmodern society does not guarantee to women the freedom, of identity or of existence, that it seems to provide; the sources of oppression have only become less clear than in previous times. This is apparent in the distinction

between the characters created by Woolf and by Davis, with the same name. Orlando in Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel lived from the Elizabethan Age to the 20th century, or the modern age, whereas the Mrs. Orlando Davis wrote about is from the end of the 20th century. In this postmodern age, Mrs. Orlando descends into senility and neurosis.

In Davis' stories, female solidarity does not exist. As readers, we are in the position of cold, objective unconcern, fully invited into the world that Davis describes. Such callousness allows the characters to witness people dying with impassivity, even pleasure. Woolf's Orlando witnessed many historical events, whereas Davis' postmodern Mrs. Orlando is a witness to strange and possibly invented *faits divers* which do not connect into a coherent and relevant whole. For Davis' Mrs. Orlando, there are no salient visible confrontations, but rather a vague feeling of hostility and estrangement from her surroundings. Her vision is distorted, and the scope of her world constrained in an ahistorical present moment (no flashbacks). Moreover, she is both victim and enjoyer of social discipline, represented by the ability to view others' weaknesses:

Mrs. Orlando is absorbed in looking. She glances around at the others and she can see they have forgotten themselves too. A drowning. This is a drowning. This may even be a suicide. She struggles back over the sand. When she gets home, she immediately calls her daughters ... Her daughters are uneasy because she becomes so excited each time she tells the story. (Davis 10)

In the third part of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault coined the term panopticism, referring to a kind of prison system in which prisoners are "dans l'anneau périphérique, [on est] totalement vu, sans jamais voir; dans la tour centrale, [la police] voit tout, sans être jamais vu" / "[prisoners are] in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; [police] are in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen" (Foucault 202). Being seen implies a totally helpless situation of being a "prisoner" or "besieged" while the ability to see, or to observe others shows a kind of power: "[le pouvoir] a son principe moins dans une personne que dans une certaine distribution concertée des corps, des surfaces, des lumières, des regards" / "power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes" (ibid. 202).

Mrs. Orlando is both prisoner and guard, viewer and viewed. Wherever she goes in the city, Mrs. Orlando feels that she is a target. Her own city is her prison. The collective viewing of the corpse in urban anonymity is the only scene where she stops being a vulnerable, feeble woman and becomes a powerful, privileged person.

In *Brothers*, big cities are still considered progressive and positive towards the individual's Self. The larger cities of the southeast, such as Nanjing and Shanghai, symbolize advancement, freedom, and a promising future. Lao Li and Lao Wang try everything to persuade Lao San to stay in Nanjing after graduation, instead of returning back to her hometown Tongshan, in a rural county in the north of Jiangsu province. At last, Lao San gives up her promising future in Nanjing because her husband refuses to follow her to the city, out of male pride. Her return to village life is a sacrifice of her entire Self, in favor of her husband's ego: "而假如这个真实的自我无法给人带来快乐, 并且还会给人带来破坏, 那么要它有什么意义?" / "If this true Self cannot make people happy, but brings destruction, then why do we want it?" (234). This is a complete resignation of the principles she cultivated during her college years in the company of her "brothers" (claiming universal human status). She is aware that her two "brothers" can have splendid days in the future, but she will not (235).

It turns out that for the other two “brothers,” life in big cities is also not ideal: the crowded bus, narrow streets, unfriendly and bad-tempered passengers and drivers on the road. The tiny room in which Lao Li and her husband live locks up her dreams and power in order to make her into an ordinary wife and mother. She thinks of running away to wander into the remote world once again: “却又深深地向往自由，梦想做一个浪迹天涯的流浪汉。” / “But she’s deeply longing for freedom, dreaming of being a wanderer traveling into the end of the world” (257); and “在她精疲力竭的时候，做一个流浪汉的念头便不时窜出来骚扰她。她想道：如有一天，我受不了了，我就走。” / “When she’s exhausted, the idea of becoming a wanderer jumps out to bother her now and then. She said to herself, if one day I can’t bear it, I will go” (270). The tiny room is her cage; she is homeless. However, her reaction to urban isolation is quite different from that of Davis’ character. Just as there is a connection with another woman, the people around her in the urban environment also assist her Li.

Unlike Mrs. Orlando, Li does not become a mere target of urban fears and limitations. In the crowded bus, although people laugh at Li when she and her baby both cry, they push her back to help her get off, which gives her a glimmer of hope. Most importantly, her former roommate Lao Wang comes to live with her. When Wang is there, the tiny room actually turns into the two women’s home, instead of belonging to Li’s husband, which leads to his dissatisfaction: “他觉得自己有点可怜巴巴的，像是被驱逐了似的……还使他吃惊的，是那女人竟然叫他女人老李。” / “He feels he’s a bit poor, like being exiled. ... What shocked him more is that that woman should call his woman Lao Li” (264). Li has become an exhausted, depressed, anxious and neurotic mother and housewife since her baby was born. Wang’s arrival liberates her. The two women once again talk about humanity, enjoy art exhibitions, and dream of traveling to the seaside together, which in Li’s husband’s mind is “可怕的疯狂的意味” / “a horrible crazy thing” (267). Most importantly, for the first time, they attempt to plan their future. Their plan is to travel around western China, drawing pictures and taking photos, then have an art exhibition. It is a brave and unrealistic plan during the 1980s. They immediately run into an inevitable problem: where will their funds come from? But at least they manage to figure out what they really want.

Meanwhile, their personal relation is very near a lesbian partnership: “她问老李：假如她们同时爱上了一个男人，都爱得很深很强烈，她们将怎么办？……老李便说，杀了他。她的回答使老王非常激动，眼泪都涌了上来。” / “She asked Lao Li, if they fell in love with the same man, both deeply and intensely, what they should do? ... Lao Li said, kill him. Her answer made Wang very moved. She burst into tears” (278). This implies that they would choose each other over love with a man, privileging the Self-affirming relationship between “brothers.” They gain universal “masculine” status through their female triad (“brotherhood”) then partnership, and access a level of Selfhood typically reserved for men in such a context. But this relationship proves to be even more impossible than their Self-accomplishing plan. At the height of their partnership, enraptured by their discussion, Li’s baby has an accident: he falls down from the cradle and hurts his head. The baby’s crying shatters their conversation and their warm affection toward each other:

老李跌跌撞撞地跟着，像个乡下女人那样一路哭号……老王……想去搀扶她一把，可是又不敢。她觉得老李在恨她，并且恨之入骨，好像这场事故全是她一手缔造的。她宁愿接受一群陌生人的帮助，让一个陌生人将孩子抱走了，却对她说：别碰我的孩子！ / Lao Li staggers behind, crying and shouting like a rural woman. ... Lao Wang ... wants to hold her, but dares not. She feels that Li hates her, hates her bitterly to the core, as if this accident were arranged by her hand.

Li would rather accept the help of a group of strangers, and let one stranger hold the baby away, while shouting at Wang “Don’t touch my child!” (279)

In China, it is common that after marriage and childbirth, a woman stops thinking about her life and future, and focuses only on her baby’s future. Li can allow herself and Wang to indulge in drinking, dreaming, talking and putting aside household chores, until the full danger that such female bonding represents for the continuance of male dominance (represented by husband and son) is affirmed. Neglecting the male (husband’s ego, son’s safety) in favor of Self and other women is detrimental to a social structure that relies on women’s self-sacrificing and unquestioning labor. What is interesting here is not that Li and Wang have failed (to establish themselves as autonomous, universally human subjects; to put their “lesbian” love and friendship first), but rather that in such a context they have tried at all.

Conclusion

Representative of their countries’ respective literary tendencies, our authors suggest that contemporary Chinese texts are closer than Western texts to naming male-dominated collective values as inimical to female friendship and self-realization. In the West, forces opposing such freedoms are increasingly protean, and overwhelmingly difficult in postmodern space to discern and to name. The novels of Lydia Davis and Wang Anyi suggest a postmodern negation of the Self in the US, particularly linked to urban landscapes, while Chinese women are using these to express individual desires. The US gendered mechanisms of social control are blurred, and the protagonists of authors such as Davis express a confused suffering, whereas their Chinese counterparts tend to place hope in female friendships furthered by an advanced, urbanized era and certain windows of opportunity. A recurring stereotype—the individualist West and collectivist China—may rightfully be questioned, particularly as it pertains to women’s lives. The postmodern renewal of the American dream—anyone can be anything—may be particularly confusing and harmful to women, insofar as it functions as a myth to obscure awareness and deny persistent obstacles to equality. In China, however, the many unknowns of contemporary society do not result in a blurring of Selfhood, but rather an increased opportunity to acknowledge, assert and utilize one’s own desires and dreams.

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