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GENEALOGY OF HUNGRY WOMEN WRITERS AND ARTISTS:
RETHINKING CHINESE MODERNITY
THROUGH THE ARTS OF FEMALE HUNGER

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation is an interdisciplinary and multimedia project examining literary work, independent documentary, and new media content authored by Chinese women writers and artists, whose lives and works have been conditioned by corporeal experiences of hunger from the beleaguered Republican era to the contemporary age of affluence. It argues that the corporeal and performative authorship of hungry women writers and artists belies the reductive victimization and stigmatization of female hunger in the representative tradition of modern Chinese literature and culture, and that the art of female hunger complicates the romanticizing trope of the hungry young artist in the Euro-American literary tradition by intersecting the poetic with the political. It.

Mapping the genealogy of hungry women writers and artists throughout the long twentieth century, under varying circumstances of poverty, famine, social restructuring, and consumer culture, the dissertation reexamines Chinese modernity from the marginalized position of the hungry others and reconfigures Chinese modernity in tandem with media evolution from print to the Internet. The way female hunger is represented in modern literary and visual works compels us to rethink Chinese modernity as an embodied historical process, which women have experienced on bodily and quotidian levels. It is imperative, historically and ethically, for us to explore the abject experiences of the hungry others against the shifting social and geopolitical structures, especially when China is quickly transforming into a society of affluence.

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Preface

In this dissertation, I attempt to delineate a history of female hunger and to theorize “hunger feminism” in the context of modern China. Elizabeth Wilson in her groundbreaking book *Gut Feminism* elucidates that “the biology of hunger is already and always a minded event: the contractions of the stomach walls, changes in blood sugar, liver metabolism...are phantastically alive—from birth, before birth, in prehistory.”¹ Debunking the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, Wilson reconceptualizes the biological phenomenon of hunger as a minded event. She calls on feminist scholars to reorient their critical attention and to theorize the biochemical mechanism of the gut. Following her line of reasoning but taking it to a further argument, I understand hunger as a biological register of historical testimony as well as a physical condition for artistic creativity. The configuration of the genealogy of hunger women writers and artists throughout the various stages of Chinese modernity revisits the grand narrative of modern history and calls its homogeneity into question with women’s alternative experiences and testimonies. Moreover, the art of female hunger as a new analytical category undermines the feminized victimology of hunger. These hunger women writers and artists wield their historical agency of bearing testimonies and their artistic agency of creating in multifarious forms and media. A categorically feminine and feminist practice, the art of female hunger is a form of transgressive art, for it disrupts the historical and cultural repression on women’s self-expression of appetite and desire.

¹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 40.

Introduction

Theorizing Hunger and Gendering the Art of Hunger

*The emptiness of hunger is emptier than
all curiosity, cannot be
compensated for with the mere hearsay of
what it demands.*

—Emmanuel Levinas

History, it appears, cannot escape hunger.

—James Vernon

In the introduction to *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault underlines “the history of the balance achieved by the human species between hunger and abundance” as one of the “unmoving histories”¹ that have constituted a totalizing narrative about human society. His observation resonates with James Vernon’s remark, “History, it appears, cannot escape hunger.”² Before the launching of industrial revolutions in the eighteenth century, human productivity was still subjected to the capriciousness of nature, so that the peril of starvation loomed large in all societies. After this menace was warded off with the advancement of technology and productivity, the modern nation-states in the developed world were built upon the foreclosure of hunger—that is, the belief in and the promise of the alleviation of hunger. However, hunger remained part and parcel of modern history in underdeveloped regions such as twentieth-century China. Fraught with historical experiences of starvation, Chinese society was haunted by the phantom of hunger, whose apparition manifested in political, cultural, as well as everyday aspects of social life. Gang Yue contends, “The sense of a shared history rests on real or imagined shared historical experiences. Yet ironically it is one of the most devastating experiences shared by all humankind in the past—hunger, famine, and mass starvation—that has haunted the rulers of China throughout its history.”³ Yue emphasizes that hunger has been the paramount problem

to be tackled throughout Chinese history, as the collective memory of hunger has been shared among generations of Chinese. Thus, the deliberations of the political and cultural elites and the quotidian experiences of the commoners converge on the matter of hunger, making it a pivotal issue in Chinese social history to modern times.

In his short essay “Edible Ecriture,” Terry Eagleton poignantly argues, “There has been much critical interest in the famished body of the Western anorexic, but rather little attention to the malnutrition of the Third World. Perhaps such dwindled bodies are too bluntly material a matter for a so-called ‘materialist’ criticism.”⁴ Eagleton’s criticism of the lack of scholarly interest in Third World hunger teases out the disparity of material reality that has shaped the locus of academic inquiries. Although the cultural implications of the Western anorexic should not be belittled, the human suffering of malnutrition and starvation also warrants a thorough investigation, for it reflects the materiality and historicity of beleaguered Third World societies. However, to avoid the pitfalls of traditional historiography, as Foucault cautions us, one should not just generalize hunger as the prevailing problem throughout human history, but instead, investigate the disparate historical and social contexts wherein hunger erupts, as well as the ways hunger constructs nuanced historical discourses. Delving into human history through the lens of hunger, one can also unravel how hunger is experienced and articulated differently, given specific historical and social backgrounds. Echoing David Der-wei Wang’s advocacy to “look unafraid at this monstrous fact of contested modernities,” this dissertation is undertaken as a critical task to examine the hungry fact of modern and contemporary Chinese society, by configuring a genealogy of gendered hunger narrative and performance. The visceral aspect of history and society casts new light on the ever unfolding and evolving discourse of Chinese modernity.

Moreover, hunger never ceases but remains an immediate life issue to be addressed at both the personal and the social levels. Even when it stops posing a threat to life, hunger continues to define and confine how one lives. Lu Xun (1881-1936), the founding figure of modern Chinese literature and forerunner of modern Chinese thinking, illuminates the centrality of hunger in his essay “Hearsays about Dreams” (*tingshuo meng*). Disputing Freudian psychoanalysis for attributing the force of life exclusively to the sexual drive, Lu Xun posits that hunger should be considered the primal force of desire in constituting the human condition. He calls on readers to think less about repressed libido in dreams, but more about material deprivation in reality. Lu Xun writes, “The craving for food is a more profound desire than libido. Currently, we can’t stop talking about lovers and love letters. If that is not inappropriate, we shouldn’t be ashamed of talking about our need to eat.”⁵ Written in 1933 when China was at a crossroads of its national fate, the essay intends to enlighten the Chinese about the path that the nation should take. In straightforward vernacular language, Lu Xun asserts that the issue of hunger (*chifan wenti*) should be taken the most seriously in deciding the nation’s future. Nevertheless, while pondering China’s social issues, he touches upon a more fundamental question pertaining to universal human conditions. That is why one need not be startled to find a striking resemblance between Lu Xun’s remark and that of Maud Ellmann in the 1990s. Ellmann states that, while Lacan envisages the “dearth” or “lack” in the human condition in terms of castration rather than in terms of “hunger,” she herself “argues for the need to substitute a more encompassing poetics of starvation for the phallic poetics of desire.”⁶ Thus, Ellmann overrides the centrality of libido in psychoanalysis and privileges hunger as the more encompassing register.

In the above quote, Lu Xun also points out that human beings’ rudimentary need to eat, driven by visceral hunger, tends to be stigmatized as being base and animalistic.

The social shaming is likely to silence any expression of hunger, as talking about the human need to eat is deemed discourteous in public discourse. Instead, the Confucian classics indoctrinate a didactic and teleological mindset towards human sufferings such as starvation. Mencius once said, “When Heaven is about to place a great responsibility on a man, it always first frustrates his spirit and will, exhausts his muscles and bones, exposes him to starvation and poverty, harasses him with troubles and setbacks, so as to stimulate his mind, toughen his nature and enhance his abilities.”⁷ The dialectic thinking of Chinese philosophy emphasizes on the association and exchangeability between fortune and misfortune: thus, misfortune can transfigure into a fortune when one seizes the opportunity to temper oneself and to prepare oneself for higher achievement. The exposure to and survival from poverty and starvation proves one’s ironclad will and strength, and hence qualifies one to take on serious social responsibilities. Only by withstanding such trials and tribulations can one cultivate character and talent. Thus, in the Confucian context, the sublimation of human sufferings alienates the suffering subjects from their corporeal experiences and disenfranchises them from the rights to express their hunger.

Ideological indoctrination and political mobilization in revolutionary China co-opted the sublime subject and transcendental mindset inscribed in Confucian moralities. In the revolutionary rhetoric, the trope of hunger allegorizes the political aspiration for national liberation and communist revolution. David Wang postulates a discourse of communist hunger: “Under revolutionary circumstances, hunger drive one to the acute awareness of one’s class status in the social hierarchy, thereby opening the way to radical solutions. On the other hand, in the same revolutionary circumstances, one’s capacity to withstand hunger becomes a sign, through which one demonstrates one’s physical and moral strength.”⁸ Thus, communist mobilization deploys a politicized and moralized semiotics of hunger, which romanticizes the

experience of starvation as a major force of motivation for class struggle and nationalist revolution—one's capacity to endure hunger testifies to one's revolutionary essence and potential. The communist hunger discourse draws on the Confucian metaphysics of manhood, but at the same time, it operates as political expediency and ideological propaganda in the hard times of real famine and warfare. The rhetorical sublimation of hunger suppresses spontaneous articulations of physical pains and prioritizes revolutionary efforts over counter-measures to alleviate hunger.

Similar to Wang's theorization, Judith Farquhar unveils an ideological investment in hunger discourse in post-liberation China, when "it was not acceptable to introduce individual appetites, or their indulgence, into discourse"⁹ and "the existence and indulgence of non-collective appetites were almost an embarrassment."¹⁰ For a long time, socialist China underwent food scarcity and material deprivation. In reaction to social outcries, the party implemented a rigid temporal scheme periodizing living experiences and human appetites, which Farquhar synthesizes as "past suffering (in the old society), future utopia (when communism is achieved), and in the present, work, production, and service."¹¹ The communist party claimed its legitimacy and authority by installing a new beginning for society, one that diverged from the old society and led to a utopian future. But the material deprivation and physical discomfort in the present posed a challenge to its administration. The ideological control prohibited the articulation of individual appetites or the exchange of personal complaints in the public realm. It stipulated that the Chinese people had suffered enormously in the past; if they kept working hard now, their past suffering and current work would be rewarded in the future. Under the scheme, the present is merely a transitional period (*guodu shiqi*), wherein human needs and appetites should be subdued and deferred. This scheme outlaws the immediate gratification of individual appetites and embellishes the destitute reality of starvation. The arbitrary

periodization of living experiences and human appetites of socialist China is thus reminiscent of the overriding Neo-Confucian tenet epitomized by Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) (in)famous aphorism—"to substantiate heavenly moralities is to subdue human appetites" (*cun tianli mie renyu*).¹² Positing an antagonism between moralities and appetites, the doctrine reprimands indulgence of appetites and extols endurance of material deprivation, i.e., withstanding hunger. Therefore, talking about hunger in the present tense is judged as morally suspicious and politically unenlightened.

Overlooking the urgency of rudimentary human needs, Chinese hegemonic hunger discourses are premised on the ideological administration over human appetites and the bio-power over hungry bodies. They reduce the embodied and lived experience of hunger to a didactic and teleological trope. In western thought, one can also find a tradition of subordinating biological needs. This cultural indoctrination can be traced back to Antiquity. For example, Aristotle's theorization of the hierarchy of lives is premised on the abasement of biological urges such as hunger. As Hannah Arendt argues, human beings achieve Aristotle's good life "by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival."¹³ Therefore, their lives are "no longer bound to the biological life process."¹⁴ That is to say, a good and civic life lies beyond the sheer biological life process, which in Aristotle's thinking, dominates only animal life. Via transcending biological limits and conquering the urges of survival one cultivates a "rational soul," which eventually governs and adjudicates human feelings and acts. The urge of hunger is characterized as an animalistic instinct, against which a good and rational human being should defend himself. Of course, the topic of hunger should be eschewed in public discussions.

In concord with Lu Xun, Arendt casts doubt on Aristotle's denouncing of biological urges and human appetites. She provocatively asserts: "Without mastering

the necessities of life in the household, neither life nor the ‘good life’ is possible.”¹⁵ Both Arendt and Lu Xun draw attention to the material and physical foundation of life, which cannot be transcended with either self-discipline or rationality. As innate urges substantiate human life, hunger is an inescapable condition of living. In their view, the sociocultural shame of talking about the base human need to eat should be overcome, for the centrality of hunger is worthy of critical thinking. In our time, western thinker Juan-Manuel Garrido pioneers the critical task of rethinking hunger, pondering the central role that hunger plays in energizing life:

Instead of having roots or an umbilical cord connecting them respectively to the Mother Earth or the Mother Womb, living beings are, so to speak, connected to their empty stomach. That is, they are abandoned to their hunger. And, through their hunger, they are abandoned or delivered to world. The world is the collection of things that appear or make sense in correlation with hunger.¹⁶

Human life comes into being with an empty stomach; therefore, life begins with and revolves around visceral hunger, which is situated at the center of the meaning-making system. Therefore, the rudimentary human need to eat is not only a survival instinct that maintains the biological life of the organism, but also a pivotal cognitive category that gives rise to a whole system of concepts. Steven Connor in his recent book *The Matter of Air* states: “Eating and drinking are usually assumed to be the contrary or the complement of cognitive life and the empire of signs, and therefore to belong to the realm of mute animal need rather than cultural self-imagination. But the habitus of eating is an important part of the dreamwork whereby bodies, indeed the very notion of a body, are formed.”¹⁷ That is to say, the urge of hunger engenders both the biological organism and the cognitive notion of human bodies.

Taking this argument one step further, Garrido teases out the dialectical relation between hunger and life: the complete gratification of hunger is perpetually deferred in life, but it is in the ceaseless process of deferral that life constantly sustains and renews itself. The ultimate alleviation of hunger leads not to a good life but rather to a

static condition of death. He elaborates: “Hunger is original or factual; it is the fact of being in excess of and in rupture with the general integration of things. To be born, to grow, to reproduce, to multiply, to vary, to increase complexity, and so forth, are only thinkable as coming out of such excess, not as existing for the purpose of filling a lack or satisfying a need.”¹⁸ Extrapolating from Garrido’s theorization, I argue that paradoxically, the emptiness of hunger is constitutive of the fullness of life. Instead of being a signifier of lack, hunger is generative of appetites and desires that feed life. Nevertheless, hunger also intimates the impossibility of filling the emptiness, for it accentuates the structural incompleteness or dependence of each living being—that is, the living subject needs to intake exterior objects in order to temporarily relieve hunger. It is not only that life originates from hunger, but also that hunger is the original problem through which life constantly deconstructs itself. In this sense, Ellmann argues that eating is the origin of subjectivity: “For it is by ingesting the external world that the subject establishes his body as his own, distinguishing its inside from its outside. If the subject is founded in gustation, though, this also means that his identity is constantly in jeopardy, because his need to incorporate the outside world exposes his fundamental incompleteness.”¹⁹

As the urge of hunger simultaneously constitutes and deconstructs life, it stimulates and confounds the meaning-making mind at the same time. The perplexing condition of hunger often sparks critical reasoning and artistic creativity. Meditating on Knut Hamsun’s semi-autobiographical fiction *Hunger* and Franz Kafka’s experimental short story “The Hunger Artist,” Paul Auster conceives an “art of hunger,”

Something new is happening here, some new thought about the nature of art is being proposed in *Hunger*. It is first of all an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it. That is not to say an art of autobiographical excess, but rather, an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself. In other words, an art of hunger: an art of need, of necessity, of desire. Certainty yields to doubt, form gives way to process. There can be no arbitrary imposition

of order, and yet, more than ever, there is the obligation to achieve clarity. It is an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers. For that reason, it becomes essential to ask the right questions. One finds them by living them.²⁰

Hunger, a debilitating biological and psychological condition suffered by all human beings in the past, is a versatile and volatile trope. A typology of hunger may need to distinguish between individual hunger and massive starvation, bodily hunger and psychological hunger, hunger as need and hunger as desire. Therefore, the art of hunger can be an art of need, of necessity, or of desire.

However, this seemingly typological disaster works to the advantage of literary and artistic analysis—that is, the discursive power of hunger is fully realized in literary narratives and artistic representations, wherein the individual hunger addresses a collective readership; the bodily hunger is mesmerized and ruminated on by the psyche; and the desperate need to eat strikes a chord with the reader in the realm of desire. Hunger is more than a biological condition measured by a range of biomedical and socioeconomic scales, or a material consequence engendered by an assemblage of natural-historical forces and sociopolitical processes. In the art of hunger, hunger is revoked and represented first as a lived experience, and then as a living condition that shapes life, history, and art. Peter Brooks famously calls the body “an epistemophilic project,” arguing that “narrative desire, as the subtending dynamic of stories and their telling, becomes oriented toward knowledge and possession of the body.”²¹ The art of hunger thus epitomizes the embodied epistemophilic project and demonstrates how bodily hunger contributes to knowledge production and artistic creation.

Kafka’s short story *Ein Hungerkünstler*, which features a hunger artist’s radical persistence of self-disembodiment, has been an enigma in the world literary history since its publication in 1922. The title itself is curiously significant here: “an artist in hungering”²² rather than a hungering/starving artist, which in German would be *ein*

hungernder Künstler. For a hungering artist, hunger only intimates a psychosomatic condition, whereas in the case of an artist in hungering, hunger is part and parcel of his artistic endeavor. Hence Kafka depicts an artist in becoming, paradoxically through self-denial—namely, starving himself to death. As illuminated by Auster, one finds the artistries of hunger “by living them.”²³ However, the western convention of allegorizing and romanticizing the art of hunger is premised on the voluntariness of hunger, which is more appropriately associated with fasting than with starving. If the artist starves under coercive physical or material circumstances, should the art of hunger be re-examined and re-defined? With this as my point of departure, I propose an alternative paradigm to the prototype of the hunger artist, which I call the “hungry artist.” Unlike the hunger artist, the hungry artist undergoes a destitute material condition. Instead of willingly fasting, she cannot afford any food to eat. Beleaguered by desperate hunger, she has recourse to the performance of literature and art in order to make a living, to find solace, or even to seek poetic justice. The expedient employment of her artistic talent gains an infinite momentum from her lived experience and traumatic memory of starvation, which makes her art of hunger a creative intervention into both her material reality and the historical discourse of her time. That is to say, hunger, although being a perilous condition, is generative of both her material being and her artistic creativity.

My dissertation is specifically a study on hungry women writers and artists, for I am fascinated with the transgressive and transformative potentials of both their experiences and their works. First of all, women’s literary and artistic representations of the “abject” female body of hunger disrupt the progressive narrative of Chinese modernity and interrogate the disembodied sublimation of hunger in hegemonic ideologies. The outcry on the part of the marginalized gender destabilizes the male-centric historic discourse that iterates the heroic narrative of triumphing over hunger. The testimonies of hungry

women writers and artists shed new light on understanding the human cost of the so-called historical progress, be it nation building, communist revolution, or economic reform. Thus, the configuration of a genealogy of hunger women writers and artists throughout the various stages of Chinese modernity revisits the grand narrative of history and calls its homogeneity into question with women's alternative experiences and testimonies. Secondly, as David Wang has keenly noticed, the theme of hunger and the image of hungry women prevail in modern Chinese fiction, for "national hunger has been imagined in feminine terms, owing perhaps to women's somatic vulnerability during natural and man-made famines, or to women's conventional role in the semiotics of victimology."²⁴ As national hunger is feminized, hungry women are reduced to victims in need of salvation and revenge. Building onto Wang's observation, I argue that whereas female hunger is an eminent literary trope employed by prominent male authors from the precursor of modern Chinese literature Lu Xun to the recent Nobel Laureate Mo Yan, women's capacity to survive hunger and their agency in recounting experiences of hunger are underrepresented. Thus, hungry women artists as a new analytical category belie the feminized semiotics of hunger. These women possess both the historical agency of bearing testimonies and the artistic agency of creating the art of female hunger in multifarious forms and media. Last but not least, the art of female hunger is a transgressive art, for it disrupts the historical and cultural repression on women's articulation of hunger.

Besides the cultural repression of women's public expression in history, there seems to be a specific taboo against women's acknowledgment, let alone, display of their empty stomachs. Levi-Strauss's study of the formation of kinship society discloses the structural oppression of women in the pre-modern era. Women were exchanged among different tribes as gifts or commodities, together with metals and livestock, in order for men to avoid incest as well as to forge alliances. Women's status as property rather than

as property owners limited their agency in consuming food—rather, they were associated with and consumed like food. Moreover, in most societies, women are designated with the role of food- and care- provider, who prioritizes the needs of others over her own. This gendered division of labor accentuates women’s “natural” “feminine” predispositions, and institutionalizes them as what I call “the cult of feminine altruism.” In this sense, Eliza Gibson asserts: “Women are supposed to feed others, not themselves. Desires for self-nurturance and self-feeding are construed as greedy and excessive. Therefore, women in western cultures have had to develop a primarily other-oriented emotional economy.”²⁵ Women are coerced into subduing their own material needs while rejoicing in gratifying others’, and their needs for self-substantiation can be misconstrued and stigmatized as unruly female desires for self-aggrandizement. Under the other-oriented economy, women’s appetites are denied as women’s outcries over hunger are silenced. The reticence imposed on hungry women operates as an apparatus of ideological control and body politics.

Chinese Confucian classics also strictly circumscribe female hunger. Confucian views on femininity crystalize in the “Three Obediences and Four Virtues” (*san cong si de*).²⁶ Among the four womanly virtues is diligence in domestic labor, which mainly includes cooking (*zhong kui*) and embroidering (*nü gong*) in the pre-modern agricultural society. According to *The Book of Changes*, a Confucian classic used to tell the fortunes of individuals, households or nations, women’s management of “zhong kui” foretells the fortune or misfortune of one household. The renowned Tang dynasty Confucian scholar Kong Yingda (574-648), in his annotations to *The Book*, remarked: “the way of womanhood...its responsibility entirely lies in cooking meals at home (*zhong kui*) and providing offerings to ancestors (*gong ji*).”²⁷ “Zhong kui” also used to be a euphemism for “wife” in Chinese classics. Thus, women’s role as domestic food provider is essentialized and institutionalized by Confucian tenets, the

gendered social role overshadowing women's agency in consuming food. The doctrine of the "Three Obediences" dictates that women should subjugate their own needs and appetites to those of their fathers, husbands and sons. For example, in times of famine, women should starve so that men can have more to eat; otherwise, they would be chastised for lack of womanly virtues. The influential Neo-Confucian philosopher Cheng Yi (1033-1107) in the Song Dynasty famously claimed that for women, "dying from starvation is trivial while losing one's chastity has grave consequences."²⁸

At the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese enlightenment intellectuals castigated Confucianism for being the bastion of conservative morals and the archenemy to modernity. In quest for modern subjectivity (*renge*), they passionately advocated the values of freedom and individuality, being unshackled from the constraint of traditions. The issue of women's liberation was evoked and coopted by the iconoclastic movement, putting a spotlight on the transformation of womanhood. However, the male enlightenment intellectuals also reinforced women's conventional role as the food-and-care provider as they envisioned themselves as suffering (*kumen*) modern men in desperate need of nourishment and cure. The prototypical male protagonist of Yu Dafu's (1896-1945) fiction, for example, is an effeminate loner in search of self-validation. Like a newborn, he has trouble substantiating an independent life, so that he demands the emotional and nutritious support of the maternal. In contrast to Yu's apathetic and narcissistic male protagonist, female characters in his works are designated as food-and-care providers—not unlike their pre-modern sisters. The nuanced difference lies in the fact that now women care for and provide food to progressive-thinking and reform-minded men, for the constitution of modernity necessitates women's selfless devotion to them. Thus, the cult of feminine altruism

prevails in both premodern and modern narratives. Women's endurance of hunger along with other material sacrifices is exploited by different forms of patriarchal society.

As women's own consumption of food is vilified by sociocultural conventions, discursive and ideological control renders women's articulation of hunger unseemly, resulting in situations where women have to overcome sociocultural suppression in order to tell her-stories of hunger. Therefore, the art of female hunger proves to be an action of defiance and even insurgency. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's canonical work on Victorian women's writing has made it common knowledge that women's eating and women's storytelling are two associated and prohibited acts of female orality.²⁹ Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran arguing along these lines note that "hunger and starvation, on the one hand, speech and storytelling, on the other, serve as central tropes dramatizing the conflicts of female literary authority in the nineteenth century."³⁰ Helena Michie reveals the latent message conveyed by Victorian women's writing: "It is in the mythic or metaphoric sub-texts of the novels, then, that women act out their hunger, reach for and periodically redefine the apple that is denied to them on realism's apparently seamless surface, its apparently uncracked plate."³¹ Writing thus becomes a means for women to act out their hunger, to claim their right to the forbidden apple. The acting-out, i.e., the cracking of the uncracked plate, entails an intervention of violence or even madness. Thus, the art of female hunger is first and foremost a subversive form of art. Along these lines, Hélène Cixious urges women to write through their bodies, for this form of "feminine writing" is a "new insurgent writing."³² Writing through the body is to transgress simultaneously the taboo against women's display of their own bodies and the prohibition on women's public speech. For one thing, "by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display"; and for the other, woman's writing is "an act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the

occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression.”³³ The art of female hunger is thus a form of women’s “body writing,” a declaration of their rights to hunger and to a public expression of hunger.

Poststructuralist feminism has deconstructed the rigid demarcation of gender boundaries, and studies of (oppositional) gender difference have been proven to be arbitrary and ineffective in understanding gender-specific experiences. Hence, instead of investigating how women’s experiences and articulations of hunger diverge from men’s, I focus on the sociopolitical contexts that are responsible for the occurrence and aggravation of women’s suffering of hunger. What renders women vulnerable, if not more vulnerable, to hunger? How do women cope with hunger under specific circumstances? What contributes to women’s survival from hunger? And who have they become after undertaking the struggle with hunger? The material reality of and the intellectual meditation on hunger are intertwined in their lives and then manifested in their creative works. Thus, I explore women’s mobility and agency through their interactions with hunger on both the material and intellectual levels.

Contrasting women’s literary and artistic agency and that in surpassing hunger, I ask questions such as: What is the significance of literary and artistic creation to hungry women? How do women writers and artists integrate the lived experiences and living memories of hunger into their works? What does “hunger” denote in their art of hunger and how is it represented? How do they construct and perform the identity of hungry women writers and artists, and through what media? What are the interventions of their art of hunger in terms of the history of hunger in modern and contemporary China? What are the revelations of their works regarding women’s involvements in the making and transforming of Chinese modernity over the course of one century? I argue that hungry women artists’ alternative narratives and performances explode the homogeneous and didactic depiction of hunger in Chinese

historical and cultural discourses and that the embodied knowledge of women's sufferings caused by poverty, famine or political turmoil contributes to the formation of women's corporeal subjectivity.

Chapter one of the dissertation delves into Xiao Hong the person and her talent against the backdrop of the tumultuous era of the Republic. Through investigating Xiao Hong's life and writing after her Nora-esque escape, the chapter argues that hunger is constitutive of her subject-formation as a Chinese Nora. An empty stomach seems to impede Nora's path towards independence and freedom, but it also presents an opportunity for Nora to assert self-determination and to stimulate her artistic agency. Exemplified by her books *The Field of Life and Death* and *Market Street*, Xiao Hong's writing about mundane life is a bodily and existential art that resists artistic transcendence and ideological sublimation. She derives her artistic creativity primarily from the visceral and affective intensity of hunger, and the centrality of hunger in her art generates a compelling empathetic effect. The interpenetration between her hunger and her art configures her modern subjectivity as a hungry woman artist. Xiao Hong redeems her abject life with the art of hunger, and in that way, enters her own golden era. Conceding that the historical and realistic representation in the biopic *The Golden Era* contributes to the demystification of homogenous enlightenment discourse and the hegemonic modality of the New Woman, I argue that without accounting for Xiao Hong's distinctive subjectivity and outstanding literary achievement against the misery and misfortune of her personal life, the biopic falls short of conveying the essence of her golden era.

Chapter two analyzes Hong Ying's art of storytelling, which is centered on her family history of hunger. Hong Ying's generation, just children during the Great Famine (1959-1962), experienced its lasting effects throughout their childhoods. Her storytelling subscribes to the politics of remembrance and the hauntology of specters.

In a Benjaminian fashion, the storyteller borrows her authority from death (by starvation), and I argue that the centrality of the specter of hunger in her storytelling evokes an ethical injunction to redress historical traumas, as postulated by Derrida's hauntology. Gravitating toward the central trope of the spectral hunger, Hong Ying's storytelling also deploys another topographical trope: the spectral river. The Yangtze River valley in Hong Ying's storytelling is a dystopia that is characterized by poverty, environmental disasters, dehumanization, and cannibalism. Overshadowed by death and atrocity, the river is re-imagined as a spectral space that leads to the underworld of ghosts. Hong Ying attempts to recast China's cultural memory by exploring the spectrality of hunger and the dystopian space of the Yangtze River.

Chapter three examines Zhang Ci's life journey as documented through three Chinese independent documentaries, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), *At Home in the World* (1995), and *The Faith of Ailao Mountain* (2015). Zhang Ci's Nora-esque escape from her provincial hometown is contextualized in the heyday of social restructuring and cultural repositioning in postsocialist China. Her wretched life bumming in Beijing attests to the deprivation and marginalization suffered by the floating population of migrant artists in the new urban milieu. Their vagrant lives epitomize a Deleuzian nomadic subjectivity configured by transgressive mobility as well as a deterritorializing lifestyle. However, the nomadic subject is demystified when hunger accentuates its physical dependence on exteriority. The deplorable being of the structurally marginalized evidences the prevailing social stratifications and alienations of the reform era. In Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing*, the first Chinese independent documentary that commemorates the migrant artist generation, Zhang Ci's outburst of tears and anger in front of the camera provokes audiences to question the romanticizing discourse around this generation. Highly charged and unpredictable, the outcry of the hungry woman artist illustrates the unique aesthetics

of Chinese independent documentary—namely, *xianchang* (a form of documentary realism that is rooted in the location of shooting). Her discharge of emotion onscreen also exemplifies the cathartic effect of cinema. That is to say, under the objective gaze of the camera, the film subject is prompted to revisit suppressed memories and to release strangled emotions.

While the life adversities of poverty and hunger have proven to Zhang Ci the tenuousness and unsustainability of living in perpetual displacement, a realization that motivated her to cross national borders, her homecoming after two decades of bumming in the world only leads to another existential crisis. Her mother's shocking suicide attempt devastates her. Overwhelmed by the raw emotions of pity and pain, Zhang Ci seeks comfort in filming, later turning the footage into her debut film *The Faith of Ailao Mountain*. Behind the camera, she starts to observe her mother and herself from a distance. By balancing subjective feelings with the objective visualization of the screen, Zhang experiences cinematic catharsis. Suffice it to say that cathartic filmmaking becomes a hallmark of the hungry woman artist's cinematic practice. With the cathartic effect, *The Faith* also exemplifies essayistic thinking that addresses a subjective quest through a mediated dialogue between the interior and the exterior.

China's open door policy since 1978, in particular, its integration into the global market circa 2001, has generated exponential economic growth for decades and lifted the majority of its population from poverty. While the international community is vigilantly watching China's breathtaking ascent as an economic powerhouse, China's material and financial wealth is widely advertised and celebrated by domestic media. It seems that China has transformed into an affluent society. While the collective memory of historical hunger is suppressed, displays of contemporary affluence develop as a form of over-compensation. The dramatic re-orientation of social

mentalities and cultural behaviors in this period reflects both the positive aspect of China's so-called economic miracle and the negative aspect of its historical amnesia. Therefore, although the unprecedented popularity of eating broadcasts in contemporary Chinese new media seems to manifest China's entry into a "post-hunger" era, the unapologetic celebration of consumption and excess in the public space of new media actually provokes more urgent questions about both the past and the present. Thus, Chapter four explores the social and political significance as well as the cultural and ethical implications of Chinese eating broadcasts via the example of the influential female broadcaster Mizijun. The chapter reveals the ethical controversies of this new media phenomenon: its unreserved celebration of contemporary affluence dismisses the history of hunger as well as the current social problem of poverty; in addition, by making women's overeating a media spectacle, it disguises women's struggle with the tyranny of hunger, in the form of culturally-coerced self-starvation.

The discursive construction of contemporary affluence obscures the collective memory of China's pre-affluence history, which is infused with the suffering of poverty and hunger. The poverty-stricken Republican era of the 1930s, the devastating aftermath of misguided socialist engineering in the 1960s, the painful social transition to the post-socialist era in the 1980s: have all witnessed the mishap of hunger and starvation afflicting part of the Chinese population. Both the historical memory of hunger and the existing reality of poverty should be called to mind, especially at the time of their impending "eradication." Against this emergent sociocultural shift in contemporary China, my project on hunger intervenes as a historical recall of and an ethical response to this emergent sociocultural shift in contemporary China.

¹ Michel Foucault, "Introduction" in *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

² James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History*, (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

³ Gang Yue, *The Mouth that Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 35.

⁴ Terry Eagleton, "Edible Ecriture," in *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, eds., Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 207.

⁵ The essay was originally published on the first issue of *Wenxue zazhi* (Literature Magazine) in April 1933.

⁶ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 27.

⁷ Translation by author. The quote can be found in *Meng zi* (Mencius).

⁸ David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 123.

⁹ Judith Farquhar, *Appetites—Food and Sex in Post-socialist China*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Translation by author. The quote can be found in *Zhu zi yu lei* (The Classified Conversations of Master Zhu).

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 36.

¹⁴ Ibid, 36-37

¹⁵ Ibid, 37.

¹⁶ Juan-Manuel Garrido, *On Time, Being, and Hunger—Challenging the Traditional Way of Thinking Life*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 41.

¹⁷ Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air*, (London: Reaktion, 2010), 332.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Maud Ellmann, 30.

²⁰ Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1992), 18-19.

²¹ Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.

²² Explained by Harry Steinhauer in his 1962 journal article "Hungering Artist or Artist in Hungering: Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist'."

²³ Paul Auster, 8.

²⁴ David Der-wei Wang, 117.

²⁵ Eliza Gibson, "Love, Hunger, and Grace: Loss and Belonging in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes and Joy Harjo," *Legacy* 19.1 (2002), 106.

²⁶ “Three Obediences” refers to “obeying her father before marriage; her husband when married; and her sons in widowhood.” “Four Virtues” refers to “morality, proper speech, modest manners and diligent work.”

²⁷ Translation by author. The quote can be found in *Wu jing zheng yi* (The Rectifications of Five Classics).

²⁸ Translation by author. The quote can be found in *Er cheng quan shu* (The Full Collection of Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi).

²⁹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.)

³⁰ Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran, *Scenes of the Apple: Food and the Female Body in Nineteenth-and-Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3.

³¹ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13.

³² Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1. 4 (1976), 880.

³³ Ibid.

Chapter One
After Nora Leaves Home:
The Golden Era of Hungry Woman Writer Xiao Hong

The essence of women's liberation lies in the resolution to work diligently instead of the privilege to enjoy life; it is premised on giving rather than receiving, on fortifying personal strength rather than asking favors from others.

—Chen Hengzhe

Hunger is not a metaphor; it is the very crux of the problem itself.

—Paul Auster

On November 7th, 1936, the Republican woman writer Xiao Hong (1911-1942), sojourning in Tokyo, wrote in a letter to her lover Xiao Jun (1907-1988):

When the window was bathed in bright moonlight, I felt like turning off the lamp and sitting in silence for a while. At this silent moment, an alarming voice hit me in the heart: *Isn't this my golden era? Right now! ...* Right, I'm in Japan, feeling free and cozy, in ease and tranquility, with little economic pressure. *This is truly a golden era, but such a desolate one. Others may soar high in their golden eras, but mine is spent in a cage.* [emphasis added]¹

Xiao Hong's appraisal of her own times as a golden era is saturated with ambivalence, if not self-contradiction. She is savoring a rare moment of emotional peace and material adequacy. However, underlying her celebratory and spontaneous tone is a subtle but sorrowful lament for the recurring frustration and prevailing loneliness of her life. The "cage" conjures up imagery of women with constrained spatial and social mobility, resembling caged birds. The metaphor resonates with Xiao Hong's famous remark "I'm a woman. The sky is lower for women. Although a woman's plumage is flimsier, she carries a heavier burden."² Aspiring to soar high as a falcon, she is anxious about the inevitable fate for women: to fall to the ground. In line with her despondence about the unbearable social restraints on women, Xiao Hong's

golden era spent in the cage crystallizes the paradox of her situation and caricatures the limitations on women's self-realization in her times.

In the previous year of 1935, Xiao Hong published her first novel *The Field of Life and Death* (*Sheng si chang*) with the endorsement of Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Hu Feng (1902-1985), two of the founding figures of modern Chinese literature and literary criticism. A brilliant novel depicting the daily struggles of Chinese peasants in the Japan-invaded northeast region, it immediately became a bestseller, coinciding with the rise of anticolonial and nationalist fever. However, book royalties only temporarily eased Xiao Hong's monetary worries, without delivering her from her lifelong struggle with poverty and ill health. After deteriorating health and a heartrending fallout with Xiao Jun compelled her to leave for a sojourn in Japan in July 1936, she was soon devastated again by the sudden death of Lu Xun, who had been a father-cum-mentor for her, on October 19th. Xiao Hong's stay in Japan was nothing less than distressful because of her infirmity and solitude. In the same letter, she mentions being bothered by fever, headache, and nightmares for months, and feeling sad about dining on her own. The dire and desolate circumstances Xiao Hong lived in at the time render her "golden era" bitterly ironic.

Inspired by this perplexing paradox, Hong Kong film director Ann Hui titled her 2014 biopic on Xiao Hong *The Golden Era* (*Huangjin shidai*). The historical film is a Nora-esque *bildungsroman* set in the Republic of China (1912-1948): inspired by an iconoclastic new culture, a young woman student runs away from an arranged marriage to pursue romantic love and intellectual freedom. The film comprises a panoply of intriguing experimental narrative and theatrical technologies. The colored film begins with a black-and-white close shot of a ghost-like Xiao Hong (played by Tang Wei) announcing her own maiden name, birthplace, birth date, and date of death. Then, the coherent and linear unfolding of Xiao Hong's personal history is

replaced by an assemblage of narrative fragments about her life, which intercut each other. The dramatization of genre film is canceled out by the effect of documentary realism simulated by talking-head interviews of historical figures impersonated by actors and actresses. The audience's habitual alignment with the protagonist's perspective is sporadically interrupted when supporting characters suddenly address the camera directly. *The Golden Era* is not a documentary film; however, it is a film of documents. A considerable portion of the dialogue and monologues in the film is directly taken from Xiao Hong's literary work, such as "Early Winter" (*Chu dong*), "In Memory of Lu Xun" (*Jinian Lu Xun xiansheng*), *Tales of the Hulan River* (*Hulan he zhuan*) and *Market Street* (*Shang shi jie*), her correspondences, and biographical sketches of Xiao Hong written by Xiao Jun, Hu Feng, Zhang Meilin, Nie Gannu, Ding Ling, Xu Guangping, Bai Lang, Duanmu Hongliang, and Luo Binji. Encompassing a multigated discourse, the film ambitiously attempts to reconstruct the historical figure of Xiao Hong with complexity, ambiguity, and contingency, as literary, historical, and everyday perspectives on her life contrast and compete with each other in their cinematic representations.

The film attempts to constitute a multifaceted image of Xiao Hong as a reckless youngster, passionate lover, talented writer, and tenacious fighter. In the scene when Xiao Hong is wandering absentmindedly in a candlelit Japanese-style room, the above-mentioned letter is recited by the voiceover. The script faithfully iterates "Isn't this my golden era?" from the letter. However, the contentedness conveyed by the expression is at odds with the arduous life emphatically portrayed throughout the film. The audience is struck by the endless setbacks and agonies she confronts: starvation, illness, death threats, unwanted pregnancy, romantic abandonment, the death of her child, just to name a few. In his *New York Times* film review, Daniel M. Gold comments that "conveying little sense of Xiao Hong the person and even less of her

talent,” as well as “charting every setback she faces,” *The Golden Era* reduces her to a cliché—namely, “the starving young artist, done wrong by men.”³ The cinematic diegesis dwells on iterating tragic occurrences, personal or historical, without delving into the interiority of the female protagonist. There arises the question: What constitutes Xiao Hong’s golden era if her life is categorically tragic? Moreover, when the perplexing expression of the “golden era” is taken out of its contingent and affective context to serve as the master trope of the film, what significance does it take on? This ambivalent reference needs to be interrogated.

From this point of departure, this chapter delves into Xiao Hong the person and her talent against the backdrop of the tumultuous era of the Republic. Through investigating Xiao Hong’s life and writing after her Nora-esque escape, the chapter argues that hunger is constitutive of her subject-formation as a Chinese Nora. An empty stomach seems to impede Nora’s path towards independence and freedom, but it also presents an opportunity for Nora to assert self-determination and to stimulate her artistic agency. Exemplified by her books *The Field of Life and Death* and *Market Street*, Xiao Hong’s writing about mundane life is a bodily and existential art that resists artistic transcendence and ideological sublimation. She derives her artistic creativity primarily from the visceral and affective intensity of hunger, and the centrality of hunger in her art generates a compelling empathetic effect. The interpenetration between her hunger and her art configures her modern subjectivity as a hungry woman artist. Xiao Hong redeems her abject life with the art of hunger, and in that way, enters her own golden era. Conceding that the historical and realistic representation of *The Golden Era* contributes to the demystification of the homogenous enlightenment discourse and the hegemonic modality of the New Woman, I argue that without accounting for Xiao Hong’s distinctive subjectivity and

outstanding literary achievement against the misery and misfortune of her personal life, the biopic falls short of conveying the essence of her golden era.

The Golden Era of Chinese Noras

Xiao Hong's (a.k.a. Zhang Naiying's) brief but grievous life mirrors the turbulence and tribulation of the Republic era. She was born into a declining landlord family in Hulanhe County in Northeast China on the eve of the 1911 Revolution, which toppled the last imperial dynasty of Qing and founded the new Republic of China. Xiao Hong's mother died when she was eight, leaving her to the care of her conservative and tyrannical father. Her grandfather was her sole source of emotional support in childhood. Despite growing up in an old-fashioned family, Xiao Hong attended women's schools to receive a modern education, and embraced the new culture spawned by the Chinese enlightenment project of May Fourth (1915-1925). At the age of nineteen, she fled to Beijing to avoid an arranged marriage, followed by another two attempts to run away from home. Her rebellion scandalized her family and cost her all familial support. In 1932, Xiao Hong, pregnant, was abandoned by her fiancé Wang Enjia, and detained in Dongxingshun Hotel in Harbin because of an unpaid bill. Out of despair, she wrote a letter to the editor of *The International Gazette* (*guoji xiebao*) asking for help. On behalf of the newspaper, Xiao Jun, a veteran and leftist writer, paid Xiao Hong a visit, and they fell in love at first sight. This young and gifted couple, full of literary talent and revolutionary idealism, took part in the emancipation movement in Manchuria, which had fallen into the hands of Japan after the Mukden Incident in the previous year of 1931. Threatened by the colonial government, they embarked on the perilous journey of political refugees. Between 1932 and 1938, the couple drifted from one place to another in wartime China, during which both of them rose to fame as patriotic and progressive writers, known as "Er Xiao" (the two Xiaos). After finally ending her torturous relationship

with Xiao Jun in 1939, Xiao Hong married another leftist writer, Duanmu Hongliang, in the middle of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Unfortunately, she found neither peace nor comfort in this marriage. In poverty and loneliness, Xiao Hong died of tuberculosis amidst the bombing noise of the Pacific War in Hong Kong, at the age of thirty-one.

In commemoration of Xiao Hong's death, her close friend, Xu Guangping (Lu Xun's spouse) wrote in 1946,

Perhaps, she desired the unfettered freedom of a fish. Equipped with new ideas, she sought to liberate herself from old morals and rites. She started to break old constraints, charged into the front line of life, and lived through everything in life as a manifestation of the liberty and freedom of humanity...Regretfully she had to repudiate her family, emulating the Nora-esque runaway! She walked out of the trap made by her father, and stepped into a brand new world. However, the kaleidoscopic and idiosyncratic new world confounded this Nora, who had little material possession.⁴

Xu Guangping's narrative situates Xiao Hong's life at the historical juncture when Chinese society was transitioning from the old (feudal) order to the new (modern) one, and it also positions Xiao Hong as a harbinger of her own times. Her personal history emblemizes Chinese women's quest for the liberty and freedom of humanity in the early twentieth century. Howard Goldblatt, who has pioneered literary study on Xiao Hong in North America, also characterizes her as a typical New Woman who pursues a modern womanhood built on the claim to individual freedom and gender equality:

There were undeniable attractions in the new order where women were, in theory at least, on a relatively equal footing with men. In the major urban areas the young population was looking for new models; Hsiao Hung probably typified a large segment of this population for whom modernity was to be achieved at almost any price, but who were all too often ill-equipped physically and emotionally to handle the new life style.⁵

Both Xu and Goldblatt contextualize Xiao Hong's personal life in its greater historical background. Their accounts showcase how the personal is tightly interwoven with the

historical. Xiao Hong's choice of an iconoclastic new lifestyle makes her an exemplary figure of the new era.

The new era during which Xiao Hong lived is historically acclaimed as the golden age of the Chinese enlightenment (1915-1925), which celebrated and ushered in the new order and new lifestyle of (western) modernity. Against the accelerating imperialist aggression of the west (including Japan), Chinese intellectuals and political reformers had taken resolute action to launch China onto the path of modernization since the late nineteenth century. To secure national salvation and renewal, they advocated sweeping sociocultural reforms modeled on the European enlightenment. Between 1902 and 1906, the illustrious thinker and reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) introduced the enlightenment idea of the self-governing individual and called for the cultivation of "new people" (*xin min*), who consented to the hegemonic power of the nation-state while maintaining their ethics, rights, dignities, and fundamental freedom (*ziyou*) and autonomy (*zizhi*). As "a spiritual forerunner"⁶ of the Chinese enlightenment, Liang's contention resonated in the writing of many enlightenment intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Hu Shi (1891-1962). The free and autonomous subjectivity (*duli zizhu renge*) of the new people was firmly believed to be the foundation of a modern and democratic China. In this way, the Chinese enlightenment is emphatically "a critical elaboration of its European precedent,"⁷ by appropriating the central tenet of enlightenment thinking—that is, the privileging of the rationality of the sovereign subject over the dominion of the church or monarch.

However, as Vera Schwarcz aptly argues in her seminal work, the Chinese enlightenment differs from its European counterpart in a significant way:

Thus, enlightenment in the Chinese context had to mean something other than what it did in Europe during Kant's lifetime: a program of *disenchantment* that would replace religious superstitions with truths derived from the realm of nature. In twentieth-century China, enlightenment requires a prolonged, still ongoing

disengagement from the bonds of duty and loyalty that have kept sons obedient to fathers, wives obedient to husbands, and ministers obedient to rulers for centuries.⁸

Deriving its momentum from its iconoclastic stance and antagonistic position against the orthodoxy of Confucianism, the Chinese enlightenment centered its critique on the conformist decrees mandated by the Confucian cult of subjugation. Chen Duxiu in his essay titled “The Year of Nineteen Sixteen” (*yi jiu yi liu nian*) on New Youth (*xin qingnian*), castigated the Confucian cult of subjugation for stripping Chinese youth of their free and autonomous subjectivity. Therefore, he indicated that sons should disobey their fathers, wives disobey their husbands, and ministers disobey the rulers, in order to dismantle the enslavement of people as well as to achieve individual freedom and autonomy.

What is also distinctive in Chinese enlightenment reasoning is the critical attention paid particularly to the subjugation of women, in parallel with the enslavement of ordinary people. The question of woman (*nüzi wenti*) was germane to China’s national campaign of “self-strengthening” (*zi qiang*) and modernization.⁹ Since the late Qing, the confinement and abasement of women under Confucian patriarchy was criticized as the principal obstacle preventing China from achieving social progress and national evolution the way its western counterpart did. Late Qing reformers such as Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao petitioned for Chinese women to receive formal education, the transformative value of which was believed to be able to recast women’s subjectivities. In his seminal essay “On Women’s Education” (*lun nüxue*) published in 1897, Liang famously claimed, “I believe that the fundamental reason for China’s weakness should be women’s lack of education.”¹⁰ In the same year, he submitted a petition to the Qing court elaborating on the imperative to open women’s schools, wherein he argued that with proper education, women “could assist their husbands, discipline their children, organize the households, and in a long term, advance the evolution of the race. With fully cultivated womanhood, thousands of

households would prosper.”¹¹ For Liang, the primary goal for women’s schools was to produce virtuous wives and devoted mothers (*liangqi xianmu*) who would contribute to the nation’s renewal through assisting their husbands with professional advancement and nourishing their children in a modernized way. Educated women were the cornerstone of the reformist blueprint of a rejuvenated modern China.

From the initial stages of China’s intellectual awakening and political reform, a new modality of womanhood and femininity that embodied modernity and generated social progress was spiritedly conceptualized and actualized. Women’s liberation, as Amy Dooling argues, “was from its inception vigorously embraced by the male intellectual vanguard as a progressive force that would contribute to the much-desired salvation, transformation, and revitalization of the beleaguered Chinese nation.”¹² On the one hand, the cause of women’s liberation was co-opted by national salvation and renewal; on the other, despite “the critical paradigm of feminism’s subordination to the modernizing discourse of Nation and Revolution,”¹³ pro-feminist reforms commenced a nationwide wave of women’s emancipation and empowerment. Following in the footsteps of their spiritual forerunners, May Fourth intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun were also invested in the question of women while castigating conservative Confucian doctrines and dismantling feudalistic social structures. Thus, the Chinese enlightenment had a salient pro-feminist component, as Zheng Wang’s significant study has demonstrated. She forcefully argues, “The May Fourth era witnessed unparalleled intellectual agitation for women’s emancipation. A Chinese feminist movement emerged as the result of the inclusion of women in men’s pursuit of a ‘Chinese Enlightenment.’”¹⁴ Wang’s case study on women in the Chinese enlightenment attests to the emancipatory messages engineered and disseminated by enlightenment intellectuals (men and women), as well as the considerable social effects of these pro-feminist messages.

However, Chinese enlightenment intellectuals envisioned a different modality of womanhood than their reform-minded predecessors as they propagated the values of freedom and women's autonomous subjectivities. Hu Shi's 1918 essay "American women" (*meiguo furen*) urged Chinese women to emulate their American counterparts in pursuing a meaningful life beyond being virtuous wives and devoted mothers (*chao liangqi xianmu zhuyi de rensheng guan*). More radically than Liang Qichao, Hu encouraged Chinese women to seek their aspirations and to realize their value outside the household of the patriarchal family. His proposed New Woman figure was first and foremost an iconoclastic new youth who was galvanized to revolt against the reactionary sociocultural establishments of the old China. At that time, enlightenment intellectuals including Hu Shi found a deep resonance between their iconoclasm and Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's individualism,¹⁵ and regarded his plays of social realism a poignant illustration of China's social problems. On the matter of women's liberation, they saw in Nora, the female protagonist of Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (*wan'ou zhi jia*),¹⁶ an epitome of the rebellious spirit of the New Woman of the era. At the end of the play, when confronted by her husband with the question about what her most sacred duties are, Nora replies, "Duties to myself." Nora's awakening to her individual rights and her brave separation from her domineering husband greatly inspired Chinese readers, who were in search for new cultural paradigms as an antidote to oppressive Confucian society.

In 1914, *A Doll's House* was first adapted and performed on stage in Shanghai by the theatrical association Spring Willow Society (*chun liu she*). But not until 1918 when the central mouthpiece of the New Cultural Movement, *New Youth* (*xin qingnian*), published the whole play in translation did Nora become a household name in urban China with unprecedented popularity among young students and progressive intellectuals. *A Doll's House* appeared in *New Youth*'s special issue on Ibsen, which

was introduced by Hu Shi's acclaimed essay "Ibsenism" (*yibusheng zhuyi*). In the article, Hu conceptualizes Ibsenism as the realistic diagnosis of social problems that begs for a cure: "I began by characterizing Ibsen as a realist. He has described the real conditions of the family and of society so that it has moved us. He demonstrates how the family and society have actually deteriorated to such an extent that everybody feels that there must be a reform. This is Ibsenism."¹⁷ He applies Ibsen's realistic portrait and critical diagnosis of social problems (*shehui wenti*) to Chinese society, and calls for sweeping social reforms. For Hu Shi, such social reforms are instigated by heroic individuals who stand up to fight against social repression. The term Ibsenism was thus widely disseminated and "came to symbolize a cluster of iconoclastic political ideas concerning female emancipation, liberation of the individual, and a critical attitude towards the existing order."¹⁸ Extolled by Hu Shi as a Ibsenian heroic individual in an oppressive society, Nora was consequently iconized by China's new youth, who were, at that time, ardent followers of the freedom, individuality and antiestablishment movement. Chinese women, especially young women students, were galvanized to emulate the Nora-esque runaway (*nala shi chuzou*)—that is, to repudiate their patriarchal families and arranged marriages so that they could chase their loves and passions freely. With Ibsen's Nora becoming a cultural icon for the young generation, Chinese society witnessed numerous Chinese Noras boldly walking out of the confinement of the traditional family. As the Chinese enlightenment intellectuals fostered a liberating social climate for Chinese Noras, it is fair to claim that the age of the Chinese enlightenment gave rise to a golden era of Chinese Noras. The Nora-esque new women emblemized the nation's transformation to modernity.

Hu Shi's interest in Ibsen dated back to the days of his study overseas. In his diaries, Hu mentioned reading Ibsen's "problem plays," and compared Ibsen to

Bernard Shaw. Thus, it is not overreaching to speculate that Hu had read and was heavily influenced by Shaw's 1891 essay "The Quintessence of Ibsenism." As a matter of fact, Shaw's influential conceptualization of Ibsenism in the article crystalizes the appealing essence of Ibsen's plays, especially *A Doll's House*, to the Chinese enlightenment intellectuals. As early as in the 1880s, Bernard Shaw was in the forefront of the Ibsen movement in England. The well-known anecdote about Shaw's and Eleanor Marx-Aveling's reading performance of *A Doll's House* in their drawing room established his reputation as an avid fan of the play. On June 7, 1889, the first faithful production of *A Doll's House* was put on stage in England, only to be received with a number of hostile reviews. The English audience was scandalized by Nora's audacious and irresponsible abandonment of her family.¹⁹ Shaw's essay was a forceful rebuke of the conservatives' and moralists' criticism of Ibsen, as well as of Nora. In the essay, Shaw contends that social progress is possible only through replacing old institutions with new ones: "The point to seize is that social progress takes effect through the replacement of old institutions by new ones; and since every institution involves the recognition of the duty of conforming to it, progress must involve the repudiation of an established duty at every step."²⁰ Therefore, he justifies individuals' choice of repudiating old systems, such as women's repudiation of the institution of marriage. For Shaw, Ibsen's plays address both the universal condition of human and the specific issue of women:

This being so, it is not surprising that our society, being directly dominated by men, comes to regard Woman, not as an end in herself as Man, but solely as a means of ministering to his appetite. The ideal wife is one who does everything that the ideal husband likes, and nothing else. Now to treat a person as a means instead of an end is to deny that person's right to live. And to be treated as means to such an end as sexual intercourse with those who deny one's right to live is insufferable to any human being. Woman, if she dares face the fact that she is being so treated, must either loathe herself or else rebel.²¹

With *A Doll's House* in mind, Shaw argues that once women come to the awareness of their status as a means to men's appetites, they will rebel against gender-based

discrimination and oppression. Women like Ibsen's Nora are simply laying claim to their right to live.

Shaw's arguments about *A Doll's House* widely resonated in the writing of Chinese enlightenment intellectuals including that of Hu Shi. But I am not saying that the Chinese enlightenment was derivative while the European thinking was original. Instead, I attempt to establish the fact that the golden era of Chinese Noras in the early twentieth century was part and parcel of a global phenomenon that was prompted by Ibsen's iconoclastic plays. Despite apparent social and cultural disparities between China and Europe, the progressive thinkers around this time period were both interested in the parallel discussions on human rights and women's rights, individual freedom and women's liberation in Ibsen's plays. Qiu Shi's biography on Xiao Hong, *Hulanhe de nu'er* (*The Daughter of Hulan River*) mentions a vignette: at the boarding school Xiao Hong attended, she and her two roommates used to read Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past" together in their dormitory. Worshipped by a new iconoclastic culture, Nora inspired and steered Xiao Hong's generation to undertake a rebellious path towards self-determination and self-empowerment. The liberating climate of the era had a profound impact on Xiao Hong's personal choice. A typical Nora-esque figure in the golden era of the Chinese enlightenment, as Xu Guangping remarked, Xiao Hong renounced her duties to the patriarchal family and tenaciously fought for her right to receive education and to entertain free love.

The Paradox of the Golden Era: The Age of Hunger

The ensuing two decades after the first production of *A Doll's House* in China witnessed a proliferation of drama and fiction in plain Chinese that featured Nora-esque protagonists,²² echoing and reinforcing the nascent cultural climate. This phenomenon is a salient example of the pivotal role played by women in the course of Chinese modernity and nation building. However, the doll that used to be confined to

the playground and subjugated by the patriarch was now idolized by Chinese society for her nascent individualistic consciousness and agency. The Nora-esque awakening is essentialized as a social imperative for the modern New Woman. That is to say, the cultural myth of Nora interpolates Chinese women to comply with their new subjectivation. However, the material foundation of the Nora-esque quest is overlooked and unaccounted for in the iconoclastic discourse. The French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's theory of interpolation describes the process by which ideology, embodied by Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), constitutes concrete individual subjects through the social interaction of "hailing." The hailing that originates from enlightenment discourse occurs on the discursive level; nevertheless, it inevitably occasions actions in reality and changes in materiality, as the new subjectivity is materialized into each "concrete" woman. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus," Althusser underscores the materiality of ideology in the forms of actions, practices and rituals: "where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject*" [emphasis in the original].²³ That is to say, embodied actions in accordance with abstract ideas are integral to ideological implementation, and ritualized practices shape the subject as well as her body. In that sense, the formation of Nora-esque subjectivity necessitates bodily and material practices on a daily basis, and Nora's dramatic running-away from home marks only a prelude, rather than a denouement.

Hence, the ideological propaganda that mystifies the triumphant moment of Nora's runaway overlooks the material process that is demanded by the making of New Woman. To further complicate Althusser's argument about the materialization of

ideology, the actualization of the ideologically and teleologically acclaimed new subjectivity does not only depend on new rituals of daily practice (i.e. living up to the modality of the free and autonomous New Woman every day), but also creates new challenges in making a living (i.e. the woman managing to live and survive on her own day by day). While these new daily rituals evidence the subject's embodiment and activation of her ideas, the material challenges attest to the perilous stakes of actualizing a new subjectivity. While Nora's dramatic performance empowers the political imagination of the Chinese audience, the enactment of her choice is never fully imagined and examined in its physicality and materiality. Lu Xun was the first to cast doubt on the seemingly auspicious prospects of Chinese Noras. In his 1923 talk addressed to women students at Peking Women's Normal College, Lu Xun raised the famous question, "what happens after Nora leaves home?" He pointed out the discrepancy between a poetic presentation of dreams and a concrete solution in reality. He predicted a dire future: in order to survive in society, the New Woman would either have "to go to the bad or to return to her husband;" otherwise, she was "to starve to death" (177). That is to say, after Nora left home, she would either become a prostitute or return to make amends with her husband if she did not want to die of starvation. Lu Xun's critique, based on historical-materialist analyses, held economics responsible for the bleak material reality confronted by Nora once she renounced her so-called economic security and family protection.

His depiction of Nora's encounter with a hostile reality undercuts the political advocacy bracketing the Nora-esque model, which postulates the domestic sphere in the form of kinship and patriarchal family as the imprisonment of women as well as the obstacle to women's self-realization. In the tradition of western political philosophy, gender segregation and hierarchy is aligned with the separation between the public and the private realms. Women, who are assigned to the private realm of

reproduction and housekeeping, only play auxiliary and relational roles in society such as those of daughters, wives, or mothers. The naturalization, as opposed to the socialization, of women's gender roles renders their domestic labor invisible—that is, stripped of exchange-value and political valence. On the other side, only men, as property owners and heads of household, inhabit the public sphere, where the dominant political community resides. Without economic independence and political representation in the public sphere, women are reduced to social dependents. Hence, for centuries, women suffragists and feminists have strived for the equal right of women to participate in the public sphere, the very first step towards women's liberation and self-realization. In the same vein, the Chinese Enlightenment thinkers also criticized the patriarchal family as the bastion of oppressive traditions and regressive ideologies. Their diatribe was more directed at the repressive familial relationship between parents and daughters than at the hierarchical relationship between men (husbands) and women (wives). Although in this context, women's rebellion against their conservative parents reflects the conflict between the older generation and the younger one, it also echoes the critique of women's confinement to the domestic sphere.

However, entering the public realm, Nora soon encounters real challenges and is exposed to new forms of oppression in society. The path toward free and autonomous subjectivity turns out to be precarious and perilous for independent women, as foreseen by Lu Xun. Hannah Arendt's conceptualization of the third realm—that is, “the social”—sheds light on the plight of Nora. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt ascribes the predicaments of modern society in the twentieth century, such as reification and totalitarianism, to the rise of the social, which she differentiates from both the private/domestic and the public/political. The idealization of the public space as the milieu of political participation and democratic socialization is antiquated and

has been overridden by the oppressive realm of a society that is governed by the modern nation-state. Arendt points out that “the rise of society” has collapsed the oppositional demarcation of the private and the public. The social in Arendt’s conceptualization is characterized by “the conformism.”²⁴

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.²⁵

The modern nation-state does not allow for a voluntary and democratic public space where women, after stepping out of their domestic confinement, can realize their values. In the hybrid realm of society where public affairs are managed as “housekeeping,”²⁶ the purportedly liberated women are still, if not more so, expected to comply with the gender norms that operated in the private household. What is excluded from women in the domestic space, more often than not, is also denied to them in society, under the pretext of common interests or public opinion. In this sense, the nation-state should be more appropriately named the “national household.”²⁷ Arendt points out that the accelerated expansion of economic activities, as well as its erosion of the public/political realm, has given rise to this transformation. Unsurprisingly, the exploitation of women’s labor and the suppression of women’s self-realization are only aggravated by such economic activities in society. No wonder Chinese Noras would struggle with livelihood in society without sustainable economic resources and considerable political leverage.

In line with Arendt’s critical intervention into the dualism of the private and the public realms in western political philosophy, Rey Chow characterizes the public realm in China’s political tradition as a Foucauldian Panopticon²⁸ in her insightful article on the acclaimed Chinese genre film *To Live (huo zhe)*:²⁹

“the public” becomes simply a space for the use of those who hold political power. For the ordinary person afraid for his own life, then, “the public”

functions much more as a space in which to submit to authority and to hide oneself than as an arena in which to speak out against injustice and to pose political alternatives.³⁰

Chinese society in Chow's analysis exemplifies the Panopticon that is designed to enforce an omnipresent surveillance on its residents, to the extent that the disciplining surveillance is internalized. To watch is to be watched, so that everyone is subjected to the surveilling gaze. The imaginary gaze of an authoritarian collectivity subdues individuals to voluntary conformity in exchange for the acceptance of the community. Hence, the public sphere creates a compelling climate for conformism, where social injustices cannot be redressed, nor can political alternatives be instated in the public realm.

Although Chow's argument is contextualized in the socialist totalitarianism of the 1950s, her characterization of China's public domain is pertinent to China's political structure in its long history. The governing principle of Chinese rulers, under the influence of Confucianism, is modeled on the management of the domestic household. Documented in *The Analects of Confucius (lun yu)*, Confucius's instruction regarding governance is "Let the ruler be a ruler; the subject, a subject; the father, a father; the son, a son" (*junjun chenchen fufu zizi*). That is to say, a wise and benevolent ruler governs his subjects the way a responsible father raises his son, and a moral subject submits to his ruler the way a filial son obeys his father. The familial structure is mapped onto the political organization—a salient example of what Haiyan Lee calls "the tyranny of the familial metaphor."³¹ Mimicking the domestic household, which is "the center of the strictest inequality,"³² Chinese society maintains a hierarchical structure and subjugates women to the patriarch, be it the father, the husband, or the nation-state. Conformist behaviors are consistent across the private and public spheres. By contrasting the relation between the polity and the family in ancient China with that in ancient Greece, Yiqun Zhou's study makes it

evident that China's public realm is domesticated in the same way that the Greek family is politicized:

If the ancient Greek family saw an extension of the public values of competition and egalitarianism into the domestic domain, in ancient China the same principle of hierarchy (based on generation, sex and age) underlying the functioning of the patrilineal family was extended to govern the operation of society and polity.³³

The welding of the domestic and the political realms results in the annexation of the public realm by the domestic order. Chinese society consolidates the familial hierarchy and applies it to the governance of public affairs.

Both Arendt's and Chow's interrogations of the public sphere hollow out the political idealism that envisages women's liberation and autonomy outside the domestic realm, and illuminate the frustrations in social reality that confronted Chinese Noras after their flights from home. Their critiques of modern society echo Hu Shi's provocative proposition of the relation between society and the individual as "mutually damaging":

Society loves to be despotic. It will use all its power to crush the individuality of each person, and to suppress her desires for freedom and independence. But when all individualities are destroyed, and all desires for freedom and independence gone, then society as such will have lost its vitality for good and will never become better. Society contains many rotten habits, corrupted ways of thinking, as well as intolerable superstitions. No one in society can avoid being compromised by these bad influences. Occasionally, there are one or two independent younger people, who are not willing to be caught in the bonds of these corrupt practices of habits, and they strike out both left and right and want to fight against society.³⁴

Hu is aware of the oppressive forces in society, but he sees the social antipathy against individuals as a stimulus for Nora's rebellion. Idealizing the heroism of exceptional individuals in a conformist society, he fails to address the oppressive society as a concrete reality, which Nora is destined to face after her rebellious act of running away. Although he alludes to the adversities that await these heroic individuals in society, he is preoccupied with igniting rebellious passion and iconoclastic thinking in Chinese youth. Hu's romanticization of individual heroism is

premised on the triumph of heroic individuality over an oppressive society, which downplays the obstacles to the actualization of heroic individuality in society.

Nora's predicament after leaving home attests to the inadequacy of individual heroism in an oppressive society. 1912 witnessed the birth of the Republic of China (1912-1949), and marked the transformation of Chinese society from a dynastic empire to a modern "national household." The Republic of China was also an impoverished and turbulent regime due to recurrent imperialist aggressions, civil wars, natural disasters, and political corruptions. Moreover, the gendered social division of labor was reinforced by the nascent capitalist economy. Meanwhile, the conservative Confucian political philosophy remained resilient and continued to influence social norms and regulations in the modern nation-state. Even well-educated women were denied professional positions except for those that were deemed the public extension of domestic chores (i.e. cook, nurse, and teacher). However, it was difficult to sustain a living with such underpaid jobs. Du Ruo, in her critical essay "Chinese Women's Movement: Past, Present and Future," published in the inaugural issue of *Women's Life (funü shenghuo)* in 1935, contends that the May Fourth paradigm failed to deliver women's true liberation, for it resulted in a "freedom without equality."³⁵ She argues that without the same access to economic resources and social experience that men enjoyed, women's freedom was given no more than lip service. Du's poignant criticism depicts the social realm as a battlefield rather than a playground for women's self-empowerment and self-realization. Not surprisingly, Nora is poverty-stricken after leaving home, for she walked out of her patriarchal family only to step into a despotic society. As she renounced her marriage and family, she forfeited all privileges enjoyed by the doll in the house, such as financial security, material comforts, and protection from interpersonal conflicts. Although she is freed from domestic confinement, she is again subjected to gender-based mistreatment and

inequality in society. Nora is vulnerable until she is able to become strong and resourceful enough to be self-reliant and self-sufficient.

Thus, the golden era of Chinese Noras was undermined by the ensuing difficult times faced by new women in society. Lu Xun's question "what happens after Nora leaves home" confirmed the predicament of Nora's future, which had intrigued the literary imagination and creativity of many writers of the time. Differing from Hu Shi's unreserved celebration of Ibsenism and unproblematic application of the philosophy to Chinese society, forward-thinking writers like Lu Xun contextualized the Nora-esque paradigm in China's cultural and economic specificities in the early twentieth century, and questioned the validity of Nora's choice. They raised the issue of material reality, which complicated and compromised women's pursuit of self-liberation. On the one hand, the dire prospects of independent women in society at that time belied the romanticization or even the mythification of women's liberation, and on the other, the escalating national crisis and the pressing anti-colonial revolution trivialized the individualist quest for freedom and autonomy. The male-chauvinistic socioeconomic structure rendered the Nora-esque quest too tenuous to succeed, while the nationwide mobilization in the name of anti-colonial revolution marginalized Nora's self-centered undertaking. The Ibsenian heroine turned out to be an anti-hero who was forced to make questionable choices in society.

In his 1925 short story "Regret for the Past" (*shang shi*), Lu Xun pioneered a psychological realistic³⁶ depiction of Nora's post-runaway (*chuzou hou*) life. The female protagonist Zijun is an educated youth who is transformed by the Zeitgeist of the enlightenment era. Passionately in love with another like-minded youth, Juansheng, Zijun makes the audacious decision to move in with him. Her unorthodox behavior is strongly opposed by the patriarchs of her conservative family, both her father and uncle. Zijun's intrepidity and self-determinacy is very much inspired by

Ibsen's Nora. In the same spirit, she declares, "I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me." However, the rosy picture of freedom and romantic love quickly disintegrates as the burden of material demands and the boredom of daily routines encroach on their cohabiting life. Overwhelmed by marital responsibilities and conflicts, Juansheng announces the death of their love. Zijun, at this point, cannot think of a way to live on her own, and has to return home in humiliation and agony. Soon she ends her own life. The harrowing suffering of Zijun evidences Lu Xun's interrogation of unsubstantiated freedom and capricious romantic love. He also suggests that unprepared and unequipped to meet the consequences of her own choice, Zijun's Nora-esque pursuit is doomed to fail.

Ding Ling's 1927 novella "Mengke" resonates with Lu Xun's pessimistic forecasting of Nora's future. Mengke, a young woman from a family of literati in the countryside, aspires to attend a modern co-ed school in the city. Without her family's consent or support, she comes to the city on her own and stays at her cousin's. Although she finally gets to attend the school, she is soon disappointed when she finds out that women are still objectified and treated differently. Meanwhile, her romantic undertaking is also frustrated because so-called free love turns out to be still overshadowed by the androcentric power structure and socioeconomic stratification. In a double disillusion, Mengke drops out of school and leaves her cousin's house. She ends up on the street and finds herself unfit for professional jobs. She eventually becomes a third-rate actress for commercial movies. The commodification and abasement of women's bodies is also salient in the subplot, wherein the female nude model in Mengke's art class is mistreated and insulted by her classmates. As a parallel character or a mirroring image of Mengke, the model's plight foreshadows Mengke's impending turn of fortune. The story discloses the predicament of independent women in society, who are easily exploited by the male-chauvinistic society and

economy. Ding Ling's "Mengke," more so than Lu Xun's "Regret for the Past," examines Nora's prospects in social reality and engages with the material aspect of life for independent new women. It teases out the irony in that the social and material realities coerce Nora, after leaving the previous doll's house, into masquerading in a doll-like role in the public. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt's well-known aphorism "Poverty forces the free man to act like a slave,"³⁷ poverty also forces the freed Nora to act like a doll again.

In the 1930s, the escalation of Japanese aggression on Chinese soil ignited literary nationalism among Chinese intellectuals and prompted the turn from literary revolution (*wenxue geming*) to revolutionary literature (*geming wenxue*). The leftist intellectuals and writers became more critical than sympathetic to the predicament of Nora in her post-runaway life. Zhang Tianyi's 1935 satire "After Leaving Home" (*chu zou zhi hou*) epitomizes such a critical stance. The protagonist Mrs. He wants to divorce her husband, for he is a corrupt capitalist who relentlessly exploits his workers and greedily milks profits from the market. But her compassionate and righteous undertaking is easily dissuaded by the Seventh Uncle's speech about compartmentalizing lofty thought and earthly life. Mrs He turns to the Seventh Uncle for advice only because he used to lecture her on women's independence. But now, in response to her impassioned outcry against social injustice and sincere petition for action to change, he glibly argues, "Thought is only thought while life is life." Being reminded of her need for and dependence on material comforts, Mrs. He returns to her husband. The story of Mrs He emblemizes the future of Nora foreboded by Lu Xun's speech. But rather than interrogating the economic base and social structure of society, Zhang berates Mrs. He for her lack of resolution. Without profound class-consciousness or revolutionary commitment, her compassion for the working class is frivolous. Her self-indulgence and lack of resolution showcase the limits of bourgeois

consciousness. That is to say, if Nora cannot surpass the limitation of her self-absorbed quest and align her individual interests with the revolutionary pursuit of the working class, she is destined to return to her bourgeois family. In Zhang Tianyi's story, the rebellious Nora is rewritten into a bourgeois housewife.

Lu Xun, Ding Ling, and Zhang Tianyi all paint a pessimistic picture in their stories, which foresee that Chinese Nora is ill-fated to deviate from the course of self-liberation and to relapse to the initial state of enslavement. Nora, the heroine, is overthrown from the pedestal, and recast as an anti-heroine who fails to emulate the epitome of New Woman. Social reality interrupts Nora's path to self-fulfillment, whether in the form of an aborted love affair, a coercive and misogynistic economy, or a hypocritical culture of capitalism. Foregrounding the inevitable abolition of women's self-willed liberation in society, these writers' critical intervention interrogates the idealization of heroic individualism and questions the idolization of the Nora-esque womanhood.

The heated debate regarding Nora's predicament in society foreshadows the conservative campaign of "home-returning" (*funnü huijia*) in the 1930s, which was precipitated by the New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong*) in 1934. With Japanese aggression escalating on Chinese territory and China's socioeconomic stability disintegrating, national priority was given to the consolidation of society. Thus, the top-down policy on women's issues took a conservative turn. In 1934, the Nationalist Party under the leadership of Jiang Jieshi (1887-1975) launched the New Life Movement. A major part of its mission was to guide and regulate women's lives after they are "emancipated" from the old society (*jiu shehui*). Women were called upon to be "good citizens" by dutifully performing "wise mothers" and "good wives" in modern bourgeois families. The conservatives made their case by auguring Nora's suffering in society: since Nora could not find a proper home (*guisu*) for her

individual aspiration in society, she should return home (*huijia*) to be a wife and mother. Lin Yutang (1895-1976), a writer and critic known for his wit and style, in his 1935 essay “Marriage and Woman’s Profession” (*hunjia yu nüzi zhiye*), comments that marriage was the best professional choice for women, for “the only profession void of male competitors is marriage; within marriage women benefit from all their advantages, while outside marriage, men take all the advantages. That is the current economy.”

Nora, at this point, was caught in-between two worlds: the free new world that could not sustain her modern dream and the decaying old world that still had a firm hold on her material reality. On one hand, social adversities jeopardized the newly achieved freedom and individuality of Nora; and on the other, returning-home entailed forfeiting all of that liberty and subjectivity. Women’s liberation seemed to enter a deadlock, and the golden era of Chinese Noras was yet to come. The life story of Xiao Hong showcases an archetypal Nora-esque awakening and self-determined liberation, which is, nevertheless, followed by a contradictory path of simultaneous self-empowerment and self-destruction, of consecutive self-assertion and self-abasement. She is as much glorified for her literary achievements as she is humiliated by chronic poverty and sexual scandals. In this sense, Xiao Hong is questioned for becoming an anti-heroine in her post-runaway life. In 2012, film director Huo Jianqi made a biopic in commemoration of the one-hundredth anniversary of Xiao Hong’s birth. The film (with the Chinese title of “Xiao Hong”) adopted the provocative English title “Falling Flowers.” The image of falling flowers symbolizes the descent of Xiao Hong after running away from her patriarchal family and arranged marriage. From there, she falls into an endless series of mishaps.

As Xu Guangping and Howard Goldblatt have related, with few material possessions and inadequate physical and emotional preparation, Xiao Hong met with

countless distresses after leaving home: illness, poverty, romantic abandonment, just to name a few. Hunger was at the core of Xiao Hong's initial encounter with society, as food is the most rudimentary need in life. In Goldblatt's retracing of Xiao Hong's drifting life, hunger is always the primary issue, to the extent that he comments, "That they [Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun] were poor, usually cold and hungry, and often desperate is almost a foregone conclusion."³⁸ Hunger, a seemingly trivial and often imperceptible visceral sensation, is in fact, the most profound and perpetual concern of human beings of all times. In his talk "What happens after Nora leaves home," Lu Xun teased, "Human beings have one great drawback, which is that they often get hungry."³⁹ He then ridiculed the naiveté in downplaying the consequences of starving:

The word "money" has an ugly sound. Fine gentlemen may scoff at it, but I believe that men's views often vary, not only from day to day but from before a meal to after it. All who admit that food costs money yet call money filthy lucre will probably be found, on investigation, to have some fish or pork not yet completely digested in their stomachs. You should hear their views again after they have fasted for a day.⁴⁰

What Lu Xun insinuates here is that an empty stomach is what it takes to jeopardize the idealistic cause of women's liberation. He also suggests that women would compromise their pursuit of freedom just for the sake of food, for hunger is despotic in the sense that it demands satisfaction at any cost. Hunger is the insurmountable setback faced by Nora in society.

It is evident that the paradox of Xiao Hong's golden era lies in the conflict between her Nora-esque aspirations and her empty stomach. Xiao Hong spent her golden era under the besiegement of poverty and hunger, and the assortment of sufferings in her life can be attributed to this material cause. As a chronic state of living, hunger took a toll on Xiao Hong's life, health, and emotions: she constantly worried about her next meal; her stomach was impaired by frequent food deprivation; and the humiliation she suffered for being poor and hungry dampened her confidence and agency. In starvation and weakness, she drifted in wartime China and

encountered sequential ordeals. Goldblatt characterizes Xiao Hong's hapless life as a historical tragedy: "Her life was largely formed and limited by the political situation in China, and her death was largely a result of it."⁴¹ He points out the towering impact of the sociopolitical context on Xiao Hong's personal life, which in return attests to the limits and cruelty of this historical period. Many scholars and critics agree on the overwhelming effect of the sociopolitical context on Xiao Hong's personal life; therefore, they question the sincerity underpinning the expression of "the golden era." Film critics Yuan Ye and Wen Tianyi contend that Ann Hui's cinematic representation of Xiao Hong's life is "an unadorned depiction" of "an impoverished, unstable era often romanticized by many modern Chinese people due to its progressive political climate."⁴² They forcefully argue that the so-called "golden era" of Xiao Hong is actually a tumultuous era of hunger. That is to say, the expression of "the golden era" parodies an ideologically formulated and retrospectively romanticized history. This rhetorical parody alludes to the absence of the ideal golden era in historical reality. It is the absence of the golden era that explains Xiao Hong's personal distresses.

Hence, the golden era of hunger parodies the ideological celebration of Nora's triumphant running-away, which overlooks the material processes necessitated by the subject-formation of New Womanhood. It evidences the mystical mechanism underpinning the idealization of the Nora-esque New Woman as well as amplifying the disparity between a discursively conjured subjectivity and its materialization as the concrete subject. Saliently revealed here is the fundamental distinction between the ideological representation of the New Woman and new women as concrete agents of historical experience. However, it is not sufficient nor satisfactory to draw the conclusion that the connotation of the golden era is parodic and even derogatory, for such an interpretation fails to account for Xiao Hong's tenacious effort in formulating

and consolidating a materially-substantiated subjectivity against all adversity. If we analyze the anti-heroic “falling” of Xiao Hong after leaving home in the Deleuzian term of “deviance,” her sufferings and misjudgments should be valorized as significant steps taken towards the path of becoming a New Woman. The actualization of a New Womanhood is realized only through deviating from, hence also negating the established and hegemonic modality. Although often devalued and stigmatized, Xiao Hong’s arduous yet accomplished life in the 1930s, or her paradoxical golden era as an independent woman writer, exemplify the figuration of Nora-in-becoming—that is, her transformation from a hungry Nora to a hungry woman artist. Xiao Hong’s unique path toward Nora-esque New Womanhood attests to a historical golden era of women’s self-liberation and self-realization, despite being replete with obstacles and setbacks.

From Being-Nora to Becoming-New-Woman

Deleuze’s theorization of becoming shifts the analytical paradigm of subjectivation. The dominant discourse on Nora postulates a sublimated subjectivity that is anchored in the enlightenment ideology of a modern womanhood. That is to say, it prescribes a homogenous identity that modern new women should be molded into. The enlightenment’s illumination on individual rationality and autonomy paradoxically creates another myth of the sovereign subject, which is crystalized as the dialectic of enlightenment by Theodor Adorno. The mystified subject of the Nora-esque New Woman is taken as “the reference point of reason, the legislating authority of action.”⁴³ The Deleuzian concept of “becoming-woman” is crucial to destabilizing the dominance of the discursively conjured subjectivity of New Woman. In the Deleuzian theory, a constant expression in language stipulates a standard measurement to evaluate subject-positions as central/peripheral, molar/molecular, and major/minor. Therefore, “the constant” conjures up the majoritarian subject-position

that subjects would occupy as its variables. Differences or deviations from the constant standard are, in contrast, considered the minority. However, the standardized model of majority connotes nobody in actuality. “For the majority, insofar as it is analytically included in the abstract standard, is never anybody, it is always Nobody—Ulysses—whereas the minority is the becoming of everybody, one’s potential becoming to the extent that one deviates from the model.”⁴⁴ The majority is generalized as the abstract and constant standard so that nobody can ever embody or inhabit it, whereas the becoming-minority is the actual figuration⁴⁵ of subject-positions, which derives its momentum from deviating from the conventional schemes of hegemonic ideological representation.

In light of Deleuze’s reasoning, the Chinese enlightenment intellectuals’ attempt to valorize the Nora-esque New Woman as a new constant subject-position fails to encompass the concrete process of subjective figurations in life, for it excludes differences, multiplicities, and fluidities of historical and material experiences. On the contrary, the “falling” Noras embody the becoming-of-new-woman, for they negotiate with various subject-positions on their own terms. By doing so, they deterritorialize the fixed subject-location and destabilize the ideological hegemony of the New Woman. Nevertheless, the “becoming-woman” in Deleuze’s theoretical system is coopted to signify a generic nomadic subject or consciousness⁴⁶ which paradoxically calls for the dissolution of sexual and gender differences. Feminist critics are vehement about this controversial Deleuzian move. Alice Jardine’s seminal article “Woman in Limbo” interrogates the precarious position of women in Deleuze’s conception of “becoming-woman,” and asks whether “she must also be the *first* to disappear”⁴⁷ if the imperative of “becoming-woman” involves all of mankind. More recently, Rosi Braidotti remarks, “Deleuze becomes caught in the contradiction of postulating a general ‘becoming-woman’ which fails to take into account the

historical and epistemological specificity of the female feminist standpoint.”⁴⁸

Deleuze’s figurative approach to “becoming-woman” bypasses the corporeality of female subjectivities and the historicity of female subjectivation. Conceding the subversive analytical prowess of the Deleuzian becoming, I also deem it necessary to historicize the process of becoming and to situate the process on women’s unreduceable bodies. In other words, to formulate a Deleuzian feminist study, we need to undertake a genealogy of “becoming-woman” and an embodied ethnography of “women-in-becoming.”

The figuration of a new subjectivity is a historical becoming—that is, a process embedded in historical unfolding. A Nora-esque New Womanhood is not a teleological or static identity, but a complex interiority in transmutation. Hence becoming-New-Woman or New-Women-in-becoming necessitates both internal and external negotiations with historical and sociocultural specificities. The process of negotiation is constant and continuous in the sense that the rhizomic figuration of subject-position always generates new mutations and empowers new becoming. At the same time, the process is also sporadic and discontinuous because it does not undertake a lineal path. That is, becoming-New-Woman entails an arduous negotiation with social and material realities, warrants moments of weakness and retrogression, and validates itself not through approximating an ideologically valorized model but through deterritorializing fixed subject-locations and deviating from hegemonic subject-positions. Nora-in-becoming manifests her subjective agency in navigating and adjudicating the figuration process of her new subjectivity rather than occupying the subject location assigned to her.

From “being” to “becoming,” the shift of the analytical lens expands the spectrum of critical investigation. “Being-Nora” only refers to the momentary arrest of Nora’s heroic self-liberation, whereas “becoming-Nora” encompasses the process of Nora

experiencing and negotiating the complexity of subject-formation. The process starts at the moment when Nora leaves home, and it unfolds in a rhizomic way as Nora adapts to and copes with new challenges and situations. Moreover, the continuous process of subjective transmutation does not follow any formulaic modalities. It is the spontaneity and modulability that invigorate “becoming-Nora.” Only through this lens can the agency of new women be manifested and examined through their historical and material experiences. Hence, the question to be asked is not how the enlightenment ideology of the New Woman informs the cause of Chinese women’s liberation, but how Chinese women reshape the discourse of the New Woman through the materialization of a new subjectivity. That is to say, instead of listing the social and material oppressions that have hindered them from embodying the idealized independent modern New Woman, I am interested in how they have overcome obstacles, successfully or not, in the process of becoming-New-Woman. Without addressing the latter question, the inquiry about “what happens after Nora leaves home” is never materialized, and consequently lacks the analytical power of synthesizing Chinese women’s bodily experience with modernity.

In line with Lu Xun’s historical-materialist analysis, I dive into the material reality confronted by Xiao Hong after leaving home. But diverging from Lu Xun’s deterministic and pessimistic take on Nora’s prospects, I explore Xiao Hong’s agential negotiation with material challenges and attest that material lack, which is epitomized by a visceral and affective hunger, is constitutive of her subject-formation, or of her becoming-the-new-woman. Juan Manuel Garrido’s philosophical manifesto on hunger illuminates the dialectic between life and hunger: “To live has been traditionally understood as having to take care of one’s own hunger. That life entails *hunger* means that the living condition is that of being in need or in want of the necessary conditions for being alive, for surviving, for not ceasing to be” [emphasis in

the original].⁴⁹ Garrido underscores the dialectical antagonism between life and hunger—that is, life is predicated on a constant negation of hunger. But the dialectical negation of hunger—that is, to cancel and to preserve hunger⁵⁰ at the same time, is the momentum of life, for the visceral stimulus of hunger is generative of the survival instinct. The Hegelian take on life and hunger revolutionizes the conventional view of hunger as a material lack that needs to be surpassed. That hunger generates momentum for living bespeaks life's twofold purposiveness: the need to substantiate biological life as well as the desire to actualize the meaning of living.

Xiao Hong's nomadic life after her escape from home was spent under the besiegement of hunger; however, her life, especially her artistic life, was also constantly rejuvenated by hunger. It was unfortunate that she was never freed from starvation, but hunger kept stimulating her to liberate her greatest artistic potential. Chen Hengzhe (1893-1976), the first woman professor and renowned feminist scholar in China, once explicated women's true liberation as the right to work with free will. In her 1935 book *New Life, Women and Liberation*, Chen wrote, "the essence of women's liberation is the will to travail rather than the fortune to enjoy life; it stipulates giving rather than receiving, achieving self-enhancement rather than receiving favors from others."⁵¹ That is to say, the movement should liberate women's faculties and capacities to share social responsibilities and to tackle economic challenges. Only through an intrepid engagement with life, including pleasure and pain, enjoyment and hard work, should women's liberation be actually achieved and sustained. The characters women build, the skills they gain, the social relationships they acquire in the process of toils and travails are constitutive of their new subjectivities. Becoming a subject in society entails submitting to the fulfillment of obligations and accountabilities, both to oneself and to others. In this sense, hunger amplifies the material need of a living body, and thus, accentuates an individual's

unalienated responsibilities to her own body. While agonized by chronic poverty and starvation, Xiao Hong is animated to mobilize her full capacity to combat hunger. What fascinates is that hunger does not only represent a conundrum to Xiao Hong, but also suggests a means to ease the distress of the conundrum, both physically and intellectually. That gives rise to Xiao Hong's transfiguration into a hungry woman artist who writes for and about her own hunger. Xiao Hong keeps writing as her hunger persists. The dynamic negotiation between her artistic creativity and visceral sensation of hunger formulates her becoming-the-new-woman.

The Hungry Woman Artist: Xiao Hong's Initiation into the World of Art

What is fascinating is that hunger not only presents a material challenge to Xiao Hong, but also creates a means for her to alleviate material distress on both the physical and intellectual levels. What emerges from Xiao Hong's negotiation with the embodied material condition of hunger is her literary writing about hunger. Xiao Hong wrote for and about her own hunger: her fervent desire to publish was partially driven by the need to make a living and therefore to deliver herself from starvation. At the same time, the experience of starvation became a significant motif in her writing. Xiao Hong's literary practice exemplifies what Paul Auster conceptualizes as "the art of hunger":

It is first of all an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it. That is not to say an art of autobiographical excess, but rather, an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself. In other words, an art of hunger: an art of need, of necessity, of desire.⁵²

In his introduction to Nobel laureate Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel *Hunger*, Auster analyzes the young artist's compulsory and even pathological fixation on hunger. He argues that this seemingly self-destructive endeavor paradoxically gives birth to an artistic world of the body: "the world of art has been translated into the world of the body."⁵³ The art of hunger is first and foremost an art of the lived experience of the body. However, as the art of hunger stems from the embodied life of the artist, it is

more than just autobiographical storytelling. It manifests the authorial effort to express hunger as both an artistic subject and aesthetic form, for “hunger affects his prose in the same way it affects his life.”⁵⁴ To be critical of Auster’s unproblematic romanticization of the bodily suffering caused by hunger, I believe that his conceptualization of the art of hunger sheds light on the visceral and affective bond between the artist’s body and the body of her art. The symbiotic connection between the life and the work of the artist also illuminates the discussion surrounding the paradox of the golden era of Xiao Hong. As her literary creativity is inseparable from her lived experience, including that of starvation, her golden era of hunger is less paradoxical than it seems to be. However, unlike Hamsun’s protagonist, Xiao Hong did not initiate a hunger strike on her own; rather, she painstakingly tried to feed her empty stomach. In the process of struggling, the affliction of hunger infiltrated more deeply into her body as well as into her artistic world. The interconnection of her hunger and her art configures Xiao Hong’s new subjectivity as a hungry woman artist.

Disputing the widely acknowledged beginning of Xiao Hong’s literary career, I argue that the initiation of Xiao Hong’s artistic career was marked by the letter of a monumental significance that she wrote to Pei Xinyuan (A.K.A. Lao Fei), the editor of the literary supplement of *The International Gazette* (*guoji xiebao*), in July 1932. It is common to regard Xiao Hong’s 1933 short story “An Abandoned Baby” (*qi’er*) as her literary debut. Since this piece of autobiographical fiction was written and published when Xiao Hong was cohabiting with her “savior” Xiao Jun,⁵⁵ the latter was often credited for recognizing the former’s literary talent and launching her literary career. In Ann Hui’s *The Golden Era*, Xiao Hong’s literary ambition is ignited by her jealousy and desperate attempt to rekindle Xiao Jun’s love for her. In the film, after Xiao Jun begins a suspiciously intimate relation with another young woman Miss Cheng, Xiao Hong gets concerned about their relationship. She confronts Xiao

Jun and demands that he reconfirm his passion for her. Upon hearing that he loves her for her artistic talent (*cai hua*), she springs from the bed and starts to write a short story titled “An Abandoned Baby.” This cinematic representation problematically attributes Xiao Hong’s literary creation to her desire to please and impress her lover. It undermines, if not diminishes, Xiao Hong’s self-determination and literary agency, and at the same time essentializes her identity as a woman madly in love. It also privileges Xiao Jun as her literary patron and mentor, an interpretation that reinforces a naturalized gender hierarchy in the world of art. Combating the reinforcement of gender hierarchy in the film, I argue that what launched Xiao Hong’s journey of a woman writer in the public was her letter addressed to Pei Xinyuan, which embodied her art of hunger. Qiu Shi’s biography of Xiao Hong⁵⁶ discloses important details about the letter: it delineated her personal history, from her Nora-esque rebellion against her tyrannical father to her perilous confinement in Dongxingshun Hotel, where her life was threatened by food shortage. Xiao Hong also criticized the editor’s lack of social responsibility and forcefully pleaded for his assistance. What intrigued Pei and other readers was the fact that as mentioned in the letter, Xiao Hong was also a woman writer with the penname Qiao Yin (“Gentle Moanings”). Another biography authored by Ye Jun⁵⁷ mentions that prior to the writing of the letter, Xiao Hong had submitted a couple of poems under the penname Qiao Yin to *The International Gazette*. Although Pei rejected her submissions, he was impressed by her artistic style.

Xiao Hong’s letter was penned from the vantage point of a hungry woman artist, and it deeply upset her readers to learn that a woman writer was mistreated in society after her Nora-esque running-away from home. It indicates that she had already positioned herself as a writer in crafting the letter, and that she demanded social compassion and assistance for the hungry woman artist. The combination of

autobiography and polemic in the letter stood out with its boldness and distinctive literary style, and it prompted Pei to orchestrate the rescue of the hungry woman artist. Suffice it to say that this piece of epistolary writing emblemizes Xiao Hong's art of hunger: on the one hand, her artistic expression is stimulated by her survival instinct under the threat of hunger, and on the other, the enticing artistic effect of her writing stems from the empathetic appeal of hunger. More importantly, the letter mobilized a rescuing action that resulted in consequential changes in Xiao Hong's life. For the first time, she was recognized and validated as a hungry woman artist by her peers.

Xiao Jun, who played a key role in Xiao Hong's rescue, remembers Xiao Hong by her art of hunger. His memoir *Ren yu renjian (People and the World)*⁵⁸ describes their first meeting: he was infatuated by the striking contrast between Xiao Hong's malnourished pale face and her invigorated spirit. What elicited his admiration and compassion were her sketches and her poem "*Ouran xiangqi*" ("A Sudden Visit of Memory"). The poem reads, "Last May/ I was eating green plums in Beijing/ This May/ The agony of my life/ Tastes exactly like an unripe plum."⁵⁹ In confinement and starvation, Xiao Hong ruminates on her own hunger, associating the agony of hunger with the taste of an unripe plum, the pungent bitterness of which greatly upsets the stomach. Moreover, the sensual memory of eating only amplifies the pain of having nothing to eat. The short poem showcases the distinctive aesthetics of Xiao Hong's art, which is her acute perception of the corporeal and sensory experience of mundane life.

What haunts Xiao Jun's memory is Xiao Hong's art of hunger. As Gang Yue attests, being a "female Chinese hunger artist," Xiao Hong had insisted on "redeeming herself in the realm of the everyday, however abject its poverty, rather than in some metaphysical form of artistic transcendence. In the everyday, her

stomach rumbles in echo to other empty bellies; her heart aches in response to other bleeding hearts.”⁶⁰ Xiao Hong’s writing about everyday life creates a bodily and existential art that resists artistic transcendence and ideological sublimation. She derives her artistic creativity primarily from the visceral and affective intensity of hunger, and in return, the centrality of hunger in her art has a compelling empathetic effect on her readers. This distinctive effect is her literary signature as a hungry woman writer. Tracing back to the beginning of her literary career as a hungry woman artist sheds new light on her embodied journey of becoming a Nora-esque New Woman. Both her artistic talent and lived experience in society constitute her new subjectivity.

The Field of Life and Death: A Tale of Women’s Hunger

Xiao Hong’s impoverished golden era, although far from ideal, is re-consolidated by her art of hunger. However, literary critics have largely overlooked her aesthetics, centering their attention either on her class consciousness or her feminist awareness. Her acclaimed novel *The Field of Life and Death* (*sheng si hang*) was immediately labeled as anti-Japanese fiction upon its publication in 1935. Lu Xun and Hu Feng, both renowned leftist writers and critics at that time, introduced the novel as a tale about the tenacious resistance of the underclass of Chinese peasants. This approach prevailed until the contemporary literary scholar Lydia Liu interpreted the novel as Xiao Hong’s feminist intervention into China’s revolutionary and nationalist discourse in the 1930s. Liu trenchantly points out that the “field of life and death” should first be understood as the vulnerable bodies of women before it should be mobilized as a metaphor for the violated motherland.⁶¹ Instead of being solely devoted to anti-Japanese resistance, Xiao Hong confronts two enemies at the same time—namely, imperialism and the patriarchy. Hence, Lydia Liu’s insight enables a twofold reading of Xiao Hong’s work, from the perspectives of both feminist and

class critique. However, this bifurcated analysis fails to address the linkage between Xiao Hong's class consciousness and feminist stance. I argue that Xiao Hong's pursuing of a modern womanhood is tested by the peril of hunger. In return, the lived experience of hunger forges her emotional and political alliance with the poverty-stricken underclass. Xiao Hong's artistic interrogations of the everyday life of women and that of the underclass converge on the issue of hunger. In this sense, the experience of hunger is both universal and gendered. Thus, Xiao Hong's literary representations of hunger should be carefully unpacked in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of her subjectivity as a woman, as well as a hungry artist.

In this new light, I read *The Field of Life and Death* as a tale of women's hunger. Among many female characters in the novel, Xiao Hong depicts the life of a village woman named Golden Bough. Howard Goldblatt notices the nuanced resemblance between the female protagonist and Xiao Hong herself: "That Golden Bough is, in some respects and to some degree, a fictional representation of the author herself is hard to dispute."⁶² He then details the parallel tragedies that have happened to both of them, including being mistreated and abandoned by men, losing their children, and being forced or threatened into prostitution. However, what Goldblatt misses in his comparison is the experience of hunger that has shaped Xiao Hong's and Golden Bough's lives. In a time of national turmoil, both Xiao Hong and Golden Bough live in poverty and hunger. The suffering of starvation also brings other misfortunes to them, as they both lose one child to the threat of hunger. Nevertheless, they are also prompted to combat hunger on their own terms. Through her fictional character Golden Bough, Xiao Hong relives the dreadful memory of hunger as well as that of losing her child. But she also sees in Golden Bough the strength to persevere against the slim odds of survival, as she herself has done. Reading Golden Bough's story

against Xiao Hong's personal life, I argue that the lived experience of the artist informs her literary creation. The bodily suffering of hunger is transferred from the artist to her art. The tale of women's hunger in *The Field of Life and Death* exposes the distressful material condition of women, and at the same time demonstrates women's resilient resistance and perseverance.

Golden Bough loses her newborn girl to her husband Chengye's tantrum on the eve of the Summer Festival. On this tragic day, Chengye is irritated by the deflated price for wheat in the market. He then grows more agitated at the sight of the bare table in the middle of the empty kitchen. Realizing that there is neither flour nor cooking oil to cook a meal, he bursts out, "So! Someone like me is supposed to starve to death!"⁶³ Chengye's anger is instigated by his empty stomach, but it is his self-centered mindset that prioritizes his need for food over others'. At this time, the newborn girl starts to cry for food, which reminds Chengye of the pressing issue of starvation. He urges Golden Bough to pacify the baby by making a threat: "I'll sell the both of you! What's the use of having you two noise-makers in the house?"⁶⁴ Golden Bough's back talk drives him into frenzy: he picks up the baby and throws her on the floor. The appalling brutality of the murder showcases the tyranny of the patriarch in the family, which is only exacerbated by the situation of starvation. The patriarch asserts his prerogative to eat, even at the cost of others' needs. His hunger should be the first to be satiated, whereas his wife and daughter should endure starvation in silence. For Chengye, the material needs of her wife and daughter are deemed a threat to his own share of food. This tragedy exemplifies the uneven distribution of food in the patriarchal society, which can be life-threatening for women and children in the time of starvation. To add to her suffering from hunger, probably to a greater degree than her husband, Golden Bough also loses her child. In enormous sorrow, Golden Bough mourns her dead baby: "No one will ever know how

many tears of grief had dried on this potter's field. Not even crows would land on this eternally pitiful area.”⁶⁵ Xiao Hong's writing unwaveringly focuses on the atrocious events that take place in the mundane lives of underclass women. In her depiction of this absurd story, hunger is the catalyst for the tragedy.

Golden Bough's story mirrors Xiao Hong's own personal tragedy. In August 1932, Xiao Hong gave birth to a baby girl, but immediately gave her up for adoption. She was castigated for relinquishing her maternal responsibility, and her reticence on the matter earned her the reputation of being selfish and standoffish. In 1933, she wrote the story “An Abandoned Baby” based on her previous experience. In the autobiographical story, Xiao Hong accounts for the seemingly ruthless decision of the female protagonist Qin. When Qin is left alone with her newborn baby in the hospital, she is awoken by the baby's cry for food in the middle of night. Instead of feeding the baby, she gets furious:

What a selfish thing! How would you not hear hundreds of thousands of babies crying? How would you not see hundreds of thousands of babies starving to death? If you would not see that adults who are more capable than kids are starving to death, or that you yourself are starving to death, you are such a selfish person!⁶⁶

In a frantic manner, Qin repeats the term “starving to death” (*e'si*). Her distraught state of mind might be explained away as a symptom of postpartum depression in today's terms. But rather than applying the concept of anachronism, I look into the specific context for a historical interpretation. The baby's cry for food devastates her because anxiety over food is so prominent in her mind. The predicament of hunger is only amplified by the baby's demand, and the threat of death becomes overwhelmingly real. The disheartening decision to give up the baby could be coerced by her own worry over food, as well as her fear that she would never be able to provide for the baby. Reading “An Abandoned Baby” and *The Field of Life and Death* side by side, I see how Xiao Hong transforms her own conflicted emotions into

both Chengye's cruelty of killing the baby and Golden Bough's sorrow over losing her. This emotional transference attests Xiao Hong's empathic alliance with hungry mothers of the underclass, and her artistic creation borrows force from her traumatic memory.

After the tragic event, Golden Bough is forced to flee to Harbin to avoid the fate of being raped by the Japanese soldiers who have camped in the village. Although it is not a Nora-esque running-away, it does, to some extent, resemble Xiao Hong's own escape from her rural house to the same city of Harbin to avoid an arranged marriage. (It may even be a valid point to argue that an analogy is made between arranged marriage and rape.) In both cases, the urban space of the metropolis is first imagined as an asylum, wherein women are protected from their ill fates. In contrast to their provincial homes, the city seems to stand for a more civilized and modernized way of living. However, it turns out that both Xiao Hong and Golden Bough are welcomed by nothing but the perilous situation of hunger. After spending her first night in Harbin on the street, Golden Bough realizes, "This was definitely not the countryside; here there were only alienation, barriers, and insensitivity."⁶⁷ Feeling hopelessly lost in the city, she musters her courage to look for work. First, Golden Bough is paid to mend socks and sew bedcovers, but she eventually resorts to prostitution to make more money. To ward off the guilt, she constantly reminds herself that what she does is "for the sake of money, for the sake of her livelihood."⁶⁸ Finally, the pain of starvation and the humiliation of prostitution compel Golden Bough to give up on her life in the city and to return to the village.

It is not overreaching to draw a parallel between Golden Bough's experience in Harbin and Xiao Hong's. Xiao Hong's stay in Harbin was also fraught with similar difficulties and perils: she had no money for a shelter and was starving in cold weather; after her fiancé abandoned her in Dongxingshun Hotel, the owner threatened

to sell her to a brothel to pay off their bill. In this sense, both author and character become refugees of starvation and victims of sexual exploitation in the city. In the same way, neither of them succumbs to setbacks or stops striving for survival. Projecting her own experience onto the female character in her novel, Xiao Hong evidences an affective bond between a woman intellectual and an underclass woman. Through her nuanced depiction of the predicament faced by the hungry woman Golden Bough, Xiao Hong reflects on her own memory of living in starvation, criticizes the oppression of women in patriarchal society, and also suggests the empowering stimulus of hunger. *The Field of Life and Death* exemplifies Xiao Hong's art of hunger, which is essentially self-referential and self-reflective. Her art of hunger is also embedded in her critical stance on the issues of women and class. That is to say, Xiao Hong resonates with other empty stomachs through her art of hunger.

Market Street: Xiao Hong's Art of Hunger

The creation of Xiao Hong's art of hunger goes hand in hand with the configuration of her new subjectivity as a hungry woman artist. Although Jing Jiang contends, "That imaginations of New Womanhood have a strongly bodily dimension should hardly surprise us,"⁶⁹ Xiao Hong's art of hunger *does* astonish us with the revelation that hunger is integral to the figuration of New Womanhood. An empty stomach seems to impede Nora's way towards independence and freedom, but it also presents an opportunity for Nora to assert self-determination and to stimulate her artistic agency. In her letter to Xiao Jun, cited at the beginning of the chapter, Xiao Hong cheerfully mentions that her book *Shang shi jie* (*Market Street*) was well received by readers. This rare moment of happiness renders her celebration of the golden era genuine to some extent. The unprecedented success of *Market Street*, which got a second printing only a month after its inaugural publication in August

1936, seems to be Xiao Hong's main source of confidence and consolation during her sojourn in Japan. *Market Street* is Xiao Hong's signature work about hunger, based on her real lived experience with Xiao Jun in Harbin between 1932 and 1934. It can be read as a sequel to Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, for it discloses the author-as-Nora's personal history of hunger and poverty after she leaves her tyrannical family and moves in with her lover Xiao Jun. *Market Street* records a dark chapter in Xiao Hong's life that is marked by desperate poverty, but also witnesses her transformation into a hungry artist. The popularity of *Market Street* evidences the artistic and social impact of Xiao Hong's art of hunger, and establishes her distinctive reputation as a hungry woman artist. It is in this sense that Xiao Hong enters a self-made golden era, wherein she creates a piece of affective art from the agonizing experience and memory of hunger.

If Xiao Hong's first anti-Japanese novel, *The Field of Life and Death*, earns her reputation as a leftist writer, *Market Street* distinguishes her from the school of left-wing writers. She was immediately recognized for writing about impoverished mundane life and the abject body of hunger. In the film *The Golden Era*, Xu Guangping is fascinated by *Market Street*, and she acclaims Xiao Hong's writing: "She is so talented in depicting cold, hunger and poverty (*ji han he pinqiong*). Who doesn't know something about cold, hunger or poverty? But no one has made it so striking and disturbing (*chu mu jing xin*)."⁷⁰ Xu is deeply touched by the unsettling depictions of personal wounds and woes in *Market Street*. It is an unconventional autobiography that captures "the atmosphere, the moods, and the often-overlooked details,"⁷⁰ rather than just documenting sequential events in her life. In other words, it is an affective autobiography that gives an account of the sensory and emotional aspects of her life. The prevailing mood in *Market Street* is undoubtedly that of starving, as the word "hunger" (*ji'e*), is repeated fifteen times throughout the book.

The mood of being hungry encroaches on each aspect of her life: job hunting, romantic relationships, friendship, and most importantly of all, introspection. Shaping her lived experience and subject-formation, hunger configures the narrative framework of *Market Street*.

In the book, Xiao Hong brilliantly depicts how life is when “Hunger and cold is all there is.”⁷¹ Every morning she wakes up in cold and hunger, and then she catches the enticing smell of the newly baked khleb hanging on her neighbor’s doorknob. In the next moment, she is standing in the hallway and drooling over her neighbor’s bottled milk and khleb: “The milky whiteness of the bottles nearly dazzled me. The khleb seemed larger than usual.” Fighting her own criminal impulse to steal, she silently cries: “I’m hungry. I’m not stealing...So what if it’s stealing! I’d steal, even if it were only a few khleb rings. This was for my hunger, for his hunger.”⁷² This episode in Chapter Seven animates the gravity of her hunger. The intangible hunger is reified by the tangible objects of the dazzling white milk and the “enormous size” of the khleb rings. The neighbor’s khleb rings, which titillate yet cruelly deny her appetite, only instigate her survival instinct. Under this desperate circumstance, she would excuse herself the act of stealing, for she is not a criminal as long as she only steals for hunger. She is tempted to renounce morality for the sake of living. Xiao Hong’s writing does not eschew the disconcerting details of hunger, abject as they are. Instead, the demoralizing effects of hunger are highlighted to interrogate the normalized and moralized way of living. This showcases a prominent feature of Xiao Hong’s art of hunger: the unfolding of narrative is driven by the bodily experience, which demands to be expressed. That is to say, the embodiment of hunger is not to be overcome or transcended, but is to be unapologetically elaborated.

The chronic deprivation of food not only results in a thinner and weaker body, but also reshapes her self-knowledge. The sensation of hunger grows stronger and deeper

every day until it penetrates into every inch of her body and colonizes her senses and thoughts. Hunger is experienced as an absolute emptiness:

I was feeling melancholic, and sort of empty, almost as though I had been transported to the depths of a coal mine, all alone and without even a lantern to light my way down. Small though the room was, I had the sensation of being in the middle of a vast deserted public square. The walls enclosing me seemed farther away than the heavens themselves; I was all alone, completely cut off from the outside world. It all boiled down to this: I had an empty stomach.⁷³

Xiao Hong ingeniously conceives the spatial metaphors of “a coal mine” and “a deserted public square” to describe the hollowing effect of hunger. The interiority of the starving body is mirrored by the emptiness of the exteriority, while the visceral hunger is transformed into a spatial and social experience. Her stomach is emptied for lack of food, just as she is isolated from the rest of world without a sense of belonging. The empty stomach emblemizes her life devoid of social connection and validation. As Maud Ellmann’s brilliant study concludes, “food is the symbol of the passage, the totem of sociality, and the epitome of all creative and destructive labor.”⁷⁴ The act of eating, or the act of absorbing nutrition from outside, connects the individual body with the rest of the world; therefore, it ascribes a sense of belonging as well as of socialization to the eating body. The deprivation of food consequently leads to the blockage of this passage and the disappearance of sociality. That is to say, Xiao Hong is stripped of sociality as she is deprived of food. She is eventually incapacitated by her profound sense of emptiness and isolation. However, Ellmann is wrong about food being the only passage to “all creative and destructive labor,” for the absence of food, or hunger, can also generate creativity, as Xiao Hong’s art of hunger attests.

Hunger leads to a state of isolation also because poverty is alienated in society and stigmatized as abnormality. The social and ideological validation of the New Woman is cancelled by her suffering of poverty and hunger. With the ambition to fulfill her individual goals in society, Xiao Hong ends up being emptied in terms of both basic

needs and social values. Hunger drives home the feeling of not belonging to society as well as not being valued by society. When she is visiting her middle school, Xiao Hong tastes the bitterness of shame, which is a socially inscribed attitude towards poverty and hunger. She is demoralized to the extent that she cannot even muster enough courage to go up to her old classroom: “I couldn’t make myself walk up the stairs right away—I felt it would be somehow humiliating.”⁷⁵ She feels shameful about becoming an impoverished and famished woman graduate who has come back to borrow money from her former literature teacher. She painstakingly compartmentalizes her memories and tries not to confuse her memory of her youth, when she enthusiastically read Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* with her roommates, with that of her present life as a starving Nora. However, the two pieces of memory collapse into one in the shared space, which only accentuates the stark contrast between past and present. While the sight of the current female students reminds her of foregone passion and hope, the decline of her life after graduation is miserably recalled. On her way back home, Xiao Hong falls down on the icy and slippery street because of her shaky legs weakened by hunger and cold. Yet, her falling on the street also epitomizes her disheartening transformation from a zealous woman student emulating Nora’s path into an unemployed hungry Nora. The humiliation of falling on the street under the influence of hunger crystalizes the social connotation of hunger: hunger is stigmatized as a failure to support oneself, and thus, the hungry body is alienated in society as being deplorably weak and worthless.

Xiao Hong’s multivalent depiction in *Market Street* addresses the physical, cognitive, and sociopolitical dimensions of hunger. It demonstrates that the suffering of hunger can be perceived viscerally by the senses, cogitated by subjective consciousness, and encoded with social significance and value. Hunger can be debilitating in its various aspects, but Xiao Hong’s suffering of hunger is exacerbated

because she is a woman. The experience of hunger is gender-differentiated due to many factors: to start with, discrete physiological structures stipulate that the female body responds differently to the deprivation of food than the male body does. But more importantly, the gendered labor division in the patriarchal society assigns domestic chores, including cooking (or preparing food), to women. Thus, the anxiety about having little to cook for one's family adds on to the agony of having little to eat for oneself. Xiao Hong starts to see this obligation to cook when she has left home. She also begins to feel frustration over cooking:

Three or four hours later, it was time to make dinner. He had gone out to look for some work, leaving me at home to do the cooking. I stayed home and waited for him. I began to pace the floor around the stove. Every day it was the same: eat, sleep, worry about firewood, fret over rice.⁷⁶

Pacing in the room alone, she beholds only the cold stove and the empty rice barrel. With the clock ticking, soon it will be time to prepare dinner again. She is trapped in a circular pattern of routines—"eat, sleep, worry about firewood, fret over rice"—and there is no escape for her. She is anguished by both her own hunger and her "delinquency" as a domestic cook. For Xiao Hong, this dual agony brings to the fore the sense of hard times: "All of this had given me a clear picture. This was no longer childhood; these were the hard times. The time for getting by had begun."⁷⁷

In ostensible contrast to her celebration of the golden era in her letter to Xiao Jun, Xiao Hong laments "hard times" in *Market Street*. Her multifaceted portrayal of hunger conveys a subtle but penetrating sense of pain so that her readers easily sympathize with her affective hunger. Nevertheless, the pain of hunger paradoxically brings her to see her situation in perspective: her emotional and economic reliance on her lover Xiao Jun is proven to be precarious. Deeply in love, the couple seems to face the adversities of life side by side until Xiao Hong tastes "the savage loneliness of [the] bodily experience" of hunger.⁷⁸ She is startled to realize how capricious love can be when it comes to hunger, and comes to the revelation that she has to be self-

reliant, for she is on her own. On the day when the couple is supposed to share one piece of khleb ring together, Xiao Jun's hunger gets the better of his love:

I took the toothbrush mug downstairs to get some water. When I got back, about the only thing left of the bread was the hard outer crust. He quickly said, "I really ate fast. How could I have eaten so fast? Boy, am I selfish. Men sure are selfish... Then his other hand moved into action and, before he knew it, he had twisted off another piece, put it into his mouth, and swallowed it..."⁷⁹

As he is fully absorbed by his own hunger, Xiao Jun ignores Xiao Hong's need. At first, she refrains from pointing out his selfish action, and excuses his act by explaining it away as an unconscious reaction under the influence of hunger. However, when the same thing happens again with the water, she finally breaks her silence and asks for her own share.

Against the common view of Xiao Hong's lack of judgment when it comes to her romantic relationship, the animated depiction of this episode showcases her sensitive and observant perception of her love relationship. The taxing situation of hunger makes it evident that survival is an individual task, and provides her with a window to reexamine her romantic relationship. The lonely experience of hunger compels her to think in individual, rather than relational, terms. In this sense, hunger challenges the norm of romantic love that is idealized as the modern paradigm of affection in the enlightenment era. Haiyan Lee's study on the genealogy of love reveals the mystification of free love in the enlightenment structure of feeling:

Ideally, the romantic lover is an atomistic being shorn of all forms of dependency and obligation, a living signifier of freedom and autonomy, a self-sufficient and self-activating moral agent. Performatively, the enlightenment structure of feeling reduces the lover to a tabula rasa on which an altogether new vision of human solidarity may be imagined.⁸⁰

Through the performance of love and romance, the young lover enacts her freedom, autonomy, and individuality. In the enlightenment structure of feeling, the lover is idealized as a modern agent embodying the enlightenment ideation of new morality and subjectivity. The cultural imagination of the New Woman is always associated

with her role of a romantic lover, or her headstrong quest for free love at any cost. Lee's groundbreaking study sheds new light on Xiao Hong's seemingly scandalous romantic relations. Her fervent pursuit of love epitomizes her relentless effort to lead a modern way of loving and living, which constitutes the condition for her becoming-the-new-woman. However, with a hollow promise of affection and happiness, the discourse of romantic love cajoles new women into heteronormative relationships, which again subject them to a gender hierarchy and domination in the name of love.

Hunger intervenes into the mystification of romantic love by exposing the loneliness of bodily suffering. It debunks the hegemonic discourse on love that calls on women to sacrifice everything for free romance. The loneliness of hunger, to some extent, liberates Xiao Hong from the shackles of romantic love. She is spurred to strive for her material needs and to employ her literary talent, even in disagreement with her lover Xiao Jun. For Xiao Hong, the most memorable event in this span of life is arguably the chance to become an ad man's assistant. In 1933, she wrote a story named "*Guanggao fushou*" (The Helper of an Ad Man) for the collection of writings she published with Xiao Jun.⁸¹ Later on, the story was rewritten and made into a chapter in *Market Street*. The story that Xiao Hong had written twice relates one incident during her cohabitation with Xiao Jun in Harbin: under economic pressure, Xiao Hong starts to look for jobs, even though her health does not really allow it. One day she comes across an ad in the newspaper: "I spotted an ad for another movie house looking for someone to paint posters, which sent my blood pumping. Why not me? Hadn't I studied art in school?"⁸² Immediately she is thrilled at the chance to employ her artistic training and talent, as well as by the opportunity to make some money. However, Xiao Jun is strongly against her idea, for he believes that the advertising industry is morally corrupt. He dismisses the pressing issue of hunger and claims that he would not compromise his sublime morality for food. But Xiao Hong is

keenly aware that hunger is not to be transcended, but must be satiated with concrete food. Moreover, her enthusiasm is ignited by the prospect of becoming a professional woman, with a career as an artisan. This dream job would give her a means of living as well as a new subject-position to inhabit. Xiao Hong pursues the job behind Xiao Jun's back. Her assertive attitude and tenacious effort attest to her self-determination on the path of becoming a modern New Woman. Her decision infuriates Xiao Jun, who sternly berates her: "As soon as you see a job, you forget everything else and take off! The minute you have a job, you don't even want your lover anymore!"⁸³ He shames her for being unfaithful to love as well as being disobedient to his will, while what she wants is just to employ her artistic skills to pay for food. Prioritizing food over romantic love is her second rebellion after leaving home. Xiao Hong's dream of becoming an assistant to an ad man is illustrative of the hungry woman artist's effort to employ her artistic skills for financial compensation and social validation

Hunger necessitates Xiao Hong's artistic endeavor, and paradoxically nourishes her art of hunger. But Xiao Hong is not engrossed in the suffering of hunger. On the contrary, in her writing, she manages to alleviate the pain of hunger with a sense of humor:

We ate a vegetarian diet; sometimes we didn't eat at all. We were like legendary people awaiting their transformation into immortals, cultivating themselves by enduring hardships. We weren't doing badly, either, for we were enduring our share: our faces were turning yellow, our frames were growing thin; my eyes seemed to be getting larger, his cheekbones were jutting out like pieces of wood. So we were doing our part. But we still hadn't become immortals.⁸⁴

Her sarcastic comments reference a moralistic Chinese mythology that preaches the obedient endurance of all sufferings. It showcases the iconoclastic stance taken by a cultural rebel like her, and also demonstrates the resilience that has been built into her personality through undergoing hardships in life. Her sense of humor exemplifies her upbeat spirit in a downtrodden position. When analyzing the work of another hungry woman artist in Xiao Hong's times, Bai Wei, Amy Dooling identifies a survival

mechanism of creating laughter. She argues that humor and wit signify “a subversive resistance to the stereotyped image of the passively suffering female and the tragic narrative ending to which she is habitually consigned.”⁸⁵ To create laughter is to resist the stigmatized victimhood that is habitually assigned to women, or specifically hungry women artists. Like Bai Wei, Xiao Hong refuses to perpetuate the stereotype of the female victim and to re-invoke the rhetoric of violence. On the contrary, she explodes this suppressive ideology and repressive reality with parody and humor. Her strategy exemplifies the iconoclastic power of laughter evoked by witty mimicry and cynical remarks, and manifests the integrity and strength of Xiao Hong’s art of hunger.

Conclusion: The Golden Era of the Hungry Woman Writer

In multigated ways, *Market Street* epitomizes the distinct aesthetics of Xiao Hong’s art of hunger. The artistic accomplishment of the book marks Xiao Hong’s transformation into a hungry woman artist. Writing, or more specifically the reflection and creativity involved in the practice of writing, substantiates her impoverished life, as well as her beleaguered path to subject-formation. The doll in the house transforms into the hungry woman writer, who executes her inalienable rights to both hunger and literary creation through writing. Xiao Hong achieves self-redemption and self-realization through her literary investment in the quotidian and the abject, which explains the unsettling and provocative effect of her work. The film script of *The Golden Era* draws on some important chapters of *Market Street*, including “The Europa Hotel,” “The Tutor,” and “Black Khleb and White Salt.” However, the cinematic visualization highlights the uplifting moment when the couple finally manages to acquire some food to ease their long-term hunger, instead of the torment of starving. For example, the long shot of their eating at a restaurant after Xiao Jun receives his first paycheck as a tutor lasts for one and half minutes. The feasting scene

replaces Xiao Hong's suffering of hunger with the celebration of Xiao Jun's resourcefulness in providing food for his lover. Hence, his role as the savior and protector of Xiao Hong is consolidated, as he now becomes the breadwinner of their family. Xiao Hong, in contrast, being weak and unemployed, counts on her lover to feed her. The film downplays the individualized experience of starving, and underrepresents Xiao Hong's agency in striving for her own survival. Without explaining Xiao Hong's personal and artistic growth through the experience of starvation, nor relating Xiao Hong's lived experience to her art of hunger, *The Golden Era* fails to account for the complex connotations of Xiao Hong's golden era.

Of course, Xiao Hong's art of hunger is not only an artistic and discursive expression, but also a means of satisfying needs and life necessities. Indebted to the exponential growth of commercial press and the fast expanding female readership in her times,⁸⁶ Xiao Hong, together with her contemporaries such as Ding Ling, Bai Wei, Su Qing and Zhang Ailing, was able to be a professional writer—that is, to make a living by writing. The autonomy of art as well as the integrity of the author is seemingly compromised by the purpose of commercialization. However, “By reflecting upon their lives through public writing,” Haiping Yan argues, they have constituted “an institutional space for women's appearance amid a civilizational collapsing.”⁸⁷ The burgeoning publishing industry, although not without gender discrimination, formulated a gendered public space for women's social and intellectual mobility, and empowered women on both material and intellectual levels. Through the constructive power of writing and publishing, what Nora is denied in society, such as political and economic equality, is given a new form; what Nora suffers in society, such as poverty and hunger, is acknowledged and validated, to some extent. More importantly, Xiao Hong's public writing about her hunger challenges rather than conforms to the modern institutionalization of writing, for her

personal narrative complicates the hegemonic ideology of the New Woman. Her hunger is a bodily excess that resists being co-opted by ideological discourse.

Writing, the most intensive labor of human creativity, reinstates a sense of purposiveness and reconstructs the integrity of the subject. Women's writing is as constructive as it is subversive, for women have to undermine men's monopolization of intellectual merits before they can start establishing their authorial identities. As Lydia Liu eloquently argues, "Insofar as the female subject is concerned, writing is always a matter of rewriting (the male text) and gaining authorial control."⁸⁸ That is to say, as the latecomer to the literary world, the woman writer is forced to have a dialogue with the literary canons and gender stereotypes that have been created by men in the long history of human society. Her mission is as much to tell her-story as to rewrite his-story. Writing is a self-reflective process that results in the molding or remolding of her selfhood, while public writing is her intervention into the discourse of history. Xiao Hong's art of hunger attempts to negotiate life, history, and selfhood on her own terms. The myth of romantic love, the ideal of the public realm, and the vision of gender equality in the modern nation-state are exploded by her outcry of hunger. In place of the hegemonic and male-dominated modernity that harnesses women's self-liberation for the momentum of nation-building, Xiao Hong discloses her different and gendered experience in society, and therefore proffers an alternative discourse on the history of modernity. To Xiao Hong, becoming-the-new-woman does not only configure a new female subjectivity by deviating from the hegemonic ideology of the New Woman, but also constitutes a new modern history by accentuating women's bodily experiences and affective memories.

¹ Translation by author. Xiao Hong, *Xiao Hong shujian* (Letters of Xiao Hong), ed. Xiao Jun, (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2015), 159.

² Translation by author. Nie Gannu, "Zai Xi'an" (In Xi'an), in *Jinian Xiao Hong* (In Commemoration of Xiao Hong), ed. Yu Guanquan, (Beijing: Oriental Press, 2011), 128.

³ Daniel M. Gold's review was accessed on <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/17/movies/the-golden-era-a-biopic-on-the-novelist-xiao-hong.html>.

⁴ Translation by author. Xu Guangping, "Zhuiyi Xiao Hong" (Recollection of Xiao Hong), in *Jinian Xiao Hong* (In Commemoration of Xiao Hong), ed. Yu Guanquan, (Beijing: Oriental Press, 2011), 54.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Tang Xiaobing, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 13.

⁷ Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The interwoven questions of Chinese modernity and woman's issues are also discussed in full length in Rey Chow's *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), Wendy Larson's *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Tani Barlow's *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), and Yan Haiping's *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ Translation by author.

¹¹ Translation by author.

¹² Amy Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 20.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 13.

¹⁵ Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is an influential Norwegian playwright, and one of the founders of Modernism in theatre. His major works that were translated and introduced to China during the enlightenment period include *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *The Wild Duck*.

¹⁶ *A Doll's House* is a three-act play that was first staged in 1879. At the beginning of the play, Nora, a housewife, is wholeheartedly devoted to her family and her husband Torvald Helmer, a bank manager. To raise enough money for Torvald to take a therapeutic vocation, Nora has to forge a check. When her forgery is exposed and she is blackmailed by Torvald's colleague Krogstad, Torvald ceases to be a doting husband right away and accuses her of being a morally corrupt woman unfit for his family and their children. At this moment, Nora comes to realize Torvald's hypocrisy and her own status of a devalued and manipulated doll. Decisively she leaves her husband and her family, closing the door behind her.

¹⁷ (Translated by Elisabeth Eide in 1986)

¹⁸ Shuei-may Chang, *Casting Off the Shackles of Family: Ibsen's Nora Figure in Modern Chinese Literature, 1918-1942*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 33-34.

¹⁹ Bernard F. Dukore, "Karl Marx's Youngest Daughter and 'A Doll's House'," *Theatre Journal* 42:3 (1990), 308-21.

²⁰ Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid*, 38.

²² An important subgenre of Chinese modern colloquial theater (*hua ju*) is the "Nora Plays" (*nala ju*): Hu Shi's *The Main Event in Life* (*zhongshen da shi*) in 1919, Tian Han's *The Night of Capturing the Tiger* (*huo gu zhi ye*) in 1924, Guo Moruo's *Three Rebellious Women* (*san ge pannie de nüxing*) between 1923 and 1925, Bai Wei's *Fighting out of the Ghost's Tower* (*da chu linggu ta*) in 1928, just to name a few.

²³ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 169.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 39.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 33.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 44.

²⁸ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the Panopticon as a biopolitical technology, an architectural design conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century for prisons, asylums, schools, hospitals, and factories, with a panoramic surveillance view for both the superintendents and the residents. Foucault argues that the observation and constant surveillance functions as a control mechanism, and gradually the constant surveillance is internalized by its residents.

²⁹ The cinematic adaption of Yu Hua's novella *To Live* is directed by the renowned Chinese fifth-generation director Zhang Yimou. Chow contends that the scene where Fugui violently disciplines his son in the communal dining hall in order to appease the outraged crowd emblemizes the political nature of the Chinese public—that is, an oppressive ideological apparatus in the service of despotism.

³⁰ Rey Chow, "We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's *To Live*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95: 4 (1996): 1059.

³¹ Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 6.

³² Hannah Arendt, 32.

³³ Yiqun Zhou, *Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations in Ancient China and Greece*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 324.

³⁴ Translation by author (Hu Shi, "Yibusheng zhuyi.")

³⁵ Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth Century China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 29.

³⁶ Psychological realism, as a literary technique in fiction writing, details the interiority of characters and unfolds the narrative through characters' psychological processes. It is exemplified by Henry James's and Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. Lu Xun's fictional depiction of social realism is imbued with subjectivism; hence he is regarded as a heir of Russian psychological realism in modern China.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, 64.

³⁸ Howard Goldblatt, 29.

³⁹ (179).

⁴⁰ (178).

⁴¹ Ibid, 129.

⁴² Yuan Ye and Wen Tianyi's review was accessed on <http://old.newschinamag.com/magazine/golden-gamble>.

⁴³ Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 22.

⁴⁴ (Deleuze 105).

⁴⁵ The Deleuzian terminology of "figuration" contrasts teleological subjectivation. Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexuality in Contemporary Feminist Theory* illuminates its theoretical connotation: "The term figuration refers to a style of thought that evokes or expresses ways out of the phallogentric vision of the subject. A figuration is a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity" (2).

⁴⁶ "Becoming-nomad" is synonymous with "becoming-woman" and "becoming-minority" in Deleuzian theory. Drawing on the lifestyle of nomadic tribes in history, Deleuze's "nomadic subject" refers to the marginalized that live freely through border-crossing and deterritorialization. In *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti encapsulates "becoming-nomad" as an iconoclastic mode of thinking and living.

⁴⁷ Alice Jardine, "Woman in Limbo," 54

⁴⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 51.

⁴⁹ Juan Manuel Garrido, *On Time, Being, And Hunger: Challenging the Traditional Way of Thinking Life*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1.

⁵⁰ Central to Hegel's dialectics is the concept of "sublation" (aufheben), which means to cancel and to preserve at the same time. The process of sublation leads to the destabilization of opposing sides, and results in the unity of the contradictory sides of the dialectic.

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⁵² Auster, "Introduction," xv.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ From November 1931 to May 1932, Xiao Hong cohabited with her fiancé Wang Enjia in Dongxingshun Hotel in Harbin and then got pregnant. Under the coercion of his family, Wang abandoned her and disappeared. The hotel owner held Xiao Hong hostage for their unpaid bills and threatened to sell her to a brothel. Via his colleague Pei Xinyuan, Xiao Jun learnt about Xiao Hong's perilous situation and participated in her rescue.

⁵⁶ Qiu Shi, *Hulan he de nu'er* (Nanchang: baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 2011).

⁵⁷ Ye Jun, *Cong yixiang dao yixiang: Xiao Hong Zhuan*

⁵⁸ Xiao Jun, *Ren yu renjian* (Beijing: zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2006).

⁵⁹ Xiao Hong, *Xiao Hong quan ji*, 240.

⁶⁰ Gang Yue, *The Mouth that Began: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 297.

⁶¹ Lydia Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Xiao Hong's Field of Life and Death Revisited," in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 37-62.

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- ⁶² Howard Goldblatt, "Translator's Introduction," in Howard Goldblatt trans., *The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 2002), xiv.
- ⁶³ Xiao Hong, *The Field of Life and Death & Tales of Hulan River*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 2002), 54.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Xiao Hong, *Xiao Hong quan ji*, 144.
- ⁶⁷ Xiao Hong, *The Field of Life and Death*, 76.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Jing Jiang, (134),
- ⁷⁰ Goldblatt, *Hsiao Hung*, 57.
- ⁷¹ Xiao Hong, *Market Street*, trans. Howard Goldblatt (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 28.
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Ibid.
- ⁷⁴ Maud, Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 112.
- ⁷⁵ Xiao Hong, *Market Street*, 49.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists*, 6.
- ⁷⁹ Xiao Hong, *Market Street*, 21.
- ⁸⁰ Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 96.
- ⁸¹ In 1933, Xiao Jun (under the penname of San Lang) and Xiao Hong (under the penname of Qiao Yin) decided to publish a collection of their stories with the primary goal of making some money. *Ba she* (*Trudging*) was their literary debut together. After that they became known as Er Xiao.
- ⁸² Xiao Hong, *Market Street*, 54.
- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Amy D. Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 137.
- ⁸⁶ Haiping Yan in her book describes the burgeoning growth of women's journals in the enlightenment era, which gave rise to a number of women writers in that period.
- ⁸⁷ Haiping Yan, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948*, (New York: Routledge, 2006,) 14.
- ⁸⁸ Lydia H. Liu, "Invention and Intervention: The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani, E. Barlow, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 43.

Chapter Two
The Specter of Hunger:
Hong Ying's Hauntological Storytelling and the Politics of Remembrance

*The Angel of History must look just so.
 His face is turned towards the past.
 Where we see the appearance of a chain
 of events, he sees one single catastrophe,
 which unceasingly piles rubble on top of
 rubble and hurls it before his feet.*

—Walter Benjamin

*Remembering is not a passionate or
 dispassionate retelling of a reality that is
 no more, but a new birth of the past,
 when time goes in reverse.*

—Svetlana Alexievich

Born in the period from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, Hong Ying's generation underwent the Great Famine (1959-1962) and its lasting effects through childhood.¹ The famine was a direct and dire consequence of the ill-advised politico-economic movement called the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), which subjected the Chinese people to malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, and even death over three years of widespread food scarcity. Few were spared from this cruel lack of food, and children in their critical stages of physical development suffered the most from starvation. For survivors, the bitter feeling of hunger was engraved on their primal memories, and their physical health was impaired by chronic malnutrition. The hungry generation also came of age in the waning phase of political fever, when the cause of communist revolution started to appear problematic or even pointless. Unlike the high-spirited devotees of Mao's revolutions and political movements from the elder generation, this generation remained incredulous of its purpose. The missed opportunity of being part

of the revolutionary sublimity overshadowed their growth, but it was the rudimentary desire for food that most profoundly constituted their physiological and psychological profiles. That is to say, the mindset of the hungry generation was conditioned less by revolutionary exhilaration than by a devastating hunger.

After 1978, post-Mao China was ushered into a period of political and economic reforms. The ethos of the immediate postsocialist moment was crystalized in the official strategy of moving forward that was predicated on a sweeping liquidation of the socialist past.² As Chinese citizens were interpellated to surpass the catastrophic past with new hopes for an alternative future, the hungry generation was urged to disremember their memories of starving youth. These sociocultural discontinuities and displacements are responsible for their new psychic trauma – namely, an emptied selfhood in a disorienting world. However, the socialist past can never be severed from the material reality of postsocialist China, or erased from China's collective memory. Memory's retracing of the past is warranted because of the imperative for meaning-making and subjective reorientation. Writing of the hungry generation exemplifies the conspicuous cultural phenomenon of postsocialist China described by Qi Wang: "writers and directors frequently invoke personal memories, private experiences and intimate dimensions in their construction of alternative narratives of the past."³ Whether historical allegory⁴ or testimony against history,⁵ their writing is haunted by a colossal phantom⁶ of the socialist past, or shadowed by the haunting experience of socialism.⁷ Thus, defying the interpellation of moving forward, the hungry generation, represented by Hong Ying, is engrossed in the therapeutic process of retrieving and reinterpreting traumatic memories centered on the suffering of hunger. As a medium for the return of bygones, her writing discloses the phantasmal message of hunger from the past, and disrupts the homogeneous temporospatial order

of the present. It is also dedicated to reconstructing the communicative memory of the traumatic past.

This chapter analyzes Hong Ying's art of storytelling, which is centered on her family history of hunger. Her storytelling ascribes to the politics of remembrance and the hauntology of specters. In a Benjaminian fashion, the storyteller borrows her authority from death (of starvation), and I argue that the centrality of the specter of hunger in her storytelling evokes an ethical injunction to redress historical traumas, as postulated by Derrida's hauntology. Gravitating toward the central trope of the spectral hunger, Hong Ying's storytelling also deploys another topographical trope of the spectral river. The Yangtze River valley in Hong Ying's storytelling is a dystopia that is characterized by poverty, environmental disasters, dehumanization, and cannibalism. Overshadowed by death and atrocity, the river is re-imagined as a spectral space that leads to the underworld of ghosts. Exploring the spectrality of hunger and the dystopian space of the Yangtze River, Hong Ying attempts to recast China's cultural memory.

A Hauntological Study of the Great Leap Famine

Encouraged by the economic rehabilitation and unprecedented agricultural growth amid its first five-year plan from 1953 to 1957, the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, launched the nationwide movement of Great Leap Forward in 1958, with the blueprint to "overtake Great Britain and catch up with the United States" (*chao ying gan mei*). Overlooking actual productivity and social structure, the movement hastily enforced crude industrialization (i.e., backyard steel furnaces) and radical collectivization (i.e., the people's communes).⁸ This misguided state attempt at socialist engineering was a categorically expensive disaster that resulted in "the greatest demolition of property in human history,"⁹ and eventually contributed to the nationwide onset of the Great Famine from 1959 to 1962.

Demographic data suggest, “this crisis resulted in about 30 million excess deaths and about 33 million lost or postponed births.”¹⁰ The magnitude of this catastrophe is unparalleled in human history and its social consequences cannot be fully gauged. While the deep fall in crop production in 1959 followed by the government’s punitive procurement of crops from rural areas is believed to have triggered the outbreak of the Famine, many scholars regard the Great Leap Famine as a manifestation of political “coercion, terror and systematic violence.”¹¹ Structural inequality and failure of centralized governance and bureaucracy, as well as intentional negligence and deception of local party cadres, are responsible for this violent history of starvation and death.

However, the true dimensions of the Great Famine remain little-known or studied due to official refusal to acknowledge the famine during its occurrence and then official reluctance to disclose historical documents afterward. This willful denial and forced reticence repress traumatic collective memory and induce social forgetting. Erasing, manipulating and rewriting the history of atrocities is memocide, which not only unethically impedes the interrogation of humanitarian and political accountability for the past, but also leaves the wound of trauma open and fresh. Journalists and historians within and outside China have taken enormous effort to unveil the historical truth as the first step towards national healing. Jasper Becker’s groundbreaking research on the Famine, *Hungry Ghost: Mao’s Secret Famine*, came in 1996. As a BBC foreign correspondent in Beijing, Becker confidentially conducted hundreds of interviews and researched many unpublished documents in rural China in order to excavate the cause and effect of the Famine. His book debunks the official understatement of the Famine as “Three Years of Difficulty,” showing that the majority of the Chinese population suffered malnutrition, and accuses the communist regime of inhumanity and atrocity. Becker concludes his book by invoking the ethics

of historical studies: “And yet, if the Chinese are kept in ignorance of what happened, that would be another kind of tragedy. If the famine remains a secret, the country will draw no lessons from its past nor learn that only in a secretive society could so many have starved to death.”¹² He indicates that institutionalized disremembering is another unethical violation of social and historical justice, one that has to be redressed by calling to mind the suppressed memory.

The historical justice that Becker’s book intends to serve is of a haunting nature, as its title suggests an outcry of hungry ghosts, a phantasmal image from Chinese folk religions. Ghost, *gui*, is believed in Chinese folklore and popular religions that depict the afterlife to be the spirit of the demised that can be partially perceived by the living. On the one hand, the concept of *gui* is associated with the tradition of ancestor worship, that is, the spiritual existence of the deceased kin is worshiped by their descendants. On the other, *gui* is also imagined as a supernatural existence that is strange (*yi*) to the human world, oftentimes an unwanted source of anxiety and fear. In the case of natural death, funerary rituals are performed to transport the discarnate spirit to its designated realm. However, if having died of violence or unnatural death, the spirit is disgruntled and becomes a haunting ghost, *ligui*. The spectral apparition signals to the living either the haunting ghost’s demand for a proper burial or its revenge for the injustice that it has suffered. Because of the intermittent outburst of famine in the primordial agrarian society of China, starvation was once a common cause for abnormal death, making the hungry ghost (*e’gui*) the most common type of *ligui*. *E’gui* is used as the Chinese adaptation of *preta* from Sanskrit, which denotes the supernatural existence inhabiting the realm of hungry ghosts in Buddhism. Condemned by negative karma, *preta* is trapped in the unavailing task of quenching its insatiable hunger and thirst for a particular object. The popular use of *e’gui* registers both the disquieted spirit that haunts the human world to avenge its unjust

suffering through starvation, and the punitive torment of starving.

Therefore, Becker's book conjures up hungry ghosts to reveal this buried episode of Chinese national history. Yiju Huang brilliantly encapsulates the role of hungry ghosts as a spectral agent of history:

The secret can only remain sealed for so long, as hungry ghosts almost always signify a phantomistic return. In Buddhism as well as in the Chinese popular imagination, hungry ghosts are neither fully alive nor dead, and they are a synthesis of wrath and desire. Their unsatisfied desires and extreme emotions compel them to return and linger. The making of tens of millions of hungry ghosts is the ineffable secret on which Mao's kingdom sits.¹³

Hungry ghosts' fixation on physical and emotional lack prohibits them from being reborn into human existence, whereas their unpacified wrath and appetite always prompt them to revisit the primal scene of trauma/death. The apparition and re-
apparition of hungry ghosts emblemize the haunting of a suppressed past that disturbs the institutionalized amnesia of the present. At the same time, the history of the Famine itself is reduced to a ghostly existence—no way to confirm or deny its actuality: “One of the most remarkable things about the famine which occurred in China between 1958 and 1962 was that for over twenty years, no one was sure whether it had ever taken place.”¹⁴ Paradoxically, this obscured history has to be revived by the ghosts of historical victims. Thus, haunting is the necessary way to demand historical justice.

Jacques Derrida reintroduces “specters” into the post-capitalist discourse on history and morality in his controversial monograph *Specters of Marx*, wherein his novel ideation of “hauntology” asserts that the apparition of specters ruptures contemporary time and being, and thus constitutes “the necessary disjuncture, the de-totalizing condition of justice.”¹⁵ Although his attempt at deconstructing Marxist ontology with the logic of “spectrality” is widely contested, Derrida's hauntology enables a literary and ethical analysis of anachronism in forms of the returning past or the anticipated future. Analogous to the Levinasian “face of the other” that elicits

ethical responses from us, the Derridean specter of others haunts our conscience from the past or the future. Thus arises the ethical injunction to cohabit with the ghosts:

It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice—let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws—seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.¹⁶

Derrida seems to be proposing two incompatible premises: to historicize social justice but also to deconstruct historical time. However, for him, justice emerges only at the dislodged moments when the presently living collide with the already dead and the not yet born. The hauntology of anachronism replaces the ontology of history, as the centrality of the subject is deterritorialized by the conjuration of others. In this light, the historical justice that Becker is interested in can be brought about only through communicating with the ghosts of the Famine victims. He suggests that the failure of commemorating the already-dead results in the unethical erasure of historical memory: “No monuments commemorate the victims and some Chinese are still not willing to believe that a famine costing so many lives ever took place.”¹⁷ Monuments epitomize the materialized and institutionalized form of historical memory, the inscriptions of which prescribe meaning to bygone events. When the meaning of monumental significance is lost, recollection of historical events is obstructed.

Thus, to build a memorial is to evidence the historical lesson imprinted on contemporary society which signifies the reconciliation between the presently living and the already dead. In this sense, the memorial symbolizes the temporospatial schism through which bygone messages are retrieved. In the same vein, the mainland journalist and historian Yang Jisheng dedicates his 2008 exposé *Tombstone: The*

Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962 to the erection of an everlasting virtual tombstone for the hungry ghosts. In the “Foreword,” Yang explicates the fourfold motive underlying his writing:

I had four reasons for choosing this title: the first is to erect a tombstone for my father, who died of starvation in 1959; the second is to erect a tombstone for the thirty-six million Chinese who died of starvation; and the third is to erect a tombstone for the system that brought about the Great Famine. The fourth came to me while I was halfway through writing this book, when a temporary health scare spurred me to complete the book as a tombstone for myself.¹⁸

Yang’s reportage on the Famine based on his canvass investigation of local archives serves as a symbolic ceremony to restore the obscured message of the dead as well as to revive the dormant remembrance of the living. The project is sparked both by a previous personal loss and a dread of impending death. While mourning the colossal tragedy of the Famine, it aspires to accelerate the demise of the sociopolitical system that occasioned the catastrophe. Yang’s elaborate fourfold metaphor of a tombstone exemplifies the multilayered interplay between past, present and future: on the one hand, both the past and anticipated deaths are meditated upon by the presently living; on the other, the present-day critique of the sociopolitical tradition conjectures a yet-to-come turn of history. Then the contentious reception of the book and the consequent censorship on it within mainland China bespeaks the fear that is elicited not only by the ghosts from the bygone past but also from the unpredictable future; that is to say, the present is evidently haunted by both the past and the future.

Storytelling of the Historical Uncanny

The conjuration of hungry ghosts by Becker and Yang evokes fear, a dreadful affect that stems from the encounter with the uncanny. In the realm of the Freudian uncanny, “the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns.”¹⁹ The repression of the familiar and affective memory, whether it is originally frightening or arises from other affects such as anxiety, regret, shame, etc., produces the dreadful uncanny upon its abrupt return. “Death, dead bodies, revenants,

spirits and ghosts”²⁰ represent the primitive origin of the psychological uncanny. Also pertinent to the discussion of the uncanny effect of the Famine narratives is Susanne Knittel’s theorization of the historical uncanny in her study of the politics of Holocaust memory:

This emphasis on the mechanisms of repression and disavowal comes closer to my own understanding of the historical uncanny as a concept, which describes the vertiginous intrusion of the past into the present, the sudden awareness that what was familiar has become strange. This uncanny effect is at work on a variety of different levels, both individual and collective, national and transnational, in history and in literature—two components of a site of memory as I conceive of it.²¹

Knittel contends that the structure of the uncanny that is analyzed by Freud on the level of the individual psyche also applies to the realm of collective memory and group identity, thus pertaining to the history of human society. Mechanisms of silencing, repression and exclusion impede the preservation and dissemination of collective memory, which are destabilized by the interception of the uncanny in historical and literary spaces. The dual mechanism of the uncanny applies to the evocation of the hungry ghosts of the Famine: on the level of the primitive uncanny, the superstitious belief in spirits and ghosts that has been “surmounted” by rationality is once again consolidated; then on the level of the historical uncanny, the subdued memory of historical traumas is revived and validated by newly unearthed evidence. Either way, the resurgence of the past disturbs the psychological and social orders that the present hinges on.

Knittel illustrates the politics of the historical uncanny in her analyses of the material and cultural legacies of Holocaust memory. But ever since the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’s study of cultural memory, the homogenous understanding of memory has to be questioned. Halbwachs distinguishes historical memory from collective memory: while the former assembles past events that are “selected, combined, and evaluated in accord with necessities and rules not imposed

on the groups that had through time guarded them as a living trust,”²² the latter preserves the authenticity and continuity of the lived and living history of social groups. Thus, within the paradigm of historiography, both Becker’s and Yang’s books intend to build on the discourse of historical memory. They reorganize individual testimonies and cacophonous records into an eclectic, coherent, and enclosed historical narrative. Their contemporary concerns with the overall causality of the Famine fail to reflect the historical specificities confronted by the starving cohort. While enhancing the discursive visibility of the past events and drawing attention to historical justice, their works contribute much less to rejuvenate the collective memory. Jan Assmann’s later conceptualization of “communicative memory” sheds new light on the rejuvenation of collective memory. In contrast to objectified and institutionalized cultural memory:

Communicative memory is noninstitutional; it is not supported by any institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation; it is not cultivated by specialists and is not summoned or celebrated on special occasions; it is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it lives in everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations.²³

Collective memory is vocally transmitted by generational interactions in everyday life. The interactive and communicative nature of collective memory resists monumentalization and archivalization. Thus the legacy of collective memory can be disseminated only through “communicative genres,” one of which is the Benjaminian storytelling—namely, “an artisan form of communication.”²⁴

The storyteller is the one who remembers, the memory of whom “creates a chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation.”²⁵ The happening, or the lived experience, becomes the story that is related from mouth to mouth. The great written forms of storytelling never deviate far from the storyteller’s vision. Thus, the storyteller is a critical medium of collective memory. Curiously,

Benjamin attributes the authority of the storyteller to mortality: “Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.”²⁶

Storytelling is an art of death, for each complete story presupposes a mortal life coming to its end, if not yet ended. Death’s absolute power over life sanctifies the art of storytelling, which is compared by Benjamin to the uncanny flashback experienced by a dying man:

Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.²⁷

The unforgettable that has become obscured in life comes back with the advent of death. The dying man undertakes an uncanny re-encounter with his own life story, which gives rise to the commanding voice of the storyteller. That is to say, the artistry of storytelling owes its awe-striking effect that commands the faculties of remembrance to the uncanny revelation of death. Compared with formal historiography, storytelling is an organic form of communicating between generations the uncanny message from the dead.

Hong Ying: The Storyteller of Hunger

Hong Ying, a witness and survivor who has lived through the outburst and aftermath of the Great Famine in Chongqing, is dedicated to the art of storytelling. “I’m infatuated with telling stories,” she spiritedly claimed in an interview, “and I believe I’m one of the best storytellers about China.”²⁸ Aspiring to be a storyteller, Hong Ying foregrounds the communicability of lived experience and the inheritance of uncanny memories in her writing, which maps out a matrilineal genealogy of remembrance of three generations, from her mother to her daughter. Embedded in their familial memory is the grave suffering of hunger during the Famine: Hong Ying’s mother was pregnant with her in the third year of the Famine, and then she

was born into a wretched household in an impoverished society. From *Summer of Betrayal* (*Beipan zhi xia* 1992), *Daughter of the River* (*Ji'e de nüer* 1997), *Good Children of the Flower* (*Hao ernü hua* 2009), to *Little Little Girl* (*Xiao xiao guniang* 2011), Hong Ying's autobiographical writing demonstrates a pattern of compulsory repetition in revisiting the traumatic memory of hunger that has been passed on in her family. In *Summer* and *Daughter*, she introspectively examines the deep-seated hunger that has shaped her adulthood, physically, emotionally and subjectively. In *Daughter* and *Good*, she retrospectively establishes the connection between her deep-seated hunger and her mother's turbulent life before, during, and after the Famine. Then, in the latest work *Little*, she experiments with an alternative form of storytelling that is attuned to children's perspectives in order to transmit the harrowing memories through the next generation of her daughter.

Like Benjamin's storyteller who borrows authority from death, Hong Ying's undertaking of storytelling is often spurred by personal loss. At the age of eighteen, her first lover, who was also her history teacher in high school, committed suicide in fear of political suppression after the Cultural Revolution. Upon receiving the news, she made up her mind to leave home to become a poet. Her avant-garde poems intend to communicate with the dead, as she explains in *Summer*: "That's exactly what my poems are—incantations of a shaman!"²⁹ She likens her literary creation to shamanism—that is, supernatural crafts that divulge secrets of the dead and divine the fate of the living. Then, when her mother's death brought her back home in 2008, she decided to write her family stories in mourning for the loss, but also in anticipation for her then not-yet-born daughter. It is an endeavor to unite death and birth, to bridge memories between different generations. For Hong Ying, the tyranny of death highlights the imperative of preserving and passing on familial memories, which becomes her artistic calling. In order to craft a meta-story of her family, she attends to

and absorbs others' storytelling. In *Daughter*, Hong Ying (nicknamed Little Six in the book) begs her big sister to share the family history preceding her birth. The way her big sister relates the story shows her the mastery of storytelling: "How much of this family history merely served Big Sister's itch to tell fanciful tales I don't know. To be honest, she's far more qualified to be a novelist than I."³⁰ Then, in *Good*, she listens to her niece Xiaomi detailing family dramas that had occurred in her absence.

Hong Ying's memory is enriched by the kaleidoscopic storytelling of others, as her craftsmanship of storytelling is perfected in retelling. Interestingly, in *Daughter*, Little Six has an illuminating discussion on the art of storytelling with her history teacher, who was also her first lover and mentor. He explains, "Every family's story was more or less the same, I think...But in the telling they were all different, too. Everyone's experience was unique."³¹ The history teacher believes that the grand narrative of history expunges the distinctness of individual experience, whereas the storyteller underscores the uniqueness of each personal story. In this way, the lived experience of ordinary people is communicated and integrated into collective memory, and the living memory is passed on to the next generation through storytelling. The history teacher resonates with Hong Ying's politics of storytelling, which is also a politics of the everyday and an ethics of memory.

The metanarrative undergirding Hong Ying's storytelling pivots around the recognition of and reconciliation with her physiological and psychological condition of hunger. The initial re-cognition occurs retrospectively when Hong Ying is approaching her eighteenth birthday. Despite being the youngest child of six, she is never treated with the tenderness or love that she deserves by either her parents or siblings. Instead, she is always kept at arm's length in her own home. At this point Hong Ying is determined to unearth the cause of such a "special" treatment. She is used to the blame for her inopportune birth during the Great Famine that exhausted

first the mother and then the entire family with one extra mouth to feed. She also succumbs to self-abasement and self-loathing because of her malnourished body as well as her maldeveloped body shape. Nevertheless, the revelation that she was an illegitimate child still startles Hong Ying: the denigration of her birth can be traced to her mother's conscious acquiescence to an extramarital affair with a sympathetic and helpful coworker who stole food from the factory canteen for her family. Being exhausted, famished, and at her wits' end, the mother was grateful for any assistance that she could get. That is to say, Hong Ying is not only a hungry daughter but also a daughter born out of hunger. Contrary to the false accusation of her inconvenient birth, the devoted biological father continued in secret supporting her with a monthly allowance, which also helped deliver her family from poverty and starvation for the ensuing two decades.

Hunger's twofold ramification is encapsulated by the Chinese title of Hong Ying's 1997 autobiographical fictional work "Ji'er de nü'er." Because of the equivocal grammatical structure, it can be literally interpreted as either "Hungry Daughter" (an attributive construction) or "Hunger's Daughter" (a possessive construction). On the one hand, the hungry daughter grows up in the situation of material inadequacy and food shortage in socialist China: Starvation is her embryonic education as poverty is her childhood companion. Her physiological features and psychological state are conditioned by such a chronic hunger, of which her stomach ailment and melancholic temperament are the manifestation. On the other, the illegitimate daughter is living proof of the desperate hunger suffered by her mother, who is coerced into scheming for the survival of her family. It is not to reduce the secretive origin birth of the hungry daughter to a calculated trade of sex for food, but to explode the historical circumstance that necessitates her mother's tactical deployment of sexuality. Schaffer and Song recapitulate that "in a quite literal sense, she is a child of the famine; a

consequence of the nation's physical hunger for food."³² The daughter of hunger bears the stigma of adultery in her familial memory as well as the shame of famine/poverty in national history. Her self-discovery is predicated on her reconciliation with a clandestine family history of hunger, which is illustrative of the latent national trauma of the Great Famine.

Highlighting "hunger" as the focal theme and central metaphor in Hong Ying's storytelling, literary critics attempt to unpack its multifaceted connotations. David Der-wei Wang in his seminal essay "Three Hungry Women" underlines the visceral and sensuous nature of Hong's hunger against the backdrop of the excessive spiritual food that the communist party-state claimed to provide:

Like thousands of women her age, Hongying has, all along, been troubled by a deep-seated hunger: She is fed up with the revolutionary spiritual food but starving for the more sensuous kinds of food, from a full meal, to love, to sex; even years after the hunger years, she can never forget her memory of deficiency and desolation. In both the literal and symbolic sense, hunger embodies her experience of growing up as a woman.³³

Wang contextualizes Hong Ying's narrative in the counter-discourse of the massive political mobilization of socialist China. Her hunger and desire for a meal, love, and sex evidence an individual history of deficiency and desolation that destabilizes the revolutionary discourse of nation-building. Illuminatingly, Wang reveals the chasm between personal memory and national history, and credits Hong Ying with reconfiguring history through reviving the repressed memory of hunger.

The leading Chinese literary critic Liu Zaifu also recognizes Hong Ying's attempt to complicate historical discourse with personal memory, but he points out that history is eroticized as hunger is psychologized in her storytelling. Liu characterizes Hong Ying as "the construction of a dual hunger (*shuangchong ji'e de chanwu*)—hunger for food (*shi ji'e*) as well as hunger for sex (*xing ji'e*)."³⁴ The circumstance of her birth prefigures her miserable childhood spent in deprivation of both food and fatherly love. In adulthood, she is compelled to feed her primal hunger ceaselessly

with greasy food and sexual intercourse, which is a psychological compensation. Liu contends that the history teacher, a surrogate father-cum-lover who personifies lived historical experience and embodied historical knowledge, appeases her desperate hunger with some insights into her traumatized past. If Wang believes that Hong Ying's hunger invokes the national history of destitution that is forcefully forgotten, Liu argues that her hunger can only be satiated by historical knowledge that is personally experienced and gained. However, other scholars suggest that the multifaceted hunger should not be reduced to Liu's psycho-historical paradigm. Schaffer and Song argue that hunger is configured on all social, emotional and physical levels in Hong's storytelling. In addition to the psychological and historical analyses, Schaffer and Song, in agreement with Jian Xu, highlight the class criticism underlying Hong Ying's story. Hong Ying's hunger represents the desperate situation of the urban underclass in socialist China. Thus, the Great Famine is commemorated as a class-differentiated social and historical experience.

Although with disparate approaches, the psychological, historical and sociopolitical interpretations of Hong Ying's metastory all converge on the central metaphor of hunger. Hong Ying maps her family story of hunger onto the national history of famine. Conceding that the semiotics of hunger is key to unpacking her metanarrative, I further argue that Hong Ying's storytelling derives its momentum from the haunting of her phantasmal hunger. By claiming that her hunger is phantasmal, I mean three things: firstly, hunger, as both a somatic need and a psychological mode, is not resolved after its material base is obsolete; secondly, the original hunger is reconstructed from the vantage point of the post-hunger present, thus, is fantastically re-imagined; finally, the mechanism of repression, being a mental process of self-preservation or an ideological apparatus, suppresses the memory of hunger and prepares for its uncanny return. The haunting of the phantasmal hunger

also has a threefold implication: first of all, the historical residues, in terms of both psychological and physical scars, continue to shape the somatic and social body at the present; then, the present order that is consolidated by active forgetting is destabilized and deterritorialized by the haunting of the past; last but not least, the body is prompted by the haunting of the phantasmal hunger to bring the past to the future, that is, to unearth historical knowledge as the way to illuminate the future. To recapitulate, Hong Ying's storytelling uncannily conjures up the specter of hunger, and combing through the past to decipher its latent message, she conjectures a new path towards the future.

The Specter of Hunger: Hong Ying's Politics of Remembrance

Hong Ying's storytelling ascribes to the hauntology of the past and the politics of remembrance. In her artistic retelling of life stories, the present is inevitably implicated by the past, as the memory of the past is constantly revisited and reconstructed from the standpoint of the present. Her deployment of interwoven temporalities is the aesthetic feature of Hong Ying's storytelling, but also the manifestation of her politics of memory. She illustrates that the past is to haunt us until historical lessons are learnt, and elucidates that memory is engraved in body and blood so that it is passed on along family lines. In the first place, it is the uncanny return of hunger in a dream-state that incites Hong Ying's curiosity about the past, for she suspects that there is a hidden story to recover and retell.

Night in and night out, sleep took me roughly from one bad dream to the next, until I woke up screaming, covered with sweat, as if I were deathly ill. In my dreams I was always hungry and could never find my ricebowl, though I could smell food. Quietly I began to sob. Hoping no one would hear me, I was driven by the desire to fall to my knees before anyone holding a ricebowl. For the sake of getting my hands on a fragrant piece of braised pork, I would gladly prostrate myself at the feet of someone who had insulted or demeaned me. Then I'd wake up, and as I mulled over my dream, I'd berate myself, begin hating myself, as I wondered where such a powerful bodily need had come from.³⁵

In her recurring nightmare, hunger is animated as the dictator of her body. Under the domination of the bodily need, she endures indignations for the sake of food. In accordance with Freud's analysis, the repetition of a feeling "that recalls the helplessness that we experience in certain dream-states"³⁶ crystalizes the effect of the uncanny. The consuming hunger that subjugates her in a helpless state blurs the boundary between dream and reality, so that Hong Ying is convinced that the imagined hunger in her nightmares must have taken root in real life.

She is re-assured that hunger must have been encrypted into her genes when her daughter is inflicted with the same pain:

I believe memories of enormous pain are hereditary. My daughter has nightmares all the time. In Chongqing dialect, it is called "*fa meng chong*." She cries disconsolately, not in the typical way of baby crying. I believe I have unwittingly passed on my memories to her. In childhood, I also had nightmares wherein someone always wanted to hurt me. The agonizing memories have been haunting me just like nightmares.³⁷

Although memories can be kept as secrets, physical and psychological symptoms of traumatic memories are ingrained in the family blood, and inherited unwittingly by the next generation. The harrowing memory of hunger returns in the disguised form of fear, as the concrete threat of starvation is obscured as an unknown source of harm in dreams. The uncanny repetition of the nightmare evidences the symptom of repression: disturbing memories and acute emotions are suppressed and blocked from the symbolic order of language. Only through the distorting process of dream-work is part of the repressed memories unlocked. Marianne Hirsch's conceptualization of postmemory sheds light on the transmission of traumatic memory along the family line. As Weijie Song recapitulates, postmemory "elucidates the relationship between the second generation and the traumatic experiences which took place before their birth yet were transmitted to them."³⁸ The trans-generational transmission via images and storytelling passes on traumatic knowledge and experience, which exert a

consequential impact on family history and collective memory. But, the structure of postmemory of hunger is distorted by social taboo and repression.

The mechanism of repression that operates on both the social and personal levels reproduces the uncanny hunger in Hong Ying's nightmares. As the history of the Great Famine is taboo in society, people who are stripped of the freedom of remembering have to internalize policing and silencing. They eschew revisiting their memories of hunger: "Fear and temporary amnesia kept most Chinese people from talking about such things. They were only too eager to be magnanimous and forgiving."³⁹ It seems that they have found peace in forgiving cruelties and atrocities more than in rectifying wrongs: once "they managed to put it all behind... They enjoyed life, they loved it."⁴⁰ When their recollections of hard times are solicited, they can only parrot the official line of political propaganda: "Oh that. Nothing much. Only Three Years of Poor Harvest, Soviet Revisionists and American Imperialists. Anti-China Chorus. What else? But we pulled you ungrateful bunch through it all, didn't we? Why dredge up accounts that have already been written off?"⁴¹ Personal stories and accounts are written off by political propaganda, and the hegemonic propagandistic terminology invokes the collective victimhood of China rather than individual sufferings. The lived experience of hunger as well as the subjective emotions associated with such experience is blocked from memory, and thus ceases to be communicative in the milieu of the everyday. The more intensely Hong Ying is affected by the uncanny hunger, the more forcefully she needs to suppress it in the public. Without any social channels of communication, the past is gradually obliterated.

The act of forgetting that negates historical facts, destroys material relics, and imposes a taboo on communicative memory fosters an oppressive political culture.

Aleida Assmann in “Canon and Archive” points out that the coercion of forgetting destroys the legacy of material and communicative remembrance:

Active forgetting is implied in intentional acts such as trashing and destroying. Acts of forgetting are a necessary and constructive part of internal social transformations; they are, however, violently destructive when directed at an alien culture or a persecuted minority. Censorship has been a forceful if not always successful instrument for destroying material and mental cultural products.⁴²

Conceding that some types of forgetting are sanctioned by the preservative and adaptive functions of society, Assmann cautions us about the intentional erasure of cultural heredities. The latter form of forgetting is often deployed by political and cultural domination. Hong Ying also discerns the danger of active forgetting, which impedes positive changes. The act of forgetting is excused by the strategic fixation on the present: that is, as long as life continues on in the present, the past can well be left behind. Once and again, Hong Ying’s attempt at revisiting past trauma was dismissed by her mother: “You should be glad you were allowed to go on living.”⁴³ She is exhorted not to make a fuss about the experience of hunger, for she has already survived starvation. The past is arbitrarily divorced from the present, and the continuity of history and memory is interrupted. What is at stake here is the chance to extrapolate lessons from history in order to better the present condition. In other words, the presently living refuse to be implicated by spectrality that gives “reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents.”⁴⁴

Hong Ying’s testimony epitomizes a circular pattern in China’s political history that is perceptively synopsisized by Rey Chow: forgetting the disastrous past leads to enduring the helpless present, which ends up repeating the same ill fate in the future.

“To endure” and “to live” thus become two points of a circular pattern of thinking which reinforce each other by serving as each other’s condition of possibility. In accordance with this circular, tautological reasoning, the imperative “to live” through endurance becomes what essentially defines and perpetuates “China.” As such, it operates as a shield in two senses: “Living” protects China from destruction at the same time that it prevents China from coming to terms with reality. That is, “China”—preoccupied exclusively with its own survival—is in

reality its own worst enemy because that preoccupation is precisely what has led China's political history, with all its catastrophes, to be repeated ad infinitum.⁴⁵

The preoccupation with nothing but sheer survival in life precludes plebeians from attending to political and historical constructions that are beyond material and somatic immediacy. Living through endurance decisively eschews critical thinking and progressive activism in the public realm. This circular and tautological reasoning only produces and conserves what Agamben refers to as *homo sacer*, bare life.⁴⁶ Stipulated as exceptional to the law, bare life is subjected to sovereign violence, which constitutes the foundation of sovereign power. Submitting to the recurring cruelty and atrocities in China's sociopolitical history, plebeians are accustomed to endless endurance and active forgetting. Even the illiterate like Hong Ying's mother "knew that the Chinese character for 'endure' was made up of a knife above a heart."⁴⁷ The Chinese character for "endure" 忍 indicates that the torment of endurance is analogous to a knife stabbing in the heart. The knife also signifies a prohibition on speaking what the heart truly feels. The enduring of sovereign violence perpetuates the status of bare life, and the silencing of sufferers obliterates the cultural memory of pain and trauma. The past is thus in danger of being forgotten.

To combat historical amnesia, it is imperative to recall the past, or to resurrect specters from the past. Summoning the specter of hunger, Hong Ying's storytelling embodies "a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" that is "this being-with specters."⁴⁸ In *Daughter*, the specter of hunger is the medium through which Hong Ying reconnects with the uncanny memories of the Famine. She first uses "the specter of hunger" to explain the ghostly nature of her memory of hunger: "Hunger is my embryonic education. Mother and daughter survived the ordeal, but only after *the spectre of hunger* was indelibly stamped in my mind."⁴⁹ During the Famine, her mother goes through a chronic starvation before and while being pregnant with her, which reduces her to a condition of severe malnutrition. Dependent

on the mother's vitality, the daughter's suffering of hunger is inextricable from the mother's, or is mediated through the maternal body. Since she starves in her mother's womb before the development of consciousness, her hunger is only retrospectively discerned. That is, today, her memory of hunger is phantasmal in nature, as the suffering of starvation occurs at the pre-birth and pre-consciousness stage of her life, and is only now retrieved and re-imagined by active remembering.

Then, the specter of hunger also stands for the physical and psychological aftereffect of the embryonic education of hunger. The severe condition of malnutrition prevents her body from ever developing into a full human shape. Instead she grows up with a lifeless countenance and a ghostly appetite: "I approached my eighteenth birthday with a face as pale and wan as always; I was still skinny, and lips were bloodless. My clothes had faded after countless washings, my dry, lustreless hair was combed into two anaemic plaits."⁵⁰ The bloodless skin and the lusterless hair are both signs of lack of vitality, or lack of the *yang* energy in Chinese philosophy. The dialectics of *yin* (death) and *yang* (life) in the natural world surmises that depletion of the *yang* energy is automatically compensated by repletion of the *yin* energy. Thus, once the liveliness of the human body is weakened, the insidious influence of spirits is amplified. Hong Ying's undernourished body renders her more susceptible to the negative energy of specters. As if possessed by a hungry ghost, she feels the agony of being consumed by a ravenous desire for food:

I was, for instance, incredibly sensitive to the taste of food. I wasn't a child any longer, but I thought constantly about food and was always hungry. Yet no matter how much I ate, I remained thin as a rail, just the smell of egg-fried rice drifting over from a neighbour's kitchen had me salivating in no time. Snacks never interested me, and I despised my 'spicy-mouthed' schoolmates who spent their pocket money on them. But fatty chunks of pork, that was a different matter. My persistent fantasy was to grow up independent enough to eat meat at every meal.⁵¹

Just like a hungry ghost with an insatiable appetite, she is denied the gratification of having enough food in her stomach. Instead, the persistent hunger reduces her to the

state of being painfully needy. Her ravenous stomach confuses her until the past is evoked to illuminate the present: “After going hungry in your mother’s belly, your stomach is now trying to get even.”⁵² Her consuming desire that evokes loathing and horror embodies the revenge of the specter of hunger. As the ghostly hunger is seeking compensation, the repressed memory of the past is rekindled by powerful visceral desire.

The imprint of hunger on Hong Ying’s body bears indelible testimony to the history of the Famine, and attests to her phantasmal recollection of the past. She is acutely aware of her physiological distinctiveness, which also shapes her psychological topography. Her abject body and ghostly desire keep in the foreground her phantasmal memory of hunger, so that her present perception is always conditioned by the past. Submitting to the influence of the specter of hunger, Hong Ying becomes an agent of the traumatic memory, or a spokeswoman for the ghostly past:

I was always curious about this catastrophic famine, as if it were tied in some mysterious way to my life, and made me different from other people: my frail health and morose disposition seemed somehow to linked to it, belonging neither to a past life nor to this one, but wedged on to the long narrow rope bridge between the two. As I set out on to that bridge, an evil wind turned me into something not quite human.⁵³

The Bridge of Helpless (*nai he qiao*) in Chinese folk religions is the gateway to the human world for hungry ghosts in the underworld. However, it is mandatory for them to drink up the potion that obliterates all memory of their previous life, good and bad, before being reincarnated into humans. Holding onto the past, Hong Ying is transformed into “something not quite human,” that is, a hungry ghost in human shape. Refusing to forget, she, instead, fixates on the memory of suffering and internalizes the loss in the past. The emotional state of melancholia distinguishes her from the people who have surpassed the stage of mourning and found peace in forgetting.

Being “always melancholic and unhappy,”⁵⁴ Hong Ying is absorbed in her own loss and pain until she recognizes the same specter of hunger on her mother’s body. The mother’s aged and haggard body mirrors the young but emaciated body of the daughter. In the first place, the uncanny mirror image only invokes horror and disgust on the daughter’s part:

I watched as, little by little, she turned into a sickly woman with rotting and repaired teeth, that is, what few teeth she had left. Her eyelids were puffy, dull and lifeless; squinting till her eyes were mere slits, she could hardly recognize a soul. Even if she’d tried, she couldn’t have made her strawlike hair look good; it kept falling out and turning whiter by the day. The tattered straw hat she wore most of the time helped a little. And she kept getting shorter, as if being pressed down by a heavy weight; her bent back made her look heavy. She shuffled when she walked, as if the soles of her shoes were made of lead; her legs grew thicker and stumpier from all that back-breaking labour, and her toes were splayed.⁵⁵

Hong Ying remembers herself scrutinizing her mother’s body with the uttermost loathing and disgust. Even though she is aware of the fact that long-term backbreaking labor has reduced her mother to this abject state, she cannot help but being repelled by the sight of the ghastly body. But underlying her seemingly ungrateful attitude is her ineffable dread for her own ordained future, which her mother’s worn-down body prefigures. She is terrified by being “doomed to live out my [her] life as a South Bank woman toiling for the rest of my [her] life.”⁵⁶ That is to say, Hong Ying disdains her mother’s abject body the same way she abhors her gloomy fate. The abjection of her mother’s body is driven by her yearning for a different life path. Julia Kristeva elucidates, “Abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives.”⁵⁷ In this sense, the maternal body is dehumanized as the object of phobia, the abjection of which only evidences the fear and desire of the daughter.

However, delving into the lived history of the maternal body, Hong Ying realizes that the abject image of the mother’s body is not a divination of her future that elicits fear but an embodiment of the shared past that calls for empathy. As Jian Xu puts it,

“in *The Hungry Daughter*, Mother’s harshness, or lack of tenderness, and her suffering-coarsened body and mind, are eventually redeemed by Hong Ying’s memory, which has its own desire and will.”⁵⁸ Hong Ying’s memory re-humanizes the abject maternal body by historicizing its physical transformation. In her prime, Hong Ying’s mother started to take on coolie labor for livelihood: “Mother spent her days as an hourly labourer, struggling with a carrying pole and two lengths of rope to earn enough to help support the family.” The grueling labor-intensive work gradually dampened her vitality and even damaged her health, so that at the beginning of the Famine, “she was already skin and bones.”⁵⁹ Then, “She starved herself for the two years leading up to my [Hong Ying’s] birth in order to feed her five children,”⁶⁰ and “During that winter of starvation, Mother had to work as a porter in the plastic-sandal factory even though she was pregnant.”⁶¹ Years of coolie labor and chronic malnutrition have transformed the maternal body from youthfulness to wretchedness. It is emaciated by hunger as much as by drudgery to deliver the family from hunger. Enlightened by the past, Hong Ying is capable of sympathizing with others: she mourns for the loss of her mother’s “spring of youth.”⁶² In other words, she compassionately reconnects with her mother through their shared past, or the same specter of hunger. Thus, what is invoked from the past by the specter of hunger is also the suffering of others, as the memory of starvation is co-inhabited by mother and daughter. The apparition of the specter epitomizes the uncanny return of Hong Ying’s phantasmal hunger as well as the haunting of the past wherein others have unjustly suffered. She situates the specter of hunger on her own body as well as others’, and in this way, she relates individual suffering to collective memory.

Diving into the past, Hong Ying also discovers that her mother is also haunted by hungry ghosts. The mother lives in remorse for not saving her relatives who have starved to death in the Famine. While she has other deceased relatives, the death of

the husband of her third cousin bothers her the most. The cousin's husband was labeled a "bad element" and sent to a labor-reform camp in 1953. Ten years later when he was released, his wife and two children had already starved to death in the Famine. He sought help from the mother, but already being overwhelmed by supporting her own family, she could do nothing more than send him away with two dollars. Shortly after, he died miserably in a public bathroom. Ever since, the mother had repented for her "selfish" act, as Hong Ying recalls, "All this was a torture for my mother, who worried herself sick."⁶³ Repeatedly, she blamed herself: "Why did I only give him two yuan? I had five on me. He came to me for help. I was pregnant with you then, I did it for you. So he died, cold and hungry. And he'd been so generous with us when we needed it."⁶⁴ The dreadful scene of him dying in cold and hunger haunts her conscience, for she believes that he has turned into a wandering hungry ghost because of her selfishness. As the mother uses her pregnancy to justify her decision, she transfers the burden of guilt to her daughter at the same time as she passes on her remorseful memory. "Born laden with guilt,"⁶⁵ Hong Ying is also held accountable for the hungry ghost.

However, not until her mother's late years does Hong Ying fully comprehend the influence of the specter of hunger. In her eighties, her mother starts to show symptoms of memory loss and confusion. While missing out on current happenings, she often finds herself living in the past, which is crystalized as nothing but hunger. Her dormant memory is activated when her mechanism of repression is weakened with the deterioration of reason. Trapped in the devastating memory of the Famine, she relives the bodily need for food and the mental anxiety of starvation. She undertakes an old habit of foraging through the garbage for edibles and valuables. Ridiculed in public as "the crazy old lady," the mother falls out of favor with her own family: "Seeing how resentful those same children were about her going through the

garbage now just as she'd done for them back then, she was baffled and hurt."⁶⁶ The mother's piteous behavior that used to be necessary for survival amid the Famine is deemed as deplorable and disgraceful in a different social context—namely, the post-hunger present. Her re-enactment of the past threatens the present order that is substantiated by historical amnesia. Thus, her temporospatial misplacement is interpreted as craziness.

In light of Foucault's study on the history of insanity, I contend that the discourse of madness is invoked here as a function in social structure that alienates and pathologizes the undesirable. Triggered by the resurgence of the repressed memory, the mother's anachronistic behavior pattern brings the undesirable past to the foreground:

...her faltering memory had returned to those hard times because she lived once again in extreme loneliness and deprivation. It was only her memory of surviving the dark years that could get her through the day. She'd always been more afraid of hunger than of anything else. During the famine, she was terrified her six children would starve.⁶⁷

When the inevitable process of aging and dying leads to a dwindling sense of self, the mother holds onto her most miserable memory of starvation. From the vantage point of the post-hunger present, the harrowing memory of starvation is recast as a celebratory recollection of surviving hunger, which attests to her strength and accomplishment in life. Like Foucault's madman, for whom "the shadows are the way to perceive daylight,"⁶⁸ she re-constitutes the reality of the present through the shadow of the past. Reliving the bygone years of starvation, she calls the specter of hunger into existence, the apparition of which stimulates unwanted remembering of pain and shame. For Hong Ying, the "craziness" of her mother evidences the undesirable past that is silenced in society. Through storytelling, she performs a historical diagnosis of her mother's madness.

The specter of hunger is engraved in the bodies of both mother and daughter, and the shared memory of suffering enables empathetic transfer between self and other.

Hong Ying embraces the specter of hunger as part of her family legacy and dedicates her storytelling to the remembrance. However, while her mother abides by the morals of endurance and becomes confused by the resurgence of repressed memory in her late years, Hong Ying, from early on, repudiates the cyclical repetition of fate and is stimulated to action by her visceral hunger, which has been sublimated into the desire for a fulfilling life. Being aware of the obstruction in her way, Hong Ying discerns the limit of individual effort: “If I was ever to break out of the cycle of poverty, I had to single-mindedly remove every burden that might hold me back.”⁶⁹ Thus, she partakes in collective activism:

All those people, voices in unison, with a clear blue sky over Tian’anmen Square, a sanctified place I’d dreamed of even as a little girl, with millions of people fervently devoting themselves to the struggle for the right to speak the truth and to respect the value of all human beings. They demanded a change in the cyclical repetition of fate for generation upon generation of suffers.⁷⁰

In the wake of the prevailing social conflicts and contradictions that were produced by such structural tensions, waves of democratic movements and student protests erupted in the 1980s. Dissident intellectuals were as exasperated by the survival of oppressive apparatuses from Mao’s regime as dismayed by the rampant capitalization that had led to political corruption and social inequality in Deng’s regime. It was June 1989 when the student protests in Beijing reached its peak. Hundreds of thousands of young people like Hong Ying assembled in Tian’anmen Square, the center of the political capital that symbolized revolutionary victory and socialist utopia.

Disconcerted by the social, political and economic grievances of post-Mao China, the students petitioned for radical and extensive reforms that would reset social structures and political apparatuses. They believed that it was the only way to reverse “the cyclical repetition of fate for generation upon generation of suffers,” and that the first step should be an end to lying about history and beginning to repair historical wrongs.

Jing Wang in her seminal book *High Culture Fever* maps out the intellectual topography of the 1980s and posits a post-Mao discourse of thought enlightenment and cultural recasting. The Tian'anmen Square Protests are the climax as well as the abortion of the high culture fever. Galvanized by the utopian project of the cultural elites, Hong Ying enthusiastically joins the dissident forces. While she resonates with the epochal zeitgeist, her political undertaking is nevertheless, catalyzed by the specter of hunger. In *Summer*, Hong Ying gives a quasi-fictional account of her traumatic encounter with the militant state power at Tian'anmen Square. In the early morning of June 4, 1989, Lin Ying, the author-surrogate, witnesses the gruesome crackdown on the students' demonstrations. Confounded, Lin flees the scene, only to find her lover Chen Yu lying in bed with his allegedly divorced wife. The double betrayal, on the political level and on the emotional level, throws Lin into a disintegrating world. However, she reacts with steadier resistance and angrier transgression. In the end, she is arrested for "the crime of indecent behavior"⁷¹ at a hedonic party. Her naked body at police gunpoint is a manifestation of her unmalleable dissidence and her uncompromising confrontation with state violence: "I will never again hide in the face of violence. From this moment on, my running is over."⁷² However, the disquieting novel ends on a perplexing note: "She felt sort of hungry."⁷³ Does Lin Ying feel hungry simply because she is exhausted by the nightlong dancing at the party? Is it a blatant confession of her sexual desire that is "like hunger, like thirst?"⁷⁴ Or is her hunger a metaphor for the emptiness of trust and freedom in a totalitarian regime? Reading *Summer* against the metanarrative of Hong Ying's storytelling, I postulate that in echo, the daughter in protest is the daughter of hunger. Hong Ying seems to trace all the way back to her phantasmal hunger amid the Great Famine as the origin of her unyielding pursuit of self-expression in adulthood, be it aesthetic, sexual, or political. As Lin Ying's enigmatic hunger is historicized in

Hong Ying's coming-of-age story, Hong Ying's ghostly hunger is conjured up and contextualized in the public realm.

Lin Ying's nudity is theorized as an embodied political critique by Johanna Hood: "Her body comes to serve as the locus of her resistance as well as the tool for her emancipation; it is the tangible means through which her new resolve and identity come to reflected."⁷⁵ Concurring that the female body is mobilized by Hong Ying's storytelling as the locus of critique and resistance, I contend that the body of resistance is molded by the imprint of uncanny hunger. The visceral hunger, a bodily suffering due to historical atrocity, is not canceled out by material affluence or excessive sexuality in Hong Ying's adulthood, but induces a deep yearning for repairing historical wrongs, that is, restoring humanity and individuality. Juan Manuel Garrido insightfully points out that hunger is the underlying problem and the perpetual drive of human society: "Were hunger meant to be overcome, satisfied, abolished, life would not be possible. Yet, because hunger is not meant to pass, because it is infinite, hunger is a problem—an ontological, ethical, political problem."⁷⁶ Born into the existential predicament of hunger, the daughter of hunger strives to comprehend the magnitude of this ontological problem, which informs and instigates her artistic and political activism. Being haunted by the specter of hunger, she cannot eschew the confrontation with the "ontological, ethical political problem" of her times. Standing in solidarity with others, Hong Ying enacts what the specter of hunger tells. It is in this sense that her artistry of storytelling acquires the function of a speech act: it assists her and "counsels" (in Benjamin's term) others on the matters of combating historical amnesia and breaking the cyclical pattern of history.

From the Daughter of Hunger to the Daughter of the River

Gravitating towards the central trope of spectral hunger, Hong Ying's storytelling also deploys another topographical trope of the mother river. The Yangtze River⁷⁷ is

extolled as the mother river of China, no less significant in terms of civilization formation than the Yellow River, which is praised as “the cradle of Chinese civilization.” In contrast to the cruel geographical features and the harsh climatic elements of the Yellow River valley, the Yangtze basin boasts clement climate and fertile soil. Hence it is eulogized as a benevolent and generous mother who bestows abundant water resources, all sorts of aquatic products, and convenient waterway transportation on the sons and daughters residing on the land of promise. The riverbank dwellers have developed and advanced Chinese civilization by harnessing these exceptional water resources. Mythological narrative and cosmological structure have also been constructed to understand the relation between human and nature, as well as to legitimate a unique cultural origin. The legacy of the ancient river civilization is imprinted on the Chinese cultural imaginary and identity.

Hong Ying exalts the generative power of the mother river of Yangtze and echoes the populist imagination in her claims to be the descendant of the river civilization. She assertively declares herself the daughter of the river in several of her interviews and blogs: “I was born on the riverbank of the Yangtze... Later, when I am traveling around the country or even the world, I remain the daughter of the Yangtze River (*changjiang de nü'er*).”⁷⁸ Hong Ying has spent her formative years on the riverbank. The geographical and cultural features of the region have shaped her physiological and psychological development, and continue to nourish her artistic imagination and creativity: “Actually, my writing never drifts away from the Yangtze valley. Some cultures are very much mysterious, such as Fengdu Ghost City. I believe that the Yangtze River civilization is no less important than the Yellow River.”⁷⁹ Hong Ying not only confesses her attachment to the river, but also her infatuation with the ancient river civilization that her writing intends to explore. Thus, Hong Ying’s storytelling is

also a modern tale of the ancient river that attempts to rewrite this legend of Chinese civilization.

Howard Goldblatt's English rendition of the title *Ji'er de nü'er* accentuates the unique authorial position as the daughter of the river. Considering the grammatical and semantic commensurability, "Daughter of Hunger" would make a credible and faithful translation in English. However, Goldblatt, a world-renowned Sinologist and translator of modern Chinese literature, decided on the English translation "Daughter of the River." In his correspondence with the Taiwanese linguist Chen Lijuan, Goldblatt explained that it was a tactical choice to replace "hunger" with "the river": "It was the publisher's decision, approved by the author. ... The British publisher thought that Brits and Americans would not want to read about "hunger!" Publisher often do that, since they are more concerned with marketing than fidelity to an author's vision."⁸⁰ It was marketing strategy rather than semantic commensurability that determined the translation. The publisher's concern with English readers' lack of interest is consistent with my analysis in Chapter One, which attributes this indifference to both the empirical knowledge and philosophical reasoning of western modernity. With the unprecedented technological development and explosively growing economy of capitalist society, the predicament of hunger has become obsolete in both material reality and cultural imaginary. As Foucault postulates, the modern nation-state shifts its governing priority from mitigating death caused by war and famine to regulating life composed of health and sexuality. Hunger, unless being pathologized (as in the case of anorexia) or politicized (as in the case of a hunger strike), does not evoke social relevance or arouse intellectual curiosity. In his short essay "Edible Ecriture," Terry Eagleton poignantly and sarcastically argues:

There is no more modish topic in contemporary literary theory than the human body. Writing the body, texts as bodies, bodies as sign-systems: in the thick of all this fashionable Foucaulteanism, there has been strikingly little concern with the physical stuff of which bodies are composed, as opposed to an excited interest in

their genitalia. The human body is generally agreed to be “constructed,” but what starts off that construction for all of us—milk—has been curiously passed over. There has been much critical interest in the famished body of the Western anorexic, but rather little attention to the malnutrition of the Third World. Perhaps such dwindled bodies are too bluntly material a matter for a so-called “materialist” criticism.⁸¹

The abject body waning in poverty and malnutrition is a striking reminder of the uneven development as well as the inadequacy (if not violence) of modernity, which, however, appears to be archaic for contemporary English readers and scholars. The starving body possesses little somatic and semiotic significance when hunger is assumedly irrelevant to the present.

Goldblatt’s regret about the translation is suggested by his subtle critique of the publisher’s market-oriented decision-making. Yet, scholars unreservedly lament the loss of the semiotic richness embedded in the trope of “hunger,” while they also question the imagery conjured up by the English title “Daughter of the River.” Song and Schaffer believe that the original title invokes the collective memory of the Great Famine and deploys an archetype of suffering in the history of socialist China, which together create a deep resonance across its Chinese readership. However, “Much of this ‘hungry’ resonance is lost in the English title. *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography*, which even in its cover design, places emphasis not on collective suffering and its effects but on the deprived and oppressive life of the individual.”⁸² Although inexplicitly, Schaffer and Song insinuate that the English translation caters to western readers’ penchant for individualistic accounts at the cost of the representation of a collective memory of hunger. Chen Lijun, a feminist scholar of translation studies, applauds the blatant acknowledgement of female desire in the original title: the daughter is claiming her rights to appetite and sexual craving by announcing hunger as her identity. Thus, Chen reproaches the English translation for undermining such a feminist stance: “the original is translated less as a piece of feminist work than as an ethnographic memoir.”⁸³ The replacement of “hunger” with

“the River,” for Chen, means that the “revolutionary potential” of disputing the stereotype of Chinese women’s passivity and inactive sexuality is traded off for ethnographic knowledge about China. The (Yangtze) River is a landmark of China’s geography and a symbol of the ancient Chinese civilization. Hence the “Daughter of the River” creates a distinguishable ethnographic archetype that plays the role of an indigenous informant.

The cover design of the English edition helps to visualize the ethnographic image conjured up by the “Daughter of the River,” which illustrates a silhouette of the backside of a reclining woman’s nude body that resembles the route of a meandering river. The curved body of the daughter is mapped onto the delineation of riverbanks, and the coupling of the daughter’s body and the river body configures a feminized topography. The minimalist and symbolic sketch of the female body amplifies the mysterious aura surrounding the remote place and the unknown people, and consequently invites English readers to construct a world of their own imagination. In Said’s terms, this imagined world is “Orientalized;” that is, the Chinese female body is eroticized while Chinese geography is feminized. Hence, the English rendition of the original book title exemplifies the Orientalism that is prevalent in the economy of cross-cultural translation. Orientalism, “as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness,”⁸⁴ is an epistemological reproduction of the power dynamic between the Occidental and the Oriental, wherein the Oriental is recurrently constructed as the ontological other to the Occidental. To reinforce the constructed imaginary of the Orient, the liberal translation introduces the exotic geography of the Oriental place as the erotic illustration accentuates the mystic sexuality of the Oriental woman.

Although the publisher’s decisions to alter the original title and to cater to the English readers’ “taste” are indicative of Orientalism underlying the global circulation

of literary works, it points us to unpack the semiotic implication of the river and its role in the narrative structure of Hong's storytelling. Contrary to the publisher's ostensible intention to essentialize the Yangtze River as a cultural symbol of China, I argue that Hong Ying appropriates the cultural trope of the Mother River of Yangtze only to scrutinize and demystify this legend of Chinese civilization, as she is a critical and rebellious daughter of a disgruntled generation. The Yangtze River valley in Hong Ying's storytelling is a dystopia that is characterized by poverty, environmental disasters, dehumanization, and cannibalism. Overshadowed by deaths and atrocities, the River is re-imagined as a spectral space that leads to the underworld of ghosts. Responsible for the abject hunger of its residents, the Yangtze becomes the ghostly river of hunger.

The Dystopia of the Mother River

Admittedly, Hong Ying taps into the cultural legacy of the mother river of Yangtze in her storytelling, in which her own family history originates from the river valley in Chongqing. The defining topographic feature of Hong Ying's family is its riverine location "on the southern bank of the Yangtze."⁸⁵ This geographical location shapes their way of living. The river is their natural reservoir, but it is also the natural barrier that they need to take a ferry to cross. Hong Ying admires the magnificent river delta: "By standing on the ridge in front of my house, I could see where the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers merge at Heaven's Gate, the gateway to the city. The peninsula created by the two rivers is the heart of Chongqing."⁸⁶ The Yangtze River and its tributary, the Jialing River, encircle and drain the land of Chongqing, the cartographic projection of which resembles a womb containing and breeding its fetus. The land on which Hong Ying's hometown stands is cultivated by the Yangtze River. In this sense they are all descendants of the river; thus Hong Ying is the daughter of the Yangtze. In the folk tale, the enriched riverine area produces bounteous grains and crops that

guarantee its folks an affluent life: “In the fertile regions of the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers, grains grow like the hair on young people: lush and vigorous.”⁸⁷ Dependent on the river for their life necessities, the riverbank residents build an emotional bond to the Yangtze: “the river flows through our hearts, it’s with us from the day we’re born. If we stop to rest on a hill, we turn to look back at the river, which invigorates us and keeps us going.”⁸⁸ The mother river is inscribed with a spiritual nature that resonates in the hearts of its descendants. The symbiotic connection between human and nature exerts a profound influence on the psychic topography of the riverbank dwellers.

However, as Hong Ying’s storytelling unfolds, the Yangtze River turns out to be a formidable parent rather than an amicable one. In the aforementioned interview, what follows her seemingly affectionate acknowledgement of being the daughter of the Yangtze River is her recurring nightmare: “I always imagined myself standing by the river and still felt myself to be the same five-year old girl running on the riverbank, with the hope to be saved by someone, to change her fate for good. Now I have realized that it has to be done by myself.”⁸⁹ The daughter of the river is trapped in an undesirable fate by the river. She longs for a different destiny, one that is impossible unless she is salvaged from the confinement of the river. Even after she has fled the river valley in adulthood, the fear of entrapment still haunts her. The river symbolizes the shackles of a predetermined fate that she strives to break from. Hong Ying revisits her previous life on the riverbank to remind herself of the reason to fight for her own salvation. She remains the daughter of the river in the sense that she stays vigilant of the threat inflicted upon her because of that very identity. It is fear of rather than love for the Mother River of Yangtze that stimulates her craving for freedom and self-determination. She refuses to succumb to the formidable parent and chooses to escape her familial and cultural origin.

Moreover, when she looks back to examine her cultural origin from a safe distance, what fascinates Hong Ying about the mysterious civilization of the Yangtze River is its clandestine culture of death, which is crystalized by Fengdu Ghost City on the Ming Mountain. This ancient religious site with two thousand years of history stands on Chongqing's northern bank of the Yangtze River, and it reifies the Capital of the Underworld, Youdu, in China's indigenous religions. A large complex of shrines, temples and monasteries, the Fengdu Ghost City is dedicated to the afterlife in the underworld wherein the virtuous are tested and reincarnated and the evil are detained and tortured. The formidable images and sculptures of punishments and torments strike fear into the hearts of viewers. While the Yangtze River civilization is often praised for its richness and prosperity, Hong Ying seems to believe that the religious subculture of the underworld manifests its cultural unconscious.⁹⁰ The offspring of the river civilization may inhabit the land of promise, but they also inherit the collective unconscious of mystic suffering and inscrutable terror. They are aware that the Mother River that begets life also threatens to take life. A primordial sense of terror clouds Hong Ying's childhood memory and her cultural exploration of the Yangtze River, while her storytelling serves to illuminate her familial and cultural past as well as to dispel the phantom of her memory.

In *Daughter*, Hong Ying, "a girl who prided herself on being disobedient"⁹¹ beholds a dystopian life on the southern bank of the Yangtze in the 1960s. The collective unconscious of suffering and terror is contextualized in the disillusioned age of socialism. For one thing the ecosystem of the Yangtze River has deteriorated to the degree that it is harmful to human life. Being used as a natural dump field, the River spreads a mixture of repelling odors: "A ten-minute walk on any mountain path in South Bank treats you to hundreds of different smells, a universe of olfactory creations."⁹² The stinky smell penetrates miles into the resident area and tortures the

dwellers' noses. At the same time, the river water is severely contaminated and no longer drinkable. Ironically, drinking water becomes a rare and pricy commodity for the riverbank families:

Water was a valued commodity, not just because it was so expensive, but because it could be cut off at any time. Several hundred families shared a single tap behind High School Avenue. Queuing up was only part of the problem, for once the water came, it was usually a dirty yellow; but if we went down to the river to fetch water, a hard, sweaty job at best, we had to treat it with alum or bleach to make it fit for drinking or cooking, and it left a metallic taste. Except for times when the running water was off, we fetched water from the river only for laundry or to mop the floors.⁹³

Fetching water from the river was never an easy task for the dwellers: the hilly and muddy path towards the riverbank made the job strenuous. Furthermore, the soiled water from the Yangtze River can only be used for washing and cleaning, needing to be sterilized before being sanitary for drinking and cooking. In Hong Ying's dismal depiction, the south bank of the Yangtze valley appears to be more a wasteland than the land of promise. Song and Schaffer aptly point out that Hong Ying repudiates the trope of the mother river in her storytelling: "The Yangtze, figured in China's cultural imagination as the nation's nurturing 'bloodstream,' was once idealized but in Hong's allegory it has become a deficient parental figure."⁹⁴ The Yangtze River in the 1960s is drained of its nurturing bloodstream and turned into a water-body of waste and pollution, which only contributes to the arduous life of the riverbank dwellers.

Hong Ying's parody of the mother river is more pronounced in *Summer*. After Lin Ying is distressed by the savage crackdown in Tian'anmen Square, she turns to her childhood memories for temporary relief. She recalls one "happy" memory associated with singing an uplifting song about the river:

She learned a song in music class: "Wide, wide river, waves so gentle, breezes waft the fragrance of sweet rice along the banks. My home is there on the riverbank heights in the midst of sunlight shining bright." She sang it over and over again, intoxicated with the words, in order not to see the dingy grayness before her eyes. The humid air was thick with soot; the stench of sewage permeated the cities on either bank.⁹⁵

What Lin learns to sing is “My Motherland” (*wo de zuguo*), the theme song of the 1956 mainstream movie *Shang gan ling*, which features the most heroic and victorious battle fought by the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army during the Korean War (1950-1953). The lyrics of the patriotic song eulogize the River as a utopian motherland that calls on its sons and daughters to protect their national borders. Ironically, the mesmerizing melody and the intoxicating lyrics only temporarily ward off the suffocating reality of living on the wasteland of riverbank. The utopian blueprint drawn by the nationalistic discourse is immediately invalidated by “the grayness,” “the humid air,” and “the stench of sewage” in the dystopian reality. Her sensual memories of the River, i.e., its color, texture, and smell, are not subsumed under revolutionary ideals and the nationalistic rhetoric.

The Mother River of Hunger and Death

The eulogy of the mother river is no longer chanted by the disgruntled generation’s descendants. Hong Ying deplores the parental deficiency of the mother river for a weightier reason: the riverbank dwellers were not delivered from the Famine despite the acclaimed fertile soil of the river valley. Instead, unprepared for food shortage, the region suffered a record high death toll in the Famine. When the land yielded few grains, “The sole edibles we common folk could gather with no restrictions were the leaves and fresh inner bark of elm trees ground into paste.”⁹⁶ Then the famished and desperate dwellers turned to search the river for food, but they would be lucky to get “vegetable skins, leafy greens, even melon rinds,” for “Most of the time all the river offered up was muddy water.”⁹⁷ At the same time, foraging in the icy river water was precarious, especially for bodies that were already emaciated by hunger: “Water from the snowy peaks of Qinghai kept the river temperature icy cold most of the year, and if you cramped up while you were swimming, getting back to shore was nearly impossible; sooner or later you’d be swept into one of the swirling eddies. Youngsters

weakened by hunger never had a chance.”⁹⁸ It is an understatement for Schaffer and Song to liken the river to a deficient parental figure; instead, the river is an accomplice to atrocity. In stark contrast to the mystifying imagery of the mother river, the apocalyptic scene of the Famine on the riverbank epitomizes the unjust suffering and terror inflicted on its dwellers.

The formidable and unrestrained power of the river manifests itself in taking away many innocent lives. Hong Ying’s mother continuously warns her children about the terror of the water and scolds them for getting too close to the riverbank: “I forbid you to go bathing in the river, especially by yourself. I don’t even want you playing on the riverbank. The river can reach out and grab you, throw a noose around you. It doesn’t care if you’re good or not, and it loves children.”⁹⁹ As if possessed by evil spirits, the river preys on the weak and vulnerable. Corpses are often spotted in the river that could be “reckless bathers, victims of capsized boats or murder, and people who have given up on life.”¹⁰⁰ The unsettling scene of corpses floating in the river is graphically depicted:

At a lumber mill near the bend in the river at Slingshot Pellet Dock, the water flows slowly past the rocky bank, where the sawdust turns the water into a strange lumpy soup. Corpses there are coated with sawdust and bloat until they look like strange-coloured logs. Impossible to determine what kind of people they might have been, with their clothes long since washed away or knotted around their bodies. And even naked it’s hard to tell whether they’re men or women. But belief has it that if a relative or an enemy of the victim is among the onlookers, fresh blood will ooze from the orifices of the purple, waterlogged face.¹⁰¹

To be drowned in the river is a dehumanizing death: the disfigured corpses look like ruined wooden logs carelessly dumped into the river. Their clothing is washed away to reveal indistinguishable flesh; the deceased lose their last shred of dignity in the river. But the dead are not gone: they seek every opportunity to be consoled by their relatives or to be avenged upon their enemies among the living. In the Chinese tradition of mythology and ghost story (i.e. *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* written by Pu Songlin), blood oozing from the seven orifices of the face (*qi qiao liu*

xue) symbolizes unnatural death under the influence of poison or a supernatural power. Yiju Huang insightfully argues: “The Yangtze River is constantly evoked as an unmarked grave, an improper burial site for the corpses of those who suffered an *abnormal death*—those who committed suicide, those who were murdered, and those who are drowned.”¹⁰² Unlike a proper burial under the ground, the river is a burial site for the evil ghost that has died an abnormal death. Since the evil ghost is “denied transmigration, reincarnation, and entry into Paradise,”¹⁰³ it will never rest in peace and will ceaselessly haunt the living. In this way, the living are always implicated in their hatred and horror of the dead.

The river is a threshold separating yet connecting the realm of the dead and that of the living. Popular local belief in Hong Ying’s hometown has it that “all waterways lead to the underworld,”¹⁰⁴ making the river a gateway to the realm of ghosts. The spectral space of the Yangtze River reduces life on the riverbank to a ghostly existence. Living among ghosts, spirits, and even demons that are conjured up by the river in the background (or the unconscious), the riverbank dwellers resort to magical power to reconcile the human world with the spiritual world. Supernatural forces are evoked to alleviate human suffering: “This mountain city is shrouded in a ghostly atmosphere. Centuries ago the Upper and Middle Reaches of the Yangtze used to be the cradles of shamanism, and even today any kind of witchcraft had followers who practiced it at least on themselves.”¹⁰⁵ This ghostly atmosphere spawns a mystic culture of shamanism, the practice of which is premised on the belief that shamans perform as the intermediary or messenger between human beings and spirits. Margaret Stutley’s study on Eurasian shamanisms concludes: “Shamans have peculiar brilliant eyes which enable them to see spirits as well as being sensitive to any change in the nearby psychic atmosphere. They uphold clan values, and bring about harmony between human beings and supernatural forces.”¹⁰⁶ The opposite charges of the

human world and the supernatural world (i.e. *yang* and *yin*) are exchanged through the medium of shamans so that physical and spiritual balances are restored. In a primitive society of mysticism, shamanism is integrated into the indigenous culture and imprinted on the popular imagination. Hong Ying parodies the laudatory phrase “the cradle of Chinese civilization” and provocatively calls the Yangtze River “the cradle of shamanism.” For her, the birth of the glorious Chinese civilization that epitomizes the progress of humanity and productivity is shadowed by its covert counterpart, that is, the culture of mysticism and superstition. If the former represents the achievement of human intelligence and courage, the latter showcases human fear and weakness.

The absurdity and brutality of the riverbank life is further pronounced in the way that death is naturalized as a mundane scene and terror is internalized as a value. As the river ruthlessly flaunts its tyrannical and destructive power over the dwellers, they grow used to the indignity of death and the pain of loss. Each year, the annual flood turns the river into a burial ground overnight:

One year rains flooded Stonebridge Avenue for days, turning the roads and lanes into swamps. The storm and flooding swept all sorts of junk away and washed the stone steps so clean you could lie down and take a nap on them. But the river had changed: thatched huts, wooden tubs, entire trees, even corpses—impossible to tell if they were pigs or dogs or humans—were swept along on its surface.¹⁰⁷

The annihilating flood equalizes the death of human and that of animals. But, after the flood recedes, the dwellers do not bother to fetch and claim the dead from the river, nor do they spend any time in grieving for the bereaved. Instead, “People went out in homemade rafts to scavenge for usable items” right away, for the flood presented them a rare opportunity of stealing without guilt: “You had to envy those who took wristwatches from floating corpses, not just because watches were valuable but because it didn’t count as theft—watches certainly weren’t much use to the dead.”¹⁰⁸

The dwellers’ morals are re-shaped by their endurance of adversity and atrocity, to which they accommodate with tactics and compromises in order to survive. But their

exceptional composure and calculated acts are still absurd in the face of tragic death, as if they are blocked from genuine feeling. Cynically, Hong Ying remarks, “Looking at dead bodies was rare entertainment in the drab daily lives of South Bank residents.”¹⁰⁹ The dehumanizing life in the dystopian river valley has hardened the human heart and alienated human emotions. Death is made a spectacle, as every resident becomes a spectator of life. They may, on the one hand, not fully grasp the cruelty and absurdity they are subjected to, and on the other, disassociate themselves from the gravity of tragedy and death just to survive.

The dystopian mother river in Hong Ying’s storytelling resonates with Xiao Hong’s depiction of a dystopian Motherland in *The Field of Life and Death* (1935), which was also translated into English by Howard Goldblatt in 1985. Although Xiao’s novel is set in the heyday of nationalistic campaigns and political upheavals prior to the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), she eschews idealizing and romanticizing the motherland. Instead of invoking patriotism and heroism, the novel focuses on the unheroic daily scenes in the sordid lives of petty villagers, for whom the motherland entails the threat of death rather than the field of life. It is known that Xiao Hong is Goldblatt’s favorite Chinese woman writer and that Hong Ying’s *Daughter* is one of his favorite contemporary Chinese novels. Goldblatt’s commentaries juxtaposing Hong Ying’s *Daughter of the River* and Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death* reveal the shared aesthetic achievement and emotional thrill that distinguish the two masterpieces from mainstream writings. They resist romanticization of the collective identity, be it the mother river or the motherland, and expose unfathomable historical cruelties and atrocities against individuals. In this way, they question the justice of representative history and institutionalized memory, and highlight the resilience and strength of the underrepresented underclass, especially underclass women.

The Myth of Cannibalism and the Bastard Daughter

To delineate the apocalyptic scene of the riverine dystopia, Hong Ying also taps into the myth of cannibalism, suggesting apathy and oblique morals. It is insinuated that the apathetic dwellers could be cannibals: they frequent the riverine restaurant named Waterhouse for its delectable meaty buns, which rumor says are stuffed with human flesh.

That storm washed away whole shaky houses, furniture and garbage included. But miraculously, Waterhouse, which was on stilts, stayed right where it was. Three days after the water receded, leaving mildew spots on its walls, it was open for business again. *And now that the storm had passed* [emphasis added], the captivating aroma of Waterhouse's meaty dumplings and hot-stickers filled nearby lanes. People said the owner owed his success to his father, who had studied Taoist magic on Mount Emei, and exerted his power on the filling of the buns.¹¹⁰

Waterhouse miraculously stays intact in the flood, and mysteriously starts to make tasty meat buns right after the storm. Here is another example of the translator's deliberate alterations to the original text, which literally reads "Ever since the storm" instead of "And now that the storm had passed." The original expression states an undeniable correlation between the mysterious meaty buns and the catastrophic flood, and hence indicates the suspicious origin of the meat in the buns. The river seems to have induced this incidence of cannibalism as it harbors so many unclaimed floating corpses after the flood. Religious mythology is invoked among the dwellers to dissipate the cloud of doubt as well as to ease their own conscience. But the intentional mistranslation in the English version withholds this suspicion from readers, who are later informed of a more gruesome rumor about Waterhouse killing children for human flesh to stuff their buns during the Famine. As Gang Yue forcefully argues, hunger cannibalism or cannibalism of desperation—that is, being left with no other alternative other than to feed on dead human flesh in famines and disasters, should be counted as a tragic chapter of the human history of survival. But lucrative cannibalism, even in hard times as Hong Ying suggests, is nothing but an

atrocities against humanity, and indifferent consumers are complicit in the hideous crime.

The mistranslation here is a missed opportunity to interrogate the cultural ecology of the south bank of the Yangtze. While the austere environment of the river valley as well as the arduous and wretched life of the riverbank dwellers are sympathetically recounted, their adaptations to the environments are morally suspicious and candidly questioned. Nevertheless, I contend that the myth of cannibalism on the riverbank does not correspond with an actual crime in history. Instead, it resonates with the national allegory of the backward cannibalistic society of China that is crystallized in Lu Xun's canonical novella "Diary of a Madman." Inspired by Nikolai Gogol's acclaimed short story of the same name, the Lu Xun novella portrays a Chinese scholar who is driven to insanity by his paranoia of being eaten up by the folk villagers. His persecution complex is triggered by the material and figurative cannibalism frequently mentioned in Chinese historiography, mythology, folklore, and parlance. In a hysterical outburst, he accuses the Chinese people of practicing cannibalism under the instruction of the classics:

Everything requires careful consideration if one is to understand it. In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: "Virtue and Morality." Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words— "Eat people."¹¹

The Madman in his derangement exposes the hypocrisy of the Chinese classical teaching about virtue and morality, underneath which lies a voracious aggression of subjugating and exploiting others. The Chinese classics as the foundation of Chinese society and culture are deconstructed in his frantic reading between the lines. The deplorable nature of the Chinese people is chastised as the questionable cultural legacy of Chinese civilization is denounced.

Lu Xun's iconoclastic stance against traditional Chinese society resonates in Hong Ying's re-appropriation of the legend of her riverine hometown. In the same critical vein, Hong castigates the deplorable character traits of the descendants of the river. Adaptation to social and physical environments in their case equates with scarifying human dignity and morality. Being subjected to the tyranny of the river, the dwellers are conditioned to suppress their reason and feeling. They are blinded to the suffering of others as they are imperceptive about their own. This internalized subjugation and intellectual passivity are responsible for a stoic society: not only are they unwilling to confront and resolve the cause of their own suffering, but they also all play a role in inflicting miseries on each other. In this sense, Hong Ying's hometown epitomizes a society of mutual cannibalism, as elucidated by Lu Xun's allegory. The person who ladles out portions in the Dining Hall of the People's Commune picks the thinnest and weakest gruel for the poorest who have absolutely no connections. Er-wa's mother, a former prostitute, hurls curses at Hong Ying's family and does everything she can to make life miserable for them because of her mother's scandalous affair. The high-school history teacher seduces his student, Hong Ying, after he makes up his mind to commit suicide in order to avoid political retaliation. Hong Ying's siblings sabotage her reunion with her biological father in fear of losing her financial contribution to the family. Her mother dismisses Hong Ying's frustration about not having money for college and advises her, "You should be glad you were allowed to go on living. Being alive is all that counts, especially for someone with your background. So just accept it."¹¹² The riverbank is just like the Madman's secluded village, wherein strangers, neighbors, and even families are, consciously or unconsciously, conspiring to "eat" the weak and vulnerable.

The vicious circle of suffering and inflicting suffering ensures that the same fate of a wretched life is relived generation after generation. Like Lu Xun, Hong Ying is also

keen to ask what it takes to break the cycle if the whole society seems to be infected by the pathological symptom of cannibalism. Teasing out the paradox underlying Lu Xun's madman, Leo Ou-fan Lee suggests:

If the Chinese people are so intellectually and spiritually diseased as not to recognized their “mutual cannibalism”—if their minds are so “dark and confused” that they enjoy oppressing others in the midst of their own undoing—then how can one individual who was reared in the same Chinese environment and who shares with his compatriots the same nature of Chineseness be an exception? The answer is: He cannot, unless he is insane.¹¹³

Lee points out that with the parable of the madman, Lu Xun proposes a dilemma rather than a solution to social problems: the insanity of the Madman disqualifies him for generating social change, for he is disenfranchised on the ground of his mental disease. Thus is showcased Lu Xun's conflicted and pessimistic attitude towards China's future. However, Tang Xiaobing sheds new light on the mentality of the madman by teasing out the etymological and semantic disparities between two Chinese characters that are often confused with each other—*feng* and *kuang*. While the former denotes mental disorders, the latter refers to hyperactive mental functions. According to Tang, Lu Xun's choice of *kuang* attests to exceptional mental capacity rather than mental disability in the madman.

Kuang is the archetypal metaphor for an explosive ecstasy (ex-stasis), a jumping off the right track, a transgressive crossing of the boundary—in short, a return to the primal or instinctual drive. It captures, to a certain extent, the inner experience of the alterity of reason, of what has to be repressed and marginalized as irrational.¹¹⁴

Explosive ecstasy and transgressive irrationality are repressed by the discursive order; thus, speaking from the marginalized space of *kuang*, the Madman destabilizes the dominant discourse and inserts an epistemic interruption. Lu Xun allegorically enacts what Foucault postulates as “a return of knowledge,” that is, the insurrection of the “subjugated knowledges” or “disqualified knowledges” of social groups marginal to epistemology, i.e., “that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person.”¹¹⁵

The subversive knowledge of the madman derives from his positionality of an outsider within. The marginality of the outsider within engenders a double vision, which is illustrated by bell hooks as looking “from the outside in and from the inside out.”¹¹⁶ When the marginalized and invisible become conscious of their social status with respect to socio-political domination and oppression, they acquire the epistemic advantage of double vision. From the vantage point of the marginal, social vices are disclosed and castigated, and the margin is transformed to the center of social critique and political resistance. Akin to the madman, Hong Ying is also an outsider within. Being a bastard daughter, Hong Ying is stigmatized by her mother’s former sexual transgression and lives, more so than her underclass family, on the fringe of society. The illegitimacy of her birth defies social integration and alienates her from the sociocultural mainstream. However, Lisa Zunshine’s research on the trope of illegitimacy in eighteenth century British novels shows that the bastard child is “a paradigmatic progressive protagonist embodying an implicit criticism on aristocratic ideology.”¹¹⁷ Bastardy emblemizes boundary-crossing and social mobility that destabilize a hierarchical aristocratic society. Thus, embodying defiance and transgression, the figure of the bastard child embodies the mushrooming critical consciousness of progressive social forces.

Just like the madman, the bastard daughter is constantly rejected by society: the voluntary disclosure of her thought and emotion is always greeted with dismissal and even disdain. As a sense of isolation and marginalization creeps in, Hong Ying develops similar symptoms to those of the Madman’s paranoia.

I had to clarify, or at least gain some understanding of, the riddles and shadows that had swirled in my life. Everybody knew something, but no one was willing to let me in on whatever it was. They had formed a conspiracy, boxing me into the tyranny of silence. Maybe they were imprisoned in the cage of non-speaking, and the truth I desperately wanted to learn lay in precisely what they would not say.¹¹⁸

She is driven mad by the reticence imposed on her, which appears to be a collective conspiracy against her and her alone. In the same way that the madman suspects the folk people of killing and eating him, Hong Ying believes that her own family holds malicious intentions against her.

Being compelled to unravel her true identity, she digs into her familial history:

What this all meant was that she was pregnant with the child of a man who wasn't her husband. Me, an illegitimate child! I should have guessed when I heard words like "daughter of a slut" and "bastard," which people hurled at each other but really directed at me. The signs were all there, I just hadn't recognized them. An unconscious fear, I suppose.¹¹⁹

"Daughter of a slut" and "bastard" are common usage of profane language when people curse each other. But the specific reference to bastardy is intentionally emphasized with a suggestive undertone. In a madman-like way of deconstructing language, Hong Ying deciphers the encrypted semiotic signs that signal the populist disdain for her illegitimate birth. Similarly, what she discovers between the lines is not "Virtue and Morality," but "Eat People": She was nearly consumed by hunger in her mother's womb in the midst of the Famine when her spiteful half-sisters and half-brothers refused to allocate more food to their pregnant mother. Then, with an illegitimate child at home, each of her family members was verbally or physically assaulted during the Cultural Revolution in the name of rectifying socialist morals.

Bastardy subjects Hong Ying to mistreatments, which reveals the structural oppression of marginalized groups in a cannibalistic society. The situated knowledge produced by her lived experience becomes the explanatory tool to analyze society and to rewrite history. Historical amnesia and the social norm of silence are to be defied and traversed by the bastard daughter's storytelling. In the preface to *Call to Arms*, Lu Xun tells a famous fable about an impregnable iron house that is on fire. The dilemma for the outside onlooker is whether to let the insiders unconsciously die in their slumber or to shout to wake them up to face a hopeless situation and die in despair. Although reluctantly, he is persuaded that with a few persons being awake, there is a

slim chance for them to demolish and break out of the iron house. “Diary of a Madman” is his first attempt at a call to arms with the hope that once people realize the oppressive and cannibalistic nature of old Chinese society, they will dismantle their reactionary cultural legacy. Tapping into the master metaphor of cannibalism in the Chinese tradition of social critique, Hong Ying resumes the mission of consciousness-raising. In this light, the bastard daughter attempts to overturn the hegemonic center of sociocultural order from her marginalized position. Storytelling is her call to arms.

The recollection of her memory and the formulation of her knowledge are assisted by two other societal outsiders—namely her big sister and her history teacher. The big sister is an outsider in Hong Ying’s family, as she is fathered by her mother’s first husband, a ringleader of the underground criminal society Gelao Hui. After the gangster is indicted in 1950 as a counter-revolutionary for sabotaging the takeover of Chongqing by the communist armies, the big sister is also cast out by society for being the daughter of the Five Black Categories,¹²⁰ in spite of her eagerness to be assimilated into mainstream values by volunteering to populate the mountains in response to the call of the communist party. In the troubled time of the Cultural Revolution, her husband betrays her confidence and makes public her suspicious family background and reactionary class status. “Large posters went up the very next day, attacking her for ‘Subversion by Offspring of Class Enemies from the Five Black Categories.’ During the struggle session that follows, he stands below the stage to witness her torment.”¹²¹ She is disillusioned with the tumultuous social order and determined to make up for her youth wasted in political movement and class struggle. She comes to terms with her birth status: compared to hypocritical party officials, “A gangster was someone you could look up to.”¹²² Paradoxically, her marginalized position allows the big sister to transgress the social order and cultural norms with

higher mobility and self-determination: she defies all normative social roles that are traditionally inscribed on women, be it obedient daughter, virtuous wife or devoting mother. In the same spirit, she disobeys the social norm of silence and relates the family story to Hong Ying.

The history teacher is the other social outcast that shapes Hong Ying's formative years. During the years of the Famine, he is labeled as rightist-opportunist for writing a petition letter that exposed deceptive cadres and their negligence. Then, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, he joins the factional fighting of the Rebels, only to accidentally kill his own younger brother who is a member of the opponent faction. Tormented by deep regret, he lives in fear of trial and punishment from that point on. Prior to the commencement of the large-scale suppression campaign targeting individuals involved in crimes amid the Cultural Revolution, he commits suicide. His brief intellectual and romantic engagement with Hong Ying is his revenge on the chaotic world. In anticipation of death, he confides his historical testimony to Hong Ying: "the famine was caused by cadres who were interested only in pleasing their superiors to advance their own careers, and to hell with the rest of the populace. For years they'd sent up glowing reports of record-breaking harvests, and none had ever accepted responsibility for a single death."¹²³ Being the first trustworthy adult in Hong Ying's life that openly discusses and castigates the past, the history teacher instigates her curiosity and kindles her political awareness. Driven by her disposition as a storyteller, Hong Ying is also keen to listen to his personal stories that complicate historical knowledge and generalization. From him, Hong Ying learns the aesthetic value of storytelling: "Every family's story was more or less the same...But in the telling they were all different, too. Everyone's experience was unique."¹²⁴

In her storytelling, Hong Ying gives voice to the socially marginalized, the big sister, the history teacher, and the bastard daughter of herself. Their unique experience at the margins bears testimony against the grain of the hegemonic ideology of the center. In post-Mao China, active forgetting is institutionalized while individual remembrance is antagonized. The marginalized other becomes the locus of resistance to historical amnesia. To tell a tale about the past, Hong Ying taps into her marginality as the daughter of hunger, the daughter of the dystopian river, and the bastard daughter. Evoking the specter of hunger and the hungry ghost of the socialist past, Hong Ying revives repressed memories of the famine and exposes the weighty implications of historical atrocity and injustice on the personal and collective levels. Hong Ying's spectral imagination is epitomized by two tropes of spectrality – namely, the ghostly hunger and the river of ghosts. The symptom of an insatiable appetite embodies and manifests the aftereffect of primal hunger and, parodying the nationalistic symbol of the mother river, the river of ghosts is imagined as a site of traumatic memory in the history of the famine. Hong Ying's hauntological storytelling is generative for the communication and dissemination of collective memory, and it is illustrative of historical responsibilities that are beyond the immediacy of the present.

¹ Hong Ying, a.k.a. Chen Hongying, was born in 1962 and grew up in the aftermath of the Great Famine (1959-1962) on the southern bank of the Yangtze River in Chongqing. Her scandalous birth as an extramarital daughter subjected her mother and her entire family to endless humiliation and even ruthless persecution during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976). Residing in the overcrowded and filthy riverside slum, Hong Ying's family barely survived decades of poverty with her mother's meager income from being a coolie at the port. At the age of eighteen, she decisively left her hometown, and embarked on the journey of an underground avant-garde poet. She was a member of the Lu Xun Literature Academy for Writers in Beijing when the Tiananmen Square Incidence occurred in the summer of 1989. In 1991, Hong Ying met her first husband Zhao Yiheng, then a leading Chinese scholar of formalism at the University of London, and moved to Britain with him. She started writing novels shortly after her settlement in London. Her talent of storytelling was immediately recognized by the international literary world.

² I use "postsocialism" in the original sense of Arif Dirlik's conception in 1989. Dirlik coined the neologism to explicate the new phenomenon of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. He pointed out that the Chinese communist party resorted to a capitalist market economy to remedy economic deficiencies without cancelling out socialist legitimacies in the 1980s. More significantly, in postsocialist society, socialism performed an ideological disguise to cover the problematic contradictions and conflicts emerging from the unfolding of social engineering.

³ Qi Wang, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 15.

⁴ Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory in Modern China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.)

⁵ Yomi Braister, *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.)

⁶ Xiaobin Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-garde Fiction*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.)

⁷ Qi Wang.

⁸ The Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee in August 1958 (also referred as the Beidaihe Meeting) made two resolutions: to double the steel production to 1,070,000 tonnes and to enforce mandatory agricultural collectivism. Afterwards, people's communes were formed in rural areas and private farming was prohibited. Small steel blast furnaces were constructed in the backyard of every commune. If iron ore was unavailable, people melted any steel objects they could get their hands on, from agricultural tools to cooking utensils, in order to make steel girders. But these girders were of such a poor quality that they were useless and valueless.

⁹ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011,) xiii. According to Frank Dikötter's historical and archival research, "The total losses from the iron-and-steel drive in 1958 were latter estimated by the Bureau for Statistics at 5 billion yuan—not including damage to buildings, forests, mines and people" (61). In the meantime, the country's agricultural foundation was severely jeopardized, for "Many were mobilised by

the militia on backyard furnaces, some were deployed on large irrigation schemes, and others had left the village in search of work in the many factories chasing after ever higher targets” (61).

¹⁰ Justin Yifu Lin and Dennis Tao Yang, “On the causes of China's agricultural crisis and the great leap famine,” *China Economic Review* 9: 2 (1998), 125.

¹¹ Ibid, xii.

¹² Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghost: Mao's Secret Famine*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 312.

¹³ Yiju Huang, *Tapestry of Light: Aesthetic Afterlives of the Cultural Revolution*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 20.

¹⁴ Jasper Becker, xi.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 22.

¹⁶ Ibid, xix.

¹⁷ Jasper Becker, 285-86.

¹⁸ Jisheng Yang, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958-1962*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, (London: Penguin Book, 2003), 147.

²⁰ Ibid, 148.

²¹ Susanne Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 9.

²² Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 78.

²³ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in *Cultural Memories: the Geographical Point of View*, eds. Peter Meusburger and Michael Heffernan, (New York: Springer, 2011), 113.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 367.

²⁵ Ibid, 371.

²⁶ Ibid, 369.

²⁷ Ibid, 368-69.

²⁸ Translation by author. The interview was accessed on:

<http://www.oh100.com/art/wenxue/eye/accessing/200205/2007040702162.html>

²⁹ Hong Ying, *Summer of Betrayal*, trans. Martha Avery, (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 59.

³⁰ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, trans. Howard Glodblatt, (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 88.

³¹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, trans. Howard Glodblatt, (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 173.

³² Song Xianlin and Kay Schaffer, *Chinese Women Writers in Postsocialist China*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 24.

³³ David Der-Wei Wang, “Three Hungry Women.” *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 25 (1998), 75.

³⁴ Translation by author. The interview was accessed on:

<http://www.ilf.cn/Theo/3653.html>

³⁵ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 42.

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- ³⁶ Ibid, 144.
- ³⁷ Translation by author. The interview was accessed on:
<http://hongying.blog.sohu.com/135906064.html>.
- ³⁸ Weijie Song, "Positions of Sinophone Representation in Jin's Chivalric Topography." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 17:1 (2015): 5.
- ³⁹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 48.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, 43.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (New York: de Gruyter. 2008), 97-98.
- ⁴³ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 48.
- ⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, 39.
- ⁴⁵ Rey Chow, "We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou's *To Live*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95: 4 (1996): 1058.
- ⁴⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- ⁴⁷ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 217.
- ⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, xviii-xix.
- ⁴⁹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 41 [emphasis added].
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 23.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, 42.
- ⁵² Ibid, 33-34.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 45.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 43.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, 13.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, 57.
- ⁵⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 14.
- ⁵⁸ Jian Xu, "Subjectivity and Class Consciousness in Hong Ying's Autobiographical Novel *The Hungry Daughter*," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17 (2008): 535.
- ⁵⁹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 10.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, 35.
- ⁶¹ Ibid, 40.
- ⁶² Ibid, 89.
- ⁶³ Hong Ying, *Good Children of the Flower*, 287.
- ⁶⁴ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 51.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid, 52.
- ⁶⁶ Hong Ying, *Good Children of the Flower*, 287-88.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, 287.
- ⁶⁸ Michael Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 107.
- ⁶⁹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 258.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid, 278.

⁷¹ Hong Ying, *Summer of Betrayal*, trans. Martha Avery, (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 18.

⁷² Ibid, 180.

⁷³ Ibid, 183.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 143.

⁷⁵ Johanna Hood, "Creating Female Identity in China: Body and Text in Hong Ying's *Summer of Betrayal*," *Asian Studies Review* 28, (2004): 168.

⁷⁶ Juan Manuel Garrido, *On Time, Being, and Hunger: Challenging the Traditional Way of Thinking Life*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 81.

⁷⁷ The Yangtze River is the longest river in China and the third longest in the world. Originating from the glacial meltwaters of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, the Yangtze descends rapidly, flows through 3,915 miles of disparate ecosystems, and meets the East China Sea in Shanghai. The river drains one-fifth of the land of China and its basin is home to one-third of the Chinese population. For thousands of years, the river has been used for water, irrigation, sanitation, transportation, and industry. Archeological discoveries show that the Yangtze River gave birth to an ancient civilization, just as the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Indus Rivers did. As indicated by the ruins of the Daxi Culture in Sichuan and Hubei provinces, the Majiapang Culture in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, and the Hemudu Culture in eastern Zhejiang, the ancient civilization of the Yangtze dated at least 7,000 years ago when the Yangshou Culture along the Yellow River and its main tributaries took shape. Therefore,

⁷⁸ Translation by author. The interview was accessed on:

<http://www.people.com.cn/BIG5/paper85/10008/918311.html>.

⁷⁹ Translation by author. The interview was accessed on:

<http://m.yicai.com/news/4717857.html>.

⁸⁰ Lijuan Chen, "A Chinese Woman in Translation: A Feminist Rereading of Hong Ying's *Ji'e de nüer* in English Translation," *Translation Review* 75, (2008), 130.

⁸¹ Terry Eagleton, "Edible Ecriture," in *Consuming Passion: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, eds. Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 207.

⁸² Song and Schaffer, 25.

⁸³ Lijuan Chen, 33.

⁸⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 6.

⁸⁵ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 2.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 35.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 136.

⁸⁹ The interview was accessed on: <http://m.yicai.com/news/4717857.html>.

⁹⁰ The term "cultural unconscious" developed from the German psychiatrist Carl Jung's concept of "collective unconscious." In his seminal work *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung delineated "a common psychic substrate of suprapersonal nature" that was created and inherited through the pre-existent religious and cultural archetypes in myths and fairytales. Among others, the illustration of hell in every culture represents the dark side of the collective unconscious.

⁹¹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 115.

⁹² Ibid, 4.

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- ⁹³ Ibid, 15.
- ⁹⁴ Song and Schaffer, 26-27.
- ⁹⁵ Hong Ying, *Summer of Betrayal*, 44.
- ⁹⁶ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 36.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid, 37.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid, 115.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 131.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰² Yiju Huang, 24.
- ¹⁰³ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 244.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 244.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 142.
- ¹⁰⁶ Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 6.
- ¹⁰⁷ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 63.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 113.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid, 63.
- ¹¹¹ Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, trans. Julie Lovell, (Berkley: Penguin Classics, 2010), 26.
- ¹¹² Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 48.
- ¹¹³ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 110.
- ¹¹⁴ Xiaobing Tang, "Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' and a Chinese Modernism," *PMLA* 107:5 (1992), 1226.
- ¹¹⁵ Michael Foucault, 82.
- ¹¹⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), vii.
- ¹¹⁷ Lisa Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-century England*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 20.
- ¹¹⁸ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 76.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid, 208-209.
- ¹²⁰ These were "class enemies" identified by Mao Zedong prior to the Cultural Revolution, comprising landlords, rich farmers, counterrevolutionaries, evildoers, and rightists. These class enemies and their children were publicly denounced and tortured by Red Guards, radical youths from the family background of the Five Red Catalogues—that is, workers, poor and lower-middle-class peasants, revolutionary cadres, revolutionary soldiers, dependents of revolutionary martyrs. See Lu Xiuyuan's "A Step Toward Understanding Popular Violence in China's Cultural Revolution," *Pacific Affairs* 67: 4 (1994), 533-63.
- ¹²¹ Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River*, 156.
- ¹²² Ibid, 91.
- ¹²³ Ibid, 34.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid, 173.

Chapter Three
From Bumming in Hunger to Homecoming to Crisis:
Zhang Ci's Nomadic Life and Cathartic Filmmaking

*I'm a fugitive and a vagabond, a
 sojourner seeking signs.*

—Annie Dillard

*I felt like a rich vagabond who had passed
 through the world paving my way with gold
 fairy dust, then realizing too late that the
 path disintegrated as soon as I passed over
 it.*

—Amy Tan

The conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 ended the highly political era of socialist China, during which class struggle was given paramount consideration. With relaxed control over public discourse and decentralizing economic reforms, postsocialist China witnessed a rapid and profound social restructuring after 1978, which concomitantly spawned “a collective cultural and ideological repositioning.”¹ The postsocialist New Era (*xin shiqi*) was inspired by “an attempt to open up a new possibility for the nation, which desperately desired to overcome the painful memories of its recent past (a decade of social disturbances and disasters).”² Riding the wave of the new era, the aspiring younger generation partook of “an epochal exodus from the archaic utopian dream” (*yige shidai xing de cong wutuobang jiumeng de da taowang*), in Yu Jian’s poetic imagery.³ They attempted to escape from the smothering confinement of the socialist utopia, which was characterized by the dominant values of egalitarianism and collectivism, in order to seek rights to individual expression and aspiration. Leaving functionary jobs in the stagnant state sector in their provincial hometowns, they strove for monetary and personal

fulfillment as self-employed businessmen (*geti hu*) or freelancers in the metropolis, for the market sector had not yet developed at that time. While the special economic zone of Shenzhen was made a paradise for speculators, Beijing was imagined as a dreamland for bohemian artists emigrating from outside the municipality. However, living on the margins of the urban milieu, their artistic utopia was far from substantiated in material reality. Before the social promise of individual sovereignty and social mobility was realized, they had to endure and overcome the mishap of hunger.

Among the bohemian artists sojourning in Beijing was woman writer and filmmaker Zhang Ci, who was born into a Chinese Muslim family in the isolated mountain region of Honghe⁴ of Yunnan province in 1962. In this chapter, I examine her life journey documented through three Chinese independent documentaries, *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (1990), *At Home in the World* (1995), and *The Faith of Ailao Mountain* (2015). Zhang Ci's Nora-esque escape from her provincial hometown is contextualized in the heyday of social restructuring and cultural repositioning in postsocialist China. Her wretched life bumming in Beijing attests to the deprivation and marginalization suffered by the floating population of migrant artists in the new urban milieu. Their vagrant lives epitomize Deleuzian nomadic subjectivity configured by transgressive mobility as well as a deterritorializing lifestyle. However, the nomadic subject is demystified when hunger accentuates its physical dependence on exteriority. The deplorable being of the structurally marginalized evidences the prevailing social stratifications and alienations of the reform era. In Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers*, the first Chinese independent documentary that commemorates the migrant artist generation, Zhang Ci's outburst of tears and anger in front of the camera provokes audiences to question the romanticizing discourse around this generation. Highly

charged and unpredictable, the outcry of the hungry woman artist illustrates the unique aesthetics of Chinese independent documentary—namely, *xianchang* (a form of documentary realism that is rooted in the location of shooting). Her emotional discharge on the screen also exemplifies the cathartic effect of cinema. That is to say, under the objective gaze of the camera, the film subject is prompted to revisit suppressed memories and to release strangled emotions.

While the life adversities of poverty and hunger have evidenced to Zhang Ci the tenuousness and unsustainability of living in the perpetual displacement which motivated her to cross national borders, her homecoming after two decades of bumming in the world only leads to another existential crisis. Her mother's shocking suicide attempt devastates her. Overwhelmed by the raw emotions of pity and pain, Zhang Ci seeks comfort in filming, later turning the footage into her debut film *The Faith of Ailao Mountain*. Behind the camera, she starts to observe her mother and herself from a distance. By balancing subjective feelings with the objective visualization of the screen, Zhang experiences cinematic catharsis. Zhang also exposes her mother's traumatic past as a birth control worker who forcibly terminated unlicensed pregnancies and ruthlessly killed hundreds of newborns. Through filming, Zhang Ci distances herself from the tragic life of her mother, and sublimates her intense emotions of pity and pain into a critical evaluation of history and society. Suffice it to say that cathartic filmmaking becomes a hallmark of the hungry woman artist's cinematic practice. In tandem with the cathartic effect, *The Faith* also exemplifies essayistic thinking that addresses a subjective quest through a mediated dialogue between the interior and the exterior.

The destitute bumming life of Zhang Ci as well as her fellow bohemian artists illustrates a significant moment in the modern Chinese history of hunger. It contributes a distinct form and content to the storytelling tradition by hungry women

artists like Xiao Hong and Hong Ying. Altogether, the three women artists engage with the issue of hunger in three disparate stages of Chinese modernity: the poverty-stricken Republican era of the 1930s, the devastating aftermath of misguided socialist engineering in the 1960s, and the painful social transition to the post-socialist era in the 1980s. In like manner as Xiao Hong and Hong Ying, Zhang Ci also nourishes her artistic creativity, in the form of both literary and cinematic production, by negotiating with the dire material reality of hunger. Both her performance in the documentary and her performative documentary-making configures the art of this hungry woman artist. The constitutive force of documentaries in the digital era is encapsulated by Tze-Lan D. Sang and Sylvia Li-chun Lin: “As technology hastens the pace toward an increasingly visually oriented way of recording changes, the role played by documentaries in shaping our understanding of the world in which we live and our memory of the past will become more important.”⁵ In light of their argument, I analyze the three documentaries of Zhang Ci to elucidate the embodied art of hungry women artists in modern Chinese history.

Zhang Ci: the “Xiao Hong of Yunnan” in Postsocialist China

Zhang Ci grew up with a pressing desire to leave her geographically and culturally marginalized hometown. However, against her wish to stay in the provincial capital of Kunming and in disregard of her outstanding literary achievement at college, she was assigned to go back and work in Honghe after graduating from the Chinese Department of Yunnan University in 1983, in accordance with her residential status. Being an editor for the state-owned local magazine *Gejiu Literature and Art* (*gejiu wenyi*) stifled her literary creativity, and her unorthodox lifestyle made her a target of public condemnation in the small town. In her reputed autobiographical story titled “Wo shi mingfeng” (I am Mingfeng),⁶ Zhang Ci makes an analogy between her deplorable confinement in the staid work unit and that of the famous fictional

character Mingfeng in Ba Jin's (1904-2005) classical novel *Family* (1933). Mingfeng is a slave girl owned by the Gaos, a traditional patriarchal family. While the novel revolves around the awakening and self-discovery of the younger generation of the Gaos, the suicide of the maiden Mingfeng, in defiance of the arrangement made for her to become a concubine, galvanizes the Gao brothers to revolutionary action. For May-Fourth intellectuals like Ba Jin, the authoritarian family is a bastion of reactionary Confucian values and traditions that have victimized many like Mingfeng. Therefore, the traditional family, which is incompatible with the enlightenment ideation of freedom and democracy, has to be dismantled. Analogously, Zhang Ci is also imprisoned in the authoritarian *family*—that is, first the state-sanctioned residential location, and then the state-assigned work unit for her. This spatial confinement and intellectual lethargy constitute her symbolic death, from which she yearns to escape.

Throughout the Maoist era (1949-1976), the centralized administration and planned economy supervised the national supply and allocation of all resources, products, and jobs. Population mobility was primarily regulated and restrained by the strictly enforced household registration (*hukou*) system, which assigned a place-specific residency status (*jiguan*) to each person based primarily on her birthplace. While the agricultural population was not allowed to migrate to cities, the urban population was assigned to work in the state sector at their birthplaces. The assigned job in a work unit was popularly referred to as “the iron rice bowl” (*tie fan wan*), for without labor mobility, it was supposed to be a lifetime job. The grain rationing system, which was introduced in 1955 to equalize the distribution and consumption of food and other scarce commodities, reinforced the *hukou* regulation. Ration coupons for food, cloth, and fuel were allotted to the urban populace via their local work units, so that they could purchase goods in local markets at state-controlled prices. The grain

stamps and other coupons issued by one local government were not valid to purchase the goods in another region. Under the systematic regulations, domestic migration, including temporary stays outside the designated residence, had to be pre-approved by local governments of both origin and destination. Thus, it was virtually impossible and foreseeably precarious to leave one's work unit and move from one place to another without state permission. Andrew G. Walder's classic study⁷ on the work system of socialist China illuminates the pivotal role of work units, which organized not just economic, but also the political and social dimensions of the everyday life of the working class.

Curtailling the spatial mobility of productive bodies, the central state in the Maoist era rigidly "fixed individuals according to class status, household registration, and occupation, determining one's access to the goods, both tangible and intangible."⁸ The household registration system essentializes one's birthplace and prescribes an institutionalized origin to each person. Fixed to a location, the socialist self is deprived of individual agency and mobility, as their intellectual freedom and creativity is curbed. That is to say, it is through the governance of bodies that China's central government managed its state affairs, as technologies of biopower underlay socialist governmentality. Implementing what Foucault terms "a bio-politics of the population," the socialist party-state secured its power over life through "the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population."⁹ In the early 1980s, a heated debate on socialist alienation drew the critical attention of many Chinese intellectuals. At the core of this "high culture fever," as termed by Jing Wang, lied a vehement castigation of the complete deprivation of individual agency and mobility.

The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978 was believed to rectify the misdirection of the socialist path, wherein "bureaucratic economic planning objectives were pursued at the systematic expense of human labor,"¹⁰

including human creativity. With the initiation of reforms and opening-up, the Plenum marked China's neoliberal turn,¹¹ which allowed privatization and marketization under the vigilant supervision of the state. This neoliberalization happened in tandem with the liberation of the population from their fixed locations, for the market economy was fueled by cheap and mobile labor. Although the *hukou* and *danwei* systems were not entirely abolished (and are still in place now), labor mobility (from rural to urban, from the provincial to the metropolis) in the domestic market was encouraged for the first time in PRC history. As a result, "a growing 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*)" was "loosened from its bureaucratic moorings in the household registration system."¹²

While it opened the door for the floating population, neoliberalism as a hegemonic mode of discourse, in David Harvey's words, "has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world."¹³ At this historical juncture in China, the introduction of the neoliberal economy also ushered in the neoliberal ideal of the self-governing and self-enterprising individual. A new subject formation was enabled. In the 1980s, "the socialist self" that was rigidly defined and confined by *hukou* and *danwei* was "no longer meaningful or satisfactory"¹⁴ for the young generation of intellectuals. Their pursuit of intellectual independence and artistic autonomy was premised on the uncurbed mobility of their bodies, which was achieved only through rebelling against the dominant *hukou* and *danwei* systems, or undermining state biopower. Decoupling art from ideological propaganda came simultaneously with severing affiliation with assigned work units, for independence, in both intellectual and financial terms, from the institutions of hegemonic ideology was deemed as the quintessential condition for artistic freedom. Meanwhile, the incipient marketization of the newly-introduced neoliberal economy began to generate

a social circulation of human labors and creativities from the bottom up in the 1980s. Independent artists and their individualized representations of art were “freed” from institutional shackles when the production and dissemination of art began to derive its momentum from the autonomy of individual desires and market demands.

Echoing the zeitgeist of the new era, Zhang Ci is interpellated by neoliberal ideology and renounces the birthplace as her fixed home or essentialized origin. Compelled by an intense sense of emotional and cultural displacement in her hometown, Zhang uprooted herself and drifted to Beijing in 1987. Led by the putative belief that Beijing was the “central stage of liberal ideas and creative freedom,”¹⁵ she moved there to pursue her dream of an autonomous life, just as Xiao Hong (1911-1942) had escaped from her arranged marriage at home in 1931, when she believed that receiving a high education in Beijing would lead the way to her freedom and self-empowerment. According to Yu Jian’s memoir,¹⁶ Zhang Ci once earned the nickname “the Xiao Hong of Yunnan” (*Yunnan de Xiao Hong*) within the literary circle in Kunming. She had admired and consciously modeled herself on the free-spirited and rebellious woman writer from the Republican Era (1912-1948). Some of Xiao Hong’s aesthetic styles can be detected in Zhang’s writing, i.e., the personal voice and loose essayistic structure. Zhang’s itinerant lifestyle also mirrors Xiao Hong’s life path. As Xiao Hong denounces her patriarchal family that is organized by Confucian tradition around the structural subjugation of women, Zhang Ci revolts against the ruling communist party-state that circumscribes individual mobility and intellectual agency. Meng Yu forcefully argues that in socialist China, when “Party’s law replaces Father’s law,”¹⁷ women are confronted with a new battle to fight for their self-determination. But, in disparate socio-historical contexts, Xiao Hong and Zhang Ci both take great pains to constitute an autonomous selfhood through subverting the institutionalized bond between self and home. Thus, they seek self-liberation through

their way of vagrancy. For them, this new subject formation is also tied to their pursuit of intellectual accomplishment and artistic creativity. The lineage spanning Xiao Hong to Zhang Ci showcases the long history of women's self-liberation in modern China while also evidencing the incomplete nature of women's liberation throughout China's history of modernization, from nation-building at the beginning of the twentieth century to decades of socialist engineering.

With extraordinary prescience, Zhang's nickname "the Xiao Hong of Yunnan" foretells the formidable situation that she would come to face, similar to what Xiao Hong had faced in Beijing half a century before. Although at first overjoyed by the unfettered freedom as a freelance writer outside the state-controlled system, Zhang was soon overwhelmed by the alienation and destitution of the floating life on the margins of urban space. Zhang was hardly spared from adversities during her stay in Beijing. Her impoverished life in Beijing is briefly recounted in Yu Jian's memoir:

She decided to join the "blind flow" in Beijing, working as a part-time editor for some magazines. Her livelihood was unsecured and her health suffered. She wrote a letter to me that winter, saying that she didn't even have enough money to buy a teapot. One day while walking, she suddenly fell down on the street. Covered in blood, she was carried home by a middle-aged woman from the North, who saved her with some sugar water. In the whole year of bumming in Beijing, she didn't have a secured residence to stay in, or enough food to eat; she didn't make money or fame; what she had left was nothing but her body and one suit of clothing. The Old Woman Mountain eventually broke this extraordinary woman down. She made up her mind to leave this country, no matter what had to be done.¹⁸

In the late 1980s, with the increasing labor mobility of postsocialist China, mental and manual labor flew towards the fast-developing metropolitan center, reconfiguring the provincial and the rural as the periphery in terms of both economic and cultural modernities. Regional disparity was widening as urbanization was rampantly expanding. At the same time, the floating population of migrants remained marginalized in urban space, either in the sense of their physical residence on the slum-like outskirts of cities or their lack of institutional affiliations and urban

household registrations (*chengzhen hukou*). In disregard of the exponential growth of the market, the planned economy still dominated the national production and distribution. The urban rationing system based on household registrations, which was only abolished in 1993, deprived the migrant population of their legal rights to purchase foodstuffs and other goods. Without ration coupons, they were forced to buy life necessities from the free market, ironically nicknamed “the black market” (*hei shi*), at significantly higher prices.

As Yiman Wang carefully parsed, the term “blind flow” (*mangliu*) refers to the massive movement of migrant workers into urban areas, which is represented in the mainstream discourse as “un-individuated anarchistic energy requiring disciplining and surveillance, despite its central importance for the state-championed market economy.”¹⁹ Underlying the structural inequality of postsocialist China is an ambiguous and even conflicting state policy with regard to the migrant population: on the one hand, labor mobility is harnessed to energize the state-sponsored market economy; on the other, self-willed immigration presents a new hazard to the centralized state apparatus. Thus, the state prioritizes policing the migrant population rather than legalizing their residency status, only to subject them to both the exploitation of the market and the restrictions of centralized governance. The disadvantaged life of the migrant populace attests to the structural inequality of postsocialist China, wherein the juxtaposition of socialist legacies with the incipient market economy gives rise to accelerating social stratification. Migrant workers and artists on the margins of urban space harness the benefits of labor mobility while at the same time suffering the consequences of displacement, which is responsible for the isolation and deprivation experienced by marginalized subjects.

Zhang Ci’s vision of an autonomous life as a freelancer in Beijing does not materialize in reality, for she soon comes to face the conundrum of an unestablished

young artist, which is only aggravated by the socialist rationing system. Not only did she have trouble securing a source of income outside the state-owned work unit system, but she was also discriminated against for her lack of a Beijing household registration in everyday life, in everything from housing to food. Yu Jian's sketches of Zhang Ci's wretched life in Beijing evidence the deprivation and marginalization suffered by migrant artists. The autonomous self is demystified when hunger accentuates its physical dependence on externals, i.e., food. The deplorable being of the structurally marginalized is illustrative of the social stratification and alienation that prevail in postsocialist China. The towering Laoyin Mountain in Zhang's hometown, a symbol of its primitive and suppressive culture, also emblemizes the hegemonic state apparatus that maintains its ruling order and restricts individual freedom.

The Hungry Nomadic Subject of Chinese Independent Documentary

During her sojourn in Beijing, Zhang Ci played a pivotal role in the launching of Chinese independent documentary. She is featured in Wu Wenguang's²⁰ film debut *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (hereinafter referred to as *Bumming in Beijing*) (1990). Wu is lauded as the founding figure of Chinese independent documentary and the initiator of the New Documentary Movement in the 1990s. Since its inception, Chinese independent documentary has been profoundly influenced by the aesthetics and techniques of *cinéma vérité*, most saliently by Frederick Wiseman and Shinsuke Ogawa. This new documentary filmmaking attributes its independent status not only to the fact that films are produced outside state-owned studios, but also to the fact that it focuses on commoners more often than not—the marginalized subjects who are devalued and underrepresented in official documentaries (called “special-theme programs,” *zhuantì piān*). The observational camera is directed to record and preserve the everyday lives of plebeians, constituting

alternative historical archives and critical social commentaries.²¹ Wu's camera probes the pulsating yet austere life of migrant artists on the margins of Beijing, or, as Judith Pernin puts it, "a generation of young, marginal artists struggling to find means, and meaning in their lives."²² Besides Zhang Ci, we meet painter Zhang Dali from Heilongjiang, photographer Gao Bo from Sichuan, woman painter Zhang Xiaping from Yunnan, and experimental theatre director Mou Sen from Tibet. "Wandering between two worlds, one (not yet) dead, the other powerless to be born,"²³ Zhang Ci and other migrant artists partake of the nation's drastic social restructuring and cultural repositioning, with their vagrant lifestyle embodying a grassroots resistance to the constraints of the old world. However, their predicament in the powerless new world presents itself as a survival challenge. Wu's documentary camera captures their condition—that is, the personal struggle involved in living a visionary life and barely making a living. In the film, the poetics and politics of the nomadic life are emphatically foregrounded, while the hungry artists' strenuous efforts to substantiate their material lives are alluded to as a subtle interrogation of the diegesis.

Wu Wenguang recalled that Zhang Ci was "the key figure" (*guanjian renwu*) for the genesis of *Bumming in Beijing*, and that it was her impending departure for the United States in 1988 that had propelled him into shooting the documentary:

I was thinking, at the time, that in the early 1980s, we were galvanized by our own artistic inspirations to give up our assigned jobs to come to Beijing despite the restricted *hukou* system. But sooner or later, our personal histories of "bumming in Beijing" would come to an end one way or another. It occurred to me that I should record this history before it ended."²⁴

Being acutely aware of the transitory state inhabited by migrant artists, Wu decided to utilize the camera to document and preserve their lived experience, a unique but also indexical lifestyle in the 1980s. Wu's remarks suggest that it was an anticipatory nostalgia that had prompted him to film the documentary, which explains the

nostalgic overtones throughout the film. Started in August 1988 and completed in October 1990, *Bumming in Beijing* was made as China transitioned from the high culture fever of the 1980s, when “a transition to the liberal democratic culture of the West” was anticipated to the post-1989 period, when “the possibility of public and visible oppositional culture”²⁵ was foreclosed. Thus Wu’s sentimental feeling is also contextualized in the historical loss experienced by his generation, the last dreamers. Zhang Yingjin interprets the connotation of “the last” as “they came too late to participate in the glorified intellectual project of 1980s enlightenment,”²⁶ whereas my analysis emphasizes the dreamers’ longing to identify with the zeitgeist of the 1980s enlightenment, which underpins their intellectual and artistic pursuits as well as motivating their migration to Beijing in the first place. Therefore, the self-reflexive naming of “the last dreamers” expresses Wu’s regret about the end of an era, which is symbolically compensated for by the filmmaking of *Bumming in Beijing*. Self-identifying with the imagined but disappearing community of the last dreamers, Wu attempts to visualize and articulate the defining characteristics of the migrant artists with his camera.

In the film, Wu Wenguang interviews the five migrant artists and observes their everyday life and work. The one-on-one interviews are intercut with each other to create filmic simultaneities and interconnections among the five interviewees, some of whom haven’t crossed paths with the others. A collective identity of the migrant artist or “the last dreamer” is conjured by Wu’s filmic editing. The interviewees are also prompted to talk about what they know of or think about each other, so that the filmmaking process is generative of the consolidation of an imagined but disappearing community. Then strings of interviews are edited and organized by specific topics accompanied by built-in captions, such as “why did you come to Beijing?” or “what’s your dream?” The topics are sequenced chronologically to retrace the interviewees’

trajectory of coming to Beijing and going beyond it, from leaving their hometowns to making a living in Beijing, from initiating their artistic careers to moving overseas. In other words, the interviews, although unscripted, are carefully parsed and structured by the documentarian. While the talking-head interview on screen accentuates the narrative voice of the film subject, Wu's off-screen voice that is occasionally recorded by the camera as well as the built-in captions evidence, rather than hide the presence of the intervening documentarian. Immersing himself in the everyday life and work of the migrant artists, Wu establishes deep connections with them. In return, his romantic sentiments towards the vagrant lifestyle²⁷ echo in their interviews. In a celebratory tone, Zhang Xiaping remarks, "I can't stand to live any other way. Now I'm drifting rootlessly, having no one to rely on, no sense of security. I don't even know what will happen tomorrow. But this is just what I want, and what I'm most afraid of is I actually have everything." Although the emotional deprivation caused by uprooting and the lack of material security in a bumming life are conceded, they are essentialized as the imperative conditions for the unorthodox lifestyle that a free-spirited artist aspires to live.

The lifestyle of bumming is, first of all, a rebellious performance against state biopower, and an embodied resistance to the institutionalized notion of home/origin. It is also an emphatic statement of individual agency and mobility. That is to say, subjective autonomy is configured in mobility and vagrancy. The Deleuzian theorization of nomadism sheds light on the poetics and politics underlying the bumming life of migrant artists. Drawing on the mobile lifestyle of nomadic tribes in history, Deleuze conceptualizes the nomadic space or "smooth space", which, in opposition to "striated space" such as the State structure, is produced by nomadic movements rather than determined by intrinsic organizations. Inhabiting the nomadic space, the "nomadic subject" is a vagabond embodying the free expression of desire

through incessant border crossing and deterritorialization. “Becoming-nomad” crystallizes an iconoclastic mode of thinking and living, which always results in “creating concepts and styles of thought that opened new differences and paths for thinking.”²⁸ With the household registration system, the central state determines the distribution of internal and sedentary space and fixes each person to her designated residence. Breaking through spatial containment, the migrant artists traverse the boundary between sanctioned and prohibited spaces, as well as that between the central and the peripheral. The itinerant life accords with the nomadic desire that “breaches the wall and causes flows to move.”²⁹

When discussing “nomad subjectivity” in the context of postsocialist China, Simon Patton comments, “such a subject could be described as objective in its displacement of a self-centered dynamic. It could also be called revolutionary in its attempts to undo the repressive effects of conventional social existence.”³⁰ The subversive and revolutionary nature of nomadic thinking is harnessed by postsocialist subjects in their revolt against socialist establishments and legacies in all aspects of social life. In both the spatial and epistemological senses, migrant artists live a nomadic life. In the film, the installation of a new nomadic subjectivity through bumming is illustrated by Gao Bo:

I think people should have the spirit of a vagabond. That’s what Chinese lack. I don’t mean I’m proud of being a vagabond, but I’m not ashamed of it. I don’t understand why people want to fix themselves in one place. People should be more mobile, really. I don’t intend to be a vagabond just for the sake of being a vagabond. But I like it, and enjoy it. It’s been over two years. I’ll remain a vagabond in the future.

He describes “the spirit of a vagabond” as a propensity for mobility rather than fixedness in life. The mobility of a vagabond lies not just in her ability to move in space, but also in her yearning to live an independent life. In this sense, to “remain a vagabond in the future” is to maintain intellectual independence and artistic freedom. More provocatively, Gao uses “the spirit of a vagabond” to contest the national

character of the Chinese, who are used to fixing themselves in one place, be it their hometowns or their work units. Gao Bo advocates for the vagrant-like lifestyle of migrants as an antidote to the rigidity and passivity of individual life in the socialist era. As Yiman Wang aptly puts it, the drifting life of the “blind flow” is valorized by the last dreamers: “Thus Gao revalorizes the self-imposed sojourning position and “blind” instability as the necessary condition for creative freedom, dreams, and spiritual redemption.”³¹ The “blind flow” is eulogized and vagrant-like mobility is accentuated as the precondition for intellectual independence and artistic autonomy.

In the same vein, Zhang Ci denounces the Chinese national character trait of “being fixed in place.” She laments the static lifestyle in her hometown, the local residents of which are used to the mechanical repetition of daily routines and content with their monotonous provincial lives. Zhang is worried that this secluded environment and alienating lifestyle will gradually suffocate her creative vitality, and she yearns for happenings and changes. For her, the confinement of her immobile life in her hometown has to be resolved by a self-imposed displacement. The nomadic lifestyle stimulates her creativity with its everlasting transgressions of geographical and social boundaries. Comparing her life in her hometown to her life in Beijing, Zhang asserts that her happiness and satisfaction derive from the nomadic lifestyle of bumming and freelancing:

Now, in Beijing, I earn a living by doing part-time jobs, stay in a rented room, spend four hours every day commuting on bus, and can’t afford much time to write my own stuff. Nevertheless, I am happy and satisfied. I guess it’s because I’m a “free person” now. I feel free all the time. I’ll do a good job if I like to, or I can leave the moment I dislike it. The rest of my life is no longer controlled by anyone else. It’s not the same as before, when you could foresee what your life would look like in your sixties.

The paramount difference between freelancing and the “iron rice bowl” lies in the fact that the freelancer is hardly fixed in her job position. The mobility of the freelancer is the source of her freedom as well as her empowerment. It is more precise to say that

Zhang is satisfied not with being a hungry young artist struggling for means and meaning in life, but with the prospect that it is always possible for her to go somewhere else and to do something else. Against the uncertainty and unpredictability embedded in the lifestyle of bumming, individual agency and willpower is amplified. Consequently, self-empowerment is generated by self-determination.

The lifestyle of bumming liberates and energizes nomadic artistic creation, but the poverty and hunger that comes along with living in marginalization and displacement keeps interrupting this self-congratulatory discourse. In the sequence shots, the camera often juxtaposes the bumming artists' quotidian life (cooking, eating, or brushing their teeth) with their artistic projects (directing a play, painting, or photographing). The packed and shady bedrooms that they rent in the weatherworn bungalows of Beijing alleys are illustrative of the poverty-stricken lifestyle of these young artists. With natural lighting that leaves most of the indoor scenes in shadow or even darkness, the documentary camera approximates the desolate and deprived life of bumming in Beijing. In stark contrast to their simple living, the artists' works are imbued with passion and vivacity, through acting or with colors and music. The movement of the camera, which guides the spectator's gaze, emphatically posits the contrast. In one sequence shot, the camera starts with a close-up that highlights the scarlet red color used in Zhang Dali's painting and slowly zooms out to frame the entire painting. The long take goes on with the camera turning to frame the painter sitting next to the painting, and then to zoom in on his every meticulous brush stroke. The association between art and artist is thus gestured to. Then the camera rotates to face another side of the room and reveals a shabby twin bed covered in ragged rugs, which showcases his impoverished life. The moving camera captures the jarring discord between the artist's bare living and his high artistic creativity. Nevertheless,

the long take concludes by showing his other paintings hanging on the wall, as if to remind the spectator of the artistic achievement of the poverty-stricken artist. The structuring of the sequence shot still accentuates the breathtaking artwork rather than the deprived artist. In the same way, the camera dwells and focalizes around Mou Sen's play, Gao Bo's photographs, and Zhang Xiping's self-portraits.

Nevertheless, the romanticizing camera-eye is undercut by the bitterness articulated in the ensuing interviews. That is to say, the romanticization of life in displacement is also contested in the documentary, as the idealistic take on the vagabond-like lifestyle is offset by realistic concerns and material struggles. The implications of living in dislocation and uncertainty conspicuously reflect on every aspect of the artists' everyday lives. The most pressing issue for the migrant artists is to find a place to stay and a means of acquiring life necessities. Freelancing jobs cannot guarantee a stable income, often leaving them in a deplorable state of poverty and hunger. Thus, self-reliance, even in the most basic terms, is brought into question. Moreover, without legal residential permits and institutional affiliations, their bumming in Beijing is no less than precarious. The migrant artists give their accounts of overcoming the humiliation of getting free board (*ceng zhu*) and free meals (*ceng chi*) from their better-off friends, which showcases how autonomous living is restrained by material needs.

Documentary Performance and the Cathartic *Xianchang*

While scholars have attributed many aesthetic and thematic characteristics of Chinese independent documentary to Wu's first cinematic experiment (i.e., synch sound, talking-head interviews, on-the-spot realism, subaltern subjects), the performative and affective aspect of *Bumming in Beijing* is largely overlooked. Aptly defined by Bill Nichols, "Performative documentaries primarily address us emotionally and expressively rather than factually."³² In stark contrast to the

investigative stance adopted by observational documentaries, performative documentaries foreground “the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge.”³³ The truth claim of the documentary is not attenuated but strengthened by the revelation of underlying emotions. Being the “upheavals of thought” in Martha Nussbaum’s terms,³⁴ emotions illuminate the historical and social construction of the human condition. In light of this discussion, I explore the performative and affective component of *Bumming in Beijing* and theorize cinematic catharsis as an affective performance by the film subject Zhang Ci. I argue that during the interview and in the presence of the rolling camera, Zhang unleashes her repressed stress and pain while revisiting her strenuous life as a migrant artist in Beijing. The emotional discharge and reconciliation of the cathartic moment evidences documentary performance with “heightened emotional involvement.”³⁵ Later on, Zhang Ci appropriates this cathartic and redemptive filmmaking while making her own award-winning documentary film *Faith of the Ailao Mountain* (2015).

When explicating the confessional and redemptive effect of the landmark feminist documentary *Not a Love Story* (1981),³⁶ Bill Nichols remarks, “The act of making the film plays a *cathartic*, redemptive role in their lives; it is less the world of their subjects that changes than their own.”³⁷ The two women who Nichols argues have undergone a catharsis through making the film are Bonnie Sherr Klein, the director, and Linda Lee Tracey, the filmed erotic dancer. Faced with violating images of female pornography, they experience an emotional upheaval of rage and pain in the film. Tracey is spurred to reflect on her own role as a sexual object on the screen while Klein struggles to find hope for women’s true liberation with her camera. Nichols’s insightful interpretation of *Not a Love Story* alludes to the potentiality of documentary as a cathartic medium that performs emotional purgation and intellectual sublimation through recording painful truths in reality. Following in his footsteps, I

attempt to theorize the cathartic effect of documentary on and off the screen, informed by both Aristotle's tragic *katharsis* and Freud's therapeutic catharsis. But instead of focusing on audience reception as current cinema studies do, I center my analysis on the double act of filmmaking—that is, both filming and being filmed.

The longstanding interest in Aristotle's theory of tragic *katharsis* has produced fruitful research beyond theatre studies. Famously yet elusively, Aristotle claims in *Poetics* that *katharsis* is the “purging of the spirit of morbid and base ideas or emotions by witnessing the playing out of such emotions or ideas on stage.”³⁸ What happens to a tragic hero strikes pity and fear into the heart of the audience, as they vicariously suffer from the tragedy while safeguarded by distance. Interpretations of Aristotelian *katharsis* were bifurcated as either medical purgation of irrational emotions or moral purification through empathic identifications until Martha Nussbaum traced *katharsis* to its original connotation of clarification or illumination. She forcefully argues that to Aristotle, “tragedy contributes to human self-understanding precisely through its exploration of the pitiable and the fearful,” which constitute the emotionally charged “recognition or acknowledgment of the worldly conditions.”³⁹ In other words, the emotional upheavals of pity and fear illuminate the understanding of the human condition and underlie the intellectual clarification and sublimation that ensue. The mechanism of Aristotelian *katharsis* elucidates the psychic and cognitive responses elicited by aesthetic representations. Catharsis occurs at the interplay of reality and mimesis, subjectivity and objectivity—that is, when the worldly reality is mediated by a theatrical imitation, and the subjective is externalized as an object to spectate.

Tapping into the connotation of medical purgation in catharsis, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud name their initial therapy for hysteria the “cathartic method.” Under the influence of hypnosis, the patient relives her traumatic memories and releases her

repressed emotions. In “An Autobiographical Study” Freud explains the therapeutic catharsis “as being to provide that the quota of affect used of maintaining the symptom, which had got on to the wrong lines and had, as it were, become strangled there, should be directed on to the normal path along which it could obtain discharge (or abreaction).”⁴⁰ Once the strangled affect is purged from the traumatized unconsciousness, the hysterical symptom disappears. But only when Freud gives up on hypnosis and develops his own theory and practice of psychoanalysis does he get closer to Aristotelian *katharsis*. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the patient’s emotional discharge is evoked by self-representation and free-association, and her self-understanding is mediated by the analyst’s interpretation. The latter’s objective and professional reconstruction of the past illuminates the former’s hidden self-knowledge and suppressed desire. Aristotle’s tragic *katharsis* and Freud’s therapeutic catharsis both attempt to accomplish the emotional and cognitive clarification of the subject through aesthetic or analytical mediation, exterior to the subjective. The layer of mediation is a necessary condition for catharsis; otherwise, one would, as Richard Kearney describes, be overwhelmed by sheer horror or smothered by trauma.⁴¹

The theorization of cathartic filmmaking is grounded in the dialogue between Aristotle and Freud. The documentarian, both the author and spectator of the cinematic representation of pain, renders the filming process cathartic by what Kearney elaborates as “a unique balancing of compassion and dispassion, of identification and contemplation, of particular emotion and universal understanding.”⁴² On the one hand, her identification with the suffering subject of the film is facilitated by spatial proximity at the shooting location so that her camera is primed to retrieve painful truths from obscurity. On the other, her detachment from the personal suffering of the film subject is enabled by the mediation of the camera.

The objective camera-eye separates the filmmaker from the profilmic, and the distance allows her to remain levelheaded and to contemplate the general human condition. Filmmaking illuminates the documentarian's understanding of human history and society by clarifying the intense emotions evoked by serving as an eyewitness to the pain of others. Then the cathartic filming results in an affective testimony without fetishizing individual trauma, a critical exposé that doesn't pursue a personal vendetta. As for the film subject, whose personal pain is visualized on the screen, the rolling camera intervenes into her subjectivity with a mediating objective gaze. The externalization of the subjective world through words and actions has a dual effect on the film subject. For one thing, she releases her strangulated emotions through narrating her own pain in front of the camera, sometimes prompted by her interviewer on or off the screen; for another, under the gaze of the camera-eye, she estranges herself from the habitual subject-position and becomes a detached spectator and inspector of her own interiority. This cathartic moment is occasioned by confessional and redemptive personal testimony. The embodied self-reflexivity and emotional discharge in the presence of a camera constitutes a cinematic catharsis, which is generative of the meaning-making of personal trauma on and off the screen.

Zhang Ci's outburst of tears and anger in front of the camera registers the bodily and emotional process of catharsis and constitutes a cathartic moment in *Bumming in Beijing*. Standing outside the bungalow she rents and against the dilapidated brick wall, Zhang addresses the camera directly while telling her personal history. As she turns her back to the sun, the shadow falls on her face, which accentuates her grim and anxious look. The alley right behind her back in complete darkness seems to suggest an unknown threat looming in the background. Her recalling of her lived experience in Beijing starts to bring back negative emotions that have been repressed under her forced composure. "My place is close to Beijing University. I used to take

showers there. I biked there to take a shower. Sometimes when my friends came, I ate with them at the University canteen. Some foreigners came to my place; being curious about everything, they said it was very nice here. What the hell is so nice here?

Bullshit!” In the late 1980s, the villages next to Beijing University in Haidian District hosted many migrant artists like Zhang Ci herself. They chose to live there for the cheap rent as well as the proximity to China’s most liberal-thinking institution, which used to be home to the Chinese enlightenment ideation of democracy and freedom in the early twentieth century. Ironically, the geographic proximity to Beijing University does not benefit Zhang much intellectually; instead, the significant role it plays in her bumming life is to help her get free showers and meals.

The stark contrast between the nomadic life that her had envisioned and her lived experience of poverty is made more and more salient as Zhang’s monologue goes on. As she gets to the details of how she manages to survive day by day, her voice is choked with sadness and then eventually with rage. Part and parcel of her memories, the subjugated emotions of shame, sadness, and anger are affective registers of her memories of suffering. Being prompted to revisit these painful and suppressed memories by her interviewer, Zhang relives and resolves her previously unexpressed feelings. Analogously, she undertakes talk therapy on the screen, with her interlocutor serving as a catalyst of the process. The personal testimony is made along with an emotional redemption, which culminates in what Thomas J. Scheff calls “cathartic crying.” Among other emotional processes, cathartic crying is triggered when “an unresolved emotional distress is reawakened in a properly distanced context.”⁴³ According to Freud’s clinic memos, crying is often a sign of the effectiveness of the therapeutic process. In the film, the unexpected and uncontrolled burst of tears also registers the spontaneity and the affect of the talking-head interview.

It is evident that the employment of the talking head in the documentary facilitates the occurrence of cinematic catharsis, as it is imperative for the subject to engage with a dialogue between self and other or to undergo the interplay between the subjective and the objective. In his groundbreaking book on Chinese independent documentary, Luke Robinson draws our attention to the seemingly paradoxical nature of the talking head. On the one hand, through the liveness of the voice of the film subject, the talking head manifests “in effect as a form of immediacy” and contingency; on the other, “the mediated nature of the talking head” suggests that “it is self-consciously constructed, both by those behind the camera and by those in front of it.”⁴⁴ As Chris Berry eloquently argues, the “fundamental and defining characteristic” of Chinese independent documentary is the “spontaneous and unscripted quality” that “reclaim[s] the authority of realism from the increasingly devalued”⁴⁵ socialist realism. In Chinese, this new documentary realism (*jishi zhuyi*) is codified as *xianchang*, which is better understood as a technical term for location shooting. *Xianchang* emphasizes the temporospatial immediacy of the shooting—that is, in the present and on the spot. The on-the-spot realism necessitates a readjustment of the relation between the pro-filmic and the diegetic, for, as suggested by Robinson, “the primacy of diegetic coherence has thus given way to an assumption that material events are inherently unpredictable, and that the structuring of a documentary should reflect this reality.”⁴⁶ Being contingent on daily occurrences, the profilmic is unscripted, and cannot be subsumed by the meaning-making of the diegesis. Zhang Ci’s emotional eruption in the film is of an unpredictable and spontaneous nature, which undercuts the romantic sentiment of the diegesis. As a matter of fact, the unexpected outcry of the hungry woman artist provokes the audience to question the nomadic ideal foregrounded in the diegesis.

That is to say, the cinematic catharsis occurs in *xianchang*, an unexpected material reality captured by the camera-eye. Zhang’s choking and weeping as a bodily

indicator of the undercurrent of emotional catharsis evidences the affective and embodied quality of *xianchang*. In this matter, Robison's discussion of vocal timbre as given off in documentary film is most illuminating. He argues,

Vocal quality, however—the “given off”—is implicitly understood as harder to manipulate and therefore “realer,” more revealing. Moments when the human voice breaks out beyond words, or what Goffman calls “flooding out,” are thus critical to suggesting the material reality of mediated representation. As a consequence of their uncontrollability, these moments emphasize the unscripted, nonperformative nature of what has been captured on film.⁴⁷

The “given off” in the human voice, such as tears and laughter, manifests the uncontrollability and unpredictability of *xianchang*, and gives away the “flooding out” of emotions that occur to the film subject on the spot. The unscripted voice quality humanizes the subject, for it suggests the unreduced physicality of the speaking body. Thus, Zhang Ci's bursting into tears and anger is more telling than her storytelling itself: her mixed and conflicting emotions of sadness, resentment, and shame are at once revealed. If she is interpellated to embody the collective identity of the last dreamers, her choked-up voice undercuts the romantic discourse by foregrounding the somatic experience and intense emotion of an individual body. Suffice it to say that her choking and weeping constitutes a cathartic *xianchang* for the self-redeeming cinematic performance of the hungry woman artist.



Figure 1
Zhang Ci bows her head
to hide her tears from the
rolling camera.

Nevertheless, this unscripted emotional discharge is instigated by the presence of the camera; therefore, it can also be consciously performed by the film subject. Zhang Ci's cathartic experience is not as simple as venting bottled-up emotions in the interview, for it is mediated through the camera-eye. That is to say, acutely aware of being filmed, Zhang consciously internalizes the cinematic gaze. For example, when she is weeping, Zhang bows her head to hide her face from the camera-eye out of embarrassment, which stems from the concern about being watched crying in public. Thus, when she addresses the camera directly, she also looks inwardly at herself, or her own performance. She is both the performer and the spectator of the talking-head interview. In this sense, the temporospatial demarcation of on and off the screen is blurred. The dual effect of the cinematic cathartic results in an emotional-somatic discharge of the film subject that is balanced by her detached or distanced self-examination. Scheff emphasizes the device of "distancing" in experiencing catharsis, which is the key to cognitive awareness and clarification after the initial stage of emotional-somatic discharge. "The balance between distress and security"⁴⁸ requires a distanced perspective from an observer rather than from a participant. The brief moment of feeling sorry for herself is quickly overridden by a stern interrogation of the general human condition (not just her own situation.) With her cursing words *hao ge pi* (literally "What a fart to say it's good"), Zhang emphatically rejects the romanticization and exoticization of the deprived lives of migrant artists. The rhetorical question "What the hell is so nice here?" is a retort to the remarks made by the voyeuristic foreigners, and at the same time it poses a thorny question about the dilemma of living as a vagabond. As the feasibility of being nomadic is debunked by Zhang's personal history, the sociopolitical context contributing to the failure is to be interrogated.

At Home in the World: Diasporic Displacement and Emplacement

While the pursuit of autonomy drives Zhang Ci's path of drifting in the first place, the irreducible suffering of the body, cold, hunger, illness, etc., spurs her into resolving the debilitating state of displacement. At this historical juncture in China, the "fever of going abroad" (*chuguo re*) was continuously fueled by the transnational imaginary that idealized Euro-America as the land of intellectual freedom and material wealth. Ann Anagnost insightfully reads the phenomenon as a continuity of the epochal escape from the stagnated socialist system: "'the West,' and the United States in particular, constitutes the object of desire in dreams of escape, in the rage to study abroad (*chuguo re*), in the fantasies about America as the liberation of one's body and mind and as offering the opportunity for unbelievable wealth."⁴⁹ An opportunity of emigrating to the United States through transnational marriage presented itself to Zhang Ci when she was stricken by poverty and hunger. Her decision to dislocate herself from her native land attests to the tenuousness and unsustainability of living in internal displacement, but at the same time registers a prolonged quest for freedom and mobility on the global scale. For one thing, global mobility is deemed an extension of domestic mobility, i.e., an extended journey of her self-willed uprooting from the intellectual and material destitution of her provincial hometown. But global mobility is also imagined as a solution to the marginalization and deprivation she has suffered at the domestic metropolitan center. At the same time, the notion of flexible citizenship mobilized by globalization indexes an individual's positionality in the global neoliberal system rather than her allegiance to the nation-state; therefore, it valorizes strategic border crossings. The pursuit of flexible citizenship through re-location to the Global North is invigorated by the neoliberal promise of "more freedoms, resources, capabilities, and functionings."⁵⁰ Zhang's choice of transnational marriage also evidences what Sheldon Lu calls "the

transnational libidinal flow based on the economic principle of free exchange,” and the flow from the Global South to the Global North driven by the uneven globalization. The Chinese hungry woman artist strategically deploys the transnational libidinal transaction in the neoliberal global system to overcome the material alienation and emotional displacement inflicting the marginalized urban subject, as well as to participate in global mobility and artistic cosmopolitanism.

Living in material deprivation and social marginalization, the migrant artists are forced to face the tenuous and unsustainable base of their lives bumming in Beijing. Following in Zhang Ci’s footsteps, Gao Bo, Zhang Xiaping, and Zhang Dali moved abroad in the early 1990s. Five years after Zhang Ci’s emigration to the United States, Wu Wenguang re-directed his camera to the last dreamers, to follow up on their current status of living, at home or abroad. The opening scene of the sequel *At Home in the World* (hereinafter referred to as *At Home*) is shot at Mou Sen’s residence in Beijing in 1993, and the familiar scenery of Beijing alleys is intended to revive the cinematic memory constructed in *Bumming in Beijing*. Wu’s brief interview with Mou Sen ends with the question, “Can you imagine what their lives are like abroad?” Mou’s succinct remarks on clean environment and taking a shower every day bespeak a restricted imagination and limited understanding about the world from *within* China. This question illuminates the underlying quest of Wu’s camera: to investigate the everyday life of diasporic Chinese artists against the inadequate imagination or knowledge of those at home. Wu’s mobile camera travelled overseas in 1994 to film the other four artists’ new lives. The interviews and sequence shots in the documentary are centered on their daily negotiations between diasporic displacement and emplacement. On one hand, their assimilation into local societies is facilitated by their Caucasian spouses and families; on the other, their subjectivities are in question, not only because of the boundaries between the culture of origin and that of

settlement, but also the conflicts between the autonomous art/self and inscribed social roles (i.e., men as the breadwinners and women as caretakers in families) in the settlement.

The film title “At Home in the World” (*si hai wei jia*) indicates a mentality, if not a reality, of “the mobile home,” which alludes to the nomadic subject bumming in the world. The manifold ways that these cosmopolitan artists employ to seek meaning and belonging in diasporic displacement illustrate the three strategies deployed by overseas Chinese, which Sau-Ling C. Wong brilliantly theorizes as genocentrism, racinationism, and translocalism. Germane to the artistic cosmopolitanism that has inspired their emigration in the first place is “translocalism,” which “does not regard the condition of displacement from the homeland, shuttling, and interstitiality as necessarily deplorable, or tie identity formation to the homeland or even to any single place of settlement.”⁵¹ Decoupling identity from locality, a vagabond-like subjectivity is constructed in diasporic space. Bumming homelessly and rootlessly, the translocal subject is empowered by shuttling between places and cultures. Embodying translocalism, Zhang Ci’s first novel *Liangji meiguo* (Bumming in America), written during her sojourn in Hawaii, proclaims her ease at navigating through life in diaspora, and flaunts her intellectual and sexual liberation achieved in a foreign land. In the documentary, Zhang Dali illustrates how culture shuttling inspires his graffiti art. In an attempt to inhabit the diasporic space, he used graffiti (an indie or illegal form of street art) to imprint his artistic signature (the sketch of his own bald head) on the urban landscape and impose a “dialogue” on the settlement environment of Bologna, Italy. The (red) star and the Chinese characters for “revolution” 革命 composing his graffiti symbolize the hegemonic revolutionary discourse in socialist China. The graffiti make an artistic parody of Chinese socialist ideology, and at the same time interrupt the urban order of Bologna. In defiance of the social order, both at

home and abroad, Zhang's dislocated images in the form of graffiti emblemize a marginal form of art for the homeless and rootless.

Another intriguing case of culture shuttling in *At Home* is Zhang Ci's "smuggling" of goods from China. At Palo Alto outside of San Francisco, Zhang ran a small business selling specialty products in consignment shops, including embroidered handbags from Yunnan and traditional cloth shoes from Beijing. Zhang's products stood out as both antiquated and exotic in the chic western-style clothing store. The black cloth shoes that evoked the memories of austere life in older times were no longer in fashion *within* mainland China in the 1990s, but they were imported to the American market as "authentic" Chinese goods, to appeal to the Orientalist gaze. The embroidered handbags manually produced by minority ethnic groups in Yunnan lured in American consumers with the exotic look of a "primitive" culture. Not surprisingly, Zhang Ci's small business prospered. Zhang's shuttling between cultures is mediated through the commodification of Oriental cultures in the global market. Her emotional and cultural connection to both her birthplace Yunnan and her transitory residence Beijing is reified by these exported commodities. At the same time, the exotic commodities from China that she sells accentuate her foreignness in American society. Her cultural in-betweenness provides the opportunity for her transnational business.

Nevertheless, the translocalism of the cosmopolitan artists is interwoven with the other two strategies. Racinationism "is premised on the possibility of creating a new home in the land of settlement after dislocation from the homeland."⁵² That is to say, the diasporic subject is not solely defined by the trauma of displacement but can be re-configured through re-location to and emplacement in the settlement. For the four diasporic artists, transnational marriage and interracial progeny contribute to their assimilation to the settlement culture. Social roles and familial responsibilities

gradually pressure them into a stable and grounded lifestyle. To the surprise of all, by 1994 Zhang Ci and Zhang Xiaping had both given up their art careers and become middle-class housewives. That is to say, their pursuit of an autonomous art and self was offset by their social assimilation and adaptation of female gender roles. In stark contrast to racinationism, “genocentrism posits the meaning of life in diaspora primarily if not exclusively in terms of relationship to origin.”⁵³ The single irreplaceable location essentialized as home/origin continues to interpellate the diasporic subject, who ascribes the trauma of displacement to the distance from home. Thus, it is imperative for diasporic subjects to revalidate connections with home. By doing so, they are temporarily relieved of the agony of living in exile. As disclosed by the interviews in the documentary, the native tongue (Mandarin rather than their provincial dialects) epitomizes their irreducible national linguistic identities. Zhang Dali insisted on speaking Mandarin with his Italian wife at home, while Zhang Xiaping found consolation in teaching her two Chinese Austrian children to speak Mandarin. Zhang Ci was also adamant that she would only write in Chinese. Through daily linguistic practice, they perform their Chineseness and enhance their sense of national belonging.

Through the film, the initial question from the vantage point of home is always looming in the background: “Can you imagine what their lives are like abroad?” The dynamic between the native camera and the diasporic subject is emphatically staged in the film, to the extent that sometimes the voyeuristic effect of a tourist video is evoked. Unlike *Bumming*, the filmmaker, not just his voice, often intrudes into the observational camera. Bérénice Reynaud believes that Wu’s presence in the film is “justified by his friendship with his subjects, as well as by shared concerns and lifestyle, which put it within the field of his study.”⁵⁴ The shared memories and concerns between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects are evoked in the film so that

the presence of the former is assimilated into the living scene of the latter, or the filmmaker “becomes part of the texture of the moment.”⁵⁵ But I argue that in doing so, Wu foregrounds his identity as a visitor from home and advances his native agenda of investigating the lives of the Chinese diaspora. The filmmaker’s positionality and intentionality is even more pronounced by the structuring of the documentary. Along with the opening scene of the Beijing alleys, the concluding scene is also shot at Beijing International Airport, where Wu and his girlfriend-cum-collaborator, Wen Hui, welcome the return of Gao Bo and Zhang Dali from abroad. After touring the world, the native camera returns home, wherein it witnesses the homecoming of the wanderers (*you zi*). In both literal and symbolic senses, home is depicted in the two films as the point of departure and the destination of the journey. Unproblematically, Beijing rather than their provincial hometowns is represented as the final destination, as Mandarin rather than their provincial dialects is assumed as the native tongue. The ending of *At Home* indicates the reassurance of returning home, as well as the reassertion of the homecoming self.

Zhang Ci’s Homecoming to Crisis and Cathartic Filmmaking

Two decades after the film *At Home* was made, Zhang Ci embarked on her own homeward journey. However, the reassurance of returning home and the reassertion of the homecoming self in Wu Wenguang’s film were contested in her experience. Zhang’s homecoming only led to an existential crisis on her part, as her diseased mother suddenly attempted suicide during her stay at home:

I decided to go back to my birthplace in Yunnan Province a few years ago, where Ailao Mountain is, and concentrate on writing a book. I learned one day from my uncle that my mother tried to commit suicide. My mother was eventually revived in the emergency room and regained consciousness, but she still didn’t give up her desire to leave the world. She begged me to help her die every day, which was torturous for me and made my life a living hell.⁵⁶

The shocking and disturbing suicide attempt of her mother left Zhang Ci in a hodgepodge of thoughts and emotions: horror, anger, shame, confusion, and guilt.

Worse still, before she could properly process the complexity of her feelings, Zhang had to look after her post-suicidal mother's physical and mental health. Living in the post-traumatic world of witnessing her mother's lack of a will to live day by day, she was helpless, overwhelmed by emotions of pity and pain. While she sympathetically lamented her mother's tragic life, the purposiveness of her own life was also called into question. In devastation, she was advised to find a digital video camera to record her life with her mother. (While it wasn't explicitly stated, her previous participation in Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* would be a source of inspiration.) That resulted in her debut film in 2015, *The Faith of Ailao Mountain* (hereinafter referred to as *The Faith*).

As she has lost her inner peace and strength, Zhang Ci resorts to external reality to reorient her life. Behind the camera, she sees the world differently, for she assumes the role of an observer rather than a participant. Observing from a distance, she attempts to restore meaning to the disturbed world she and her mother have both lived in. In an interview, Zhang explains the shift of perspective involved in filmmaking: "Once I started filming, my mom was no longer my mom, but a film subject. At the same time, I was no longer myself, but the eyes of an objective observer. As a recorder, my personal opinion didn't matter anymore. The film subject spoke for itself. Just like that, I was salvaged, like a miracle."⁵⁷ Filming is her device of distancing, which leads her to an emotional catharsis. In Wu Wenguang's terms, Zhang Ci finds a "cinematic redemption"⁵⁸ (*yingxixiang jiushu*) through making her documentary film. Underlying the cinematic filmmaking is a parallel process for Zhang Ci to make sense of her mother's pains and to make peace with her own. The objective camera-eye separates the filmmaker from the profilmic, and the distance allows her to maintain a level head and to contemplate the general issue of the human condition. Her deep sympathy for her mother's suffering is balanced by her detached

judgment. The filmmaking illuminates her understanding of China's history and society by clarifying the intense emotions evoked by her painful witnessing. At the same time, Zhang Ci's own agonies are visualized on the screen. The externalization of her subjective world through the camera has a dual effect—that is, an emotional-somatic discharge and an intellectual reflection. In her own words, through the process, she finds a supreme power out of enormous pain (*zai juda de tongku li zhaodao juda de liliang*).⁵⁹ When the self is in crisis or individual agency is in question, it rehabilitates itself through engaging with the larger human collective on general issues such as history, politics, and spirituality. As the cathartic filmmaking guides Zhang Ci's way to self-redemption, her voice as a social critic and advocate also emerges in *The Faith*.

In order to film her mother, Zhang Ci had borrowed a DV camera from the local police, which was used to document crime or accident scenes (*fanzui xianchang*, *shigu xianchang*). *Xianchang* in this context is not just a shooting location, but also a violent and disorderly scene that needs to be straightened out. The interesting anecdote behind the scenes, nevertheless, brings to the fore the twofold nature of Zhang Ci's filmmaking. In line with the aesthetics of *xianchang* in Chinese independent documentary, she uses the camera to reveal the unscripted organic life of her mother. However, she also enters *xianchang*—namely, her mother's post-suicidal life scene to investigate the motives for her mother's suicide attempt and the cause of her lack of will to live. With the investigating tool of the DV, Zhang interviews her sick mother and shoots scenes of daily life in her hometown. In their local dialect, Zhang asks her mother about past and present in order to find out how she has turned into a bedbound and suicidal senior from the good-looking and athletic young woman of forty years before. Probing into familial history, the filming reenergizes the suppressed memories of the mother and daughter. In this sense, it borrows strength

from the tradition of home movies. Tianqi Yu's study of female first-person documentary in contemporary China, such as Yang Lina's *Home Video* (2001)⁶⁰ evidences that as a private cinematic form, the amateur filmmaking of home movies is co-opted by female directors, who "tend to highlight a personalized vision, by bringing their own intimate familial spaces to wider audiences and reflexively turning themselves into key characters in their own films."⁶¹ However, the seeming re-emplacement in the traditional collective institution is conducted as a personal interrogation of the disappearing social history that has shaped the familial space. These female filmmakers, who "use home movies to compose personal and family portraits deeply embedded in their historical contexts,"⁶² intervene in the public discourse with "microhistorical approaches."⁶³

The head-and-shoulder shot of a person directly addressing the camera is widely used in documentary filmmaking. Luke Robinson contends that the direct address epitomizes "the documentary subject's ability to self-represent, rather than simply be represented by the person behind the camera,"⁶⁴ and hence, "allows precisely those people who might normally be excluded from official narratives of contentious or traumatic historical events to be introduced on camera."⁶⁵ The technique revives and validates the talking subject's hidden memory (often of suffering) while it also brings history and memory to the here and now, which is inhabited by both the filmmaker and the film subject. On the screen, Zhang Ci's mother relates her past working as a local obstetrician gynecologist. Her petrifying confession divulges the harrowing secrets of her profession: after the enforcement of the "one-child policy" in the late 1970s, she was obligated by her job to terminate "unlicensed" pregnancies, perform forced abortions, and sometimes even kill newborns. She recalls, "...the only way they would let me leave work was after terminating the babies, or abortion, killing these babies. It was the only way they'd let me leave. After burying them I could go

home.” Even though she has only played a functional role in the history of inhumane atrocity, morally, she is still held responsible for the murder of hundreds of innocent lives in her career. The burden of horror and guilt has taken its toll on her physical and mental health. Local beliefs and Islamic morals also suggest that since she sinned against humanity, she could have been condemned to suffer chronic diseases. Thus, she endures an exacting dual torment, both her physical illness and her spiritual remorse: “The Muslims said I killed too many people when I was young. That’s why I have so many physical problems. These problems are torturing me. I can’t die. I can’t live. Painful. Very painful. Just like now, constipated. There’s no solution.”

With the talking head, Zhang Ci gives the stage to her mother’s reminiscence of personal history, as she herself also travels to the past via the camera. But she is not restrained by the passivity of being a spectator; instead, her experimental deployment of the camera, e.g. the creative use of the shooting position, reflects her thinking through her mother’s confession. The composition of a group interview shot exemplifies the intricate interconnectedness between the visual and the expressive. This sequence is shot from the static camera placed outside the mother’s bedroom, so that the right side of the doorframe is captured on the screen. From afar, the room with grayish walls looks packed, even with just three persons. The pale and weak mother sits in a reclining chair, lodged between two elderly Muslim women wearing the hijab. Hanging over their heads is a doctor’s white gown, presumably from the mother’s working days as an obstetrician gynecologist. Next to the white gown, which symbolizes the past, hangs a brand new calendar that shows the date of the shooting. The juxtaposition of past and present on the wall attests to the undeniable interconnection between the bygone and the living. In addition, it also purports to allegorize the intentionality of the camera, that is, to bring history and memory to the here and now.



Figure 2
Zhang Ci's sick mother is
seated in a reclining chair
and sandwiched between two
Muslim women in the hijab.

What is even more intriguing and telling about the composition is its multilayered framing. First of all, as the field of view of the camera is limited, part of the view has to be left off screen. Then the right side of the doorframe captured on screen suggests that the camera looks into the room through an open door, the frame of which again circumscribes the scope of the shot. As a result of the two layers of framing, space appears to be compressed in this scene, as the talking subjects seem to be confined in the claustrophobic room. Last but not least, at the center of the almost symmetrical composition sits the mother, whose body is tightly enclosed by the frame of the reclining chair. The chair that is supposed to hold and support her body also restrains her bodily movement. The visual effect that signals confinement and immobility illustrates the mother's health and mental state: she is paralyzed by her physical illness as well as her despondent mood. Moreover, the sick mother looks extremely weak and small in between the two bigger and stronger Muslim women. In terms of visual representation, the stark contrast between the mother's weak body and the Muslim women's robustness is easily associated with the apparent difference in their attires—namely, the wearing of the hijab. The religious symbol of the hijab purports to demonstrate the purity and sanctity of a person's soul. Not wearing a hijab can be deemed as morally suspicious. That is to say, the mother's physical weakness is also indicative of her spiritual and moral weakness in contrast to the two pious and healthy

Muslim women. In a nutshell, the visual composition of the scene warrants careful analysis on both the semiotic and affective levels. More than corresponding to the mother's confession in the interview about being physically and mentally tortured for what she has done, the thoughtfully structured scene attests to the expressivity of the visual.

Released right before the one-child policy was revoked in October 2015, *The Faith* is situated in the historical context of reflecting on the social consequences of the most draconian population control policy in human history after more than three decades of its implementation. The documentation of the personal history of a birth policy worker exposes the atrocities committed in the name of the policy and provides an affective argument for its abolition. Zhang Ci is outspoken about her critique of the policy, expressed throughout the film. In the aforementioned interview, she articulates her social intervention:

this documentary reflects the history and reality of the past one-child policy. I can refer to her as a representative of the one-child policy's executor, as she used to be a gynecologist and obstetrician, and had to assist many abortion surgeries under pressure. My documentary was screened right before this policy was abolished, which added weight to the importance of my film and will have far-reaching influence in the future.⁶⁶

The critical commentary on contemporary politics underlying *The Faith* epitomizes what Nussbaum calls intellectual clarification. Through the filming, Zhang Ci distances herself from the tragic life of her mother, and sublimates her intense emotions of pity and pain into a critical evaluation of human society. More importantly, *The Faith* delves into the human cost of the policy on a deeper level—that is, the diminishing of humanity, as atrocity becomes banality. The personal suffering of Zhang Ci's mother attests to the dehumanizing effect of the "one-child policy," as well as to the social consequences of its human cost.

Being taken on the journey back to her mother's past enriches Zhang Ci's own socio-historical experiences as well, which consequently reformulates the mother-

daughter relationship as well as the relational self. Her childhood memories are jogged by the conversation with her mother. In the extra-diegetic narrative (the voice-over), Zhang recalls what her mother used to be in her eyes. Roaming with the hand-held camera in her hometown, she retraces her personal memories and traumas in the lived space of her childhood. On the cognitive level, her early remembrance of her mountainous hometown is coupled with her childhood memory of her working mother, for she has looked at all the locations marked by her mother's footprints. As the head obstetrician gynecologist in the county, Zhang Ci's mother was always in a hurry to deliver another baby. Accompanying her mother on her work, Zhang traveled all over the mountain region. Retracing her mother's footprints on the mountain roads with the camera, Zhang revisits bygone memories: "Things like the Hani rice terraces, the old houses, the minorities, all take me back to my childhood memory of my mother." At the same time, what is conjured up by her recalling is the image of her mother in her prime, fully engrossed in her medical job at the community clinic. The mother was galvanized to emulate the ideologically championed model of the "iron woman" (*tie guniang*)⁶⁷ who lived by the motto "I'm a brick of the Communist Party. East, South, West, North, willingly moved by their hand." Engraved in the enunciator's early memory is a heroic image of her very capable mother: "She traveled on the back of a horse from village to village, from Duoyi Shu village to Ganiang, from Bada then to Niujiao village with a torch. She would hurry to deliver babies, sometimes by C-section. I remember my mom lit a fire in a young Hani woman's shack. And just like that, she delivered her baby." The image of an intrepid woman doctor reminds one of the stereotypical heroine of the literature and art of socialist realism, who triumphs over adversities just to fulfill her responsibilities to the party and the people.

The reminiscing voice-over and the framing of her mother's vigorous figure in old photos overcome the temporospatial constraints of the here and now. The image of the mother in her prime makes a startling contrast to her abject body confined in the reclining chair, which hints at the consuming work and life that the body has endured. In the official rhetoric of the CPC, party work is always understood as consuming labor, "a labor that expends completely the energies and even the physical bodies of party members."⁶⁸ The demanding party work showcases the level of self-sacrifice on the part of honorable party members, as well as attesting to the party's commitment to selflessly serve the people. The damaging effects of consuming labor, in terms of personal health or individual happiness, are entirely silenced. Ann Anagnost's ethnographical study reveals that birth control work exemplifies consuming party work:

But this theme of consuming labor takes on specific images in the case of birth policy workers, who are often women. Not only do they lose their health, youth, and even their personal safety to the demands of this labor, but the cost to them may also include the sacrifice of their children and the welfare of their households. Birth policy work is so demanding that it virtually requires the dereliction of women's roles as mothers and household managers.⁶⁹

At the high cost of their own physical health and family lives, these women party workers like Zhang Ci's mother, unreservedly devoted their time and energy to the implementation of the "one-child policy." Their own children were left unattended. Going back into the past, *The Faith* also reveals a stressed mother-daughter relationship. Indoctrinated by the hegemonic ideology of "selflessly serving the people," Zhang Ci's model-worker mother willingly abandoned her maternal responsibilities. Her children were not only neglected but also forced to take over heavy chores at a young age. Practically raised by their grandmother, they, including Zhang Ci, were all estranged from their mother. Lingzhen Wang's study on the emotional trauma caused by the absence of the mother in socialist China shows that "the daughters of this revolutionary generation shared an emotional and psychological

suffering,” and she calls for a reassessment of “the value, goal, and form of women’s emancipation” in socialist revolution and modernity.⁷⁰ The mother-daughter bond is sabotaged as the revolutionary generation of mothers subordinates their maternal role to their role in nation-building and socialist engineering. The forced separation from their mothers inflicts tremendous pain on the unattended daughters. Zhang’s family history showcases the emotional cost of harnessing a workforce of women in the name of women’s liberation and empowerment by communist party policies.

Delving into national history and the family past, Zhang Ci with her camera discloses the latent causes of her mother’s tragic life. As she reaches intellectual clarification, she stages a *xianchang* for emotional-somatic discharge. The camera is placed on a tripod observing Zhang’s painstaking conversation with her post-suicidal mother in the hospital room. In the scene, Zhang Ci is standing behind her mother and putting her arms around the mother’s shoulder. Her stance and gesture suggests her physical and emotional support for the weakened mother. Aware of the ineffable pain of the mother, Zhang attempts to assuage her suffering and rekindle her desire to live. However, her support is unappreciated by her mother, who keeps saying to her “Don’t touch me,” and “You can’t help me.” Zhang’s mother tries to convince her that there is nothing she could do to take away her harrowing pain. Zhang eventually has a meltdown at her mother’s repeated requests for euthanasia. What is striking about the scene is the ineffectiveness of intersubjective exchange. The daughter is helpless in convincing her mother to desire life while the mother is frustrated by her failure in talking her daughter into a mercy killing. The bodily intimacy between the mother and daughter depicted by the visual of the scene is undercut by the difficulty of understanding each other expressed in the sync sound—that is, the mother-daughter conversation recorded in *xianchang*. The limitation of the subject, in terms of both her claim to discursive power and her impact on the other, as well as the exterior world,

are foregrounded in the extremely long take. The failed intersubjective exchange brings to the fore the contestation of subjective agency. The observational camera in *xianchang* witnesses (and to some extent, recognizes) Zhang Ci's frustration and agony, and catalyzes her emotional release on the scene.



Figure 3
Zhang's mother tries to convince her that there is nothing she can do to assuage the harrowing pain.

The Encounter between Essayistic Subjectivity and the Exterior World

Saliently in the case of cinematic catharsis, the objective stance embodied by the camera forms the necessary device of distancing for the traumatized subject. It proffers an antidote to Zhang Ci's subjective crisis, triggered by her mother's suicide. In filming the documentary, Zhang shifts her focus from the interior to the exterior, from the subjective to the objective. Looking through the camera-eye, she dislocates her thought and emotion from the essentialized position of the subject to the experiential encounter between the subject and the external. In other words, her personal quest for a redeeming force in life is carried out in the exterior world through filmmaking. While deterritorializing the subject position, the camera grants novel meanings to the subject-object encounter, which, in return, configures new subjectivity through self-reflexivity. Thus, the filmic logic of *The Faith* also emblemizes essayistic thinking, which although operating with what Paul Arthur articulates as "a blatant, self-searching authorial presence,"⁷¹ revolves around the dialogical dynamics between the subjective and the exterior. This essayistic

subjectivity is contested and reformulated, as the limitations of the subject reveal themselves in her experiential encounters with irreducible otherness.

The essay as a literary form was pioneered by French thinker-cum-writer Michel de Montaigne, who named his 1580 collection of short personal writings on variegated topics “*Essais*.” With the connotation of “attempt” and “test,”⁷² the “essay” is given a provisional and explorative nature,⁷³ and its aesthetic and philosophical prowess is harnessed to reflect on subjective thinking vis-à-vis objective reality. Since Montaigne, numerous writers have experimented with the literary form of the essay—Francis Bacon, Virginia Woolf, and Roland Barthes, to name a few—while the tradition of essayistic articulation has been traced back to Plato. Georg Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1910) elucidates some formal characteristics of the essay, comparing it with science, on the one hand, and poetry and art, on the other. He prescribes an “eternal smallness” to the writing of the essayist, which “set[s] its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness.”⁷⁴ For Lukács, the want of systematic value and form in essayistic expression leads to “a new creation, a coming-alive in real experience.”⁷⁵ That is to say, the essayistic claim to truth is not positive but empirical, and the process of living and thinking is prioritized over the conclusion. Thus, essayistic writing has an open structure, as the lived experience or the contingently constructed perception and memory of the essayistic self is enunciated and contested dialectically. Following the thread of Lukács’s argument, Theodor Adorno radicalizes the fragmentary character of the essay and provocatively proclaims, “the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy.”⁷⁶ The orthodox of thought and the tautology of truth are violated and surpassed by the mobility of essayistic reasoning⁷⁷ which derives from the lack of an essentialized perspective, be it scientific or ideological. Adorno’s seminal study foregrounds the critical prowess of the essay—that is, “as immanent

critique of intellectual constructions, as a confrontation of what they are with their concepts, it is critique of ideology.”⁷⁸ The contingent and fragmented subjective experience and reflection that is privileged in the essay undermines teleological and ideological epistemology.

The critical and subversive stance embedded in the essay was also theorized and championed by Lukács’s contemporaries in China – namely, Chinese enlightenment thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the renowned critic Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) who first introduced the western essay as an innovative way of elucidating new ideas (*xin sixiang*), and mastered his own stylistic prose writing of *meiwen* (aesthetic essay).⁷⁹ In his preface to the first volume of *The Collection of New Chinese-Vernacular Literature: Prose* (1935),⁸⁰ Zhou traces the literary tradition of the Chinese essay (*xiaopin wen*) back to the tumultuous years of the Jin Dynasty (265-420), and highlights the dismantling of ruling orders and norms (*wang gang jie niu*) as the imperative condition for the blooming of essayistic writing. Zhou’s understanding of the new essay (*xin sanwen*) as a hybrid literary genre of both western and Chinese traditions as well as a literary tool for expressing new discourses or unorthodox thoughts was influential in the New Culture Movement (1917-1927). Yu Dafu (1896-1945), the author of the preface to the second volume of the same collection of prose, echoes Zhou in stating that the new deployment of essayistic writing contributes to the breaking of the shackles of formulaic and didactic writing in classical Chinese. Yu posits the most salient characteristic of the new essay as the manifestation of individuality (*geren xing*) and personality (*ren ge*), which subverts the suppressive culture and conformist traditions of Confucianism. Two decades prior to Aldous Huxley’s influential theory of “a three-poled frame of reference” (1960),⁸¹ Yu astutely teases out the multiple layers of reference interwoven in the essay and advocates for accordance (*tiao he*) among three referential dimensions: individuality

(*ge xing*), sociality (*shehui xing*), and nature (*da ziran*) in essayistic writing. That is to say, the new essay revolves around individual perceptions of and interaction with nature and society. Huxley's three poles of the personal, the factual, and the abstract-universal configure the human subject's epistemological inquiry into the objective world, whereas Yu's three dimensions of individuality, sociality, and nature privilege the individual's critical conception of the social and the natural. Yu Dafu's essayistic modality is conspicuously influenced by the prominent genres of classical Chinese essay.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the reinvigoration of essayistic writing in both western and Chinese literary histories. Since then, the essayistic form of expression and representation has flourished in a plethora of media, photography, installation art, and, most notably, film. In André Bazin's original words, the essay film is "an essay documented by film," wherein the film director plays the role of an essayist.⁸² Tapping into the personal voice and subjective inquiry embedded in the form of the essay, the essay film records a self-reflective rhetorical journey in order "to visualize thoughts on screen."⁸³ Coining the term "horizontal montage," Bazin postulates that in the essay film, such as Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958), the filmic sense of duration is evidenced by the lateral relationship of a shot to "what is said" by the shot⁸⁴ or, in Roland Barthes's terms, the level of communication to that of signification and significance.⁸⁵ If the process of thinking is the privileged subject of the essay film, it is strictly situated in, rather than transcends, a particular authorial position, meaning that "Argument must proceed from one person's set of assumptions, a particular framework of consciousness, rather than from a transparent collective 'we'."⁸⁶ Although the personal authorial vision is foregrounded in the essay film, it is interrogated and transgressed by the experiential encounters with others in the process of filming. In other words, the authorial subjectivity is fragmented and de-

territorialized by on-going self-reflectivity. Thus, Timothy Corrigan's three-pronged formulation defines the essay film as "(1) a testing of expressive subjectivity through (2) experiential encounters in a public arena, (3) the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response."⁸⁷ In stark contrast to the narrative movie and the observational documentary, the essay film is an expressive personal cinema that visualizes the enunciator's process of thinking conditioned by exteriority and alterity. "The transgressive quality that the essay film inherits from the literary essay"⁸⁸ as well as its "emphasis on the first person" promotes "oppositional positions"⁸⁹ that are often inhabited by marginal directors, hence its attraction for "politically, sexually, socially, and racially marginalized persons."⁹⁰

The essay film is not an unproblematic cinematic form, loosely defined at best.⁹¹ At the core of its cinematic grammar is the mode of first-person address and self-reflexive visual thinking, which are co-opted by other umbrella terms such as "reflexive documentary," "first person documentary," or "subjective cinema." Also, its claim to be a "cinema of ideas" is challenged by film historians as unoriginal.⁹² However, it is not my intention to consolidate the parameters of the essay film; I am rather interested in mobilizing its distinct cinematic expressions to contrast Zhang Ci's *The Faith* with the predominant tradition of *cinéma vérité* in Chinese independent documentary. In other words, my goal is more to analyze Zhang's innovative implementation of essayistic expressions and representations in *The Faith* than to declare it an essay film *par excellence*. At the same time, exploring the experimental qualities of Zhang's film, in terms of both form and content, will shed new light on the concept of the essay film. It is generally acknowledged that American Direct Cinema and the French *cinéma vérité* have had a profound impact on Chinese independent documentary since the 1990s. The observational camera records

and preserves the everyday lives of plebeians as social archives and sometimes social interventions. Although Chinese documentarians have experimented with self-reflexive filmmaking (Zhao Liang and Wang Bing), participatory documentary (Wu Wenguang), and activist documentary (Ai Xiaoming and Ai Weiwei), the expressive personal point of view is rarely adopted, to the extent that Bérénice Beynaud once commented that the first-person documentary is “the rather un-Chinese field.”⁹³ Only recently, with the explosion of digital and internet-based technologies, has the phenomenon of the individualized (*geren hua*) camera garnered critical attention from scholars. The 2014 anthology *China’s iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century* probes the new frontier of image-making of the iGeneration (or the post-urban generation and the post-New Documentary Movement), which is characterized as “a vibrant culture of amateur realism and self-representation.”⁹⁴ Although she belongs to the generation of the New Documentary Movement, Zhang’s fascinating directorial debut contributes to the individualized camera a provocatively subjective perspective.

Zhang Ci’s film foregrounds her subjective point of view as her camera follows her journey of homecoming impelled by her personal inquiry and self-searching. To the spectator, it is evident from the opening scene that the filmmaker, the enunciator, and the subject matter are one and the same. As the hand-held camera mimics the slightly tilted eye level of the filmmaker who is stepping upstairs, the enunciator speaks in the first-person singular:

Actually I don’t know what has brought me back here, to return to my birthplace. It’s an impulse or some sort of foreboding, a feeling that can’t be chased away. Since I was little, I’ve been wanting to leave my hometown and go somewhere to look for something. I went to college in Kunming. I could not find what I was looking for in Kunming. I have traveled to Beijing. I lived in Beijing for years and still could not find what I was looking for. I then moved to the US. I have been living in the United States for over twenty-five years, but still have not found it. Now I’m back at Ailao Mountain from San Francisco. I plan to write a book here. Through writing, I might find it. Ailao Mountain, I’m back.

Although the filmmaker's body is not framed within the camera, the unique eye-level view and the rhythmic up-down movement of the camera evidences her presence behind the camera, and, more significantly, the symbiosis between the filmmaker, the enunciator, and her camera. In the duration of the long extra-diegetic monologue, the camera enters a room, approaches the windows, and focuses on the scenic view outside the windows. On the symbolic level, this sequence shot of going back to her own room overlooking her mountainous hometown illustrates the announcement of homecoming in the voice-over. As mentioned earlier, Zhang's transnational migratory trajectory, first from the ethnic minority concession of Honghe to the provincial capital city of Kunming, and then from the national capital city of Beijing to the metropolis of San Francisco on the western coast of the US, was galvanized by her persistent goal of achieving a mobile and autonomous self. Shuttling between places and cultures, she has experienced the empowerment of global mobility and artistic cosmopolitanism as well as encountered the trauma of urban marginality and diasporic displacement. She has also traded off her literary dreams for cultural assimilation and re-socialization as a woman immigrant in a middle-class family. Her migratory path that started with the emphatic repudiation of her "primitive" hometown has been directed towards the modernized and globalized urban and cultural center. However, she has been haunted by a profound sense of failure; that is, she has failed to acquire what she has been searching for. This sense of failure or deep-seated lack has driven her onto a homeward path.

The opening scene expresses the enunciator's personal quest—namely, how to redeem the meaning and purposiveness of her life as a writer,⁹⁵ and this existential question is generative of self-reflexive essayistic reasoning, which is "modeled on the question-answer-question format."⁹⁶ Rather than speaking with an assertive authorial voice, the enunciator engages the spectator in the process of personal searching and

reasoning. In this way, she embodies a “self-interrogatory voice, like a true essayist’s, dubious, ironical, wheeling and searching for the heart of the subject matter.”⁹⁷ On the indexical level, the extra-diegetic monologue reveals the real identity of the enunciator as a writer, or an essayist. A parallel as well as a contrast is drawn here between writing and filming: while the enunciator intends to redeem herself through writing, she is now searching for meaning via her camera. The analogy of camera to pen, of filming to writing, is an underlying assumption of Zhang’s film. When interviewed after the premier screening of *The Faith* in 2013, Zhang articulated her understanding of the moving image as a revolutionary medium of writing which would eventually replace the keyboard and the pen. She also remarked that the strength of the moving image lies in its irreducible objectivity, which would problematize the subjectivity of the traditional writer.⁹⁸

Zhang’s attempt at contesting the unproblematic subjectivity of the writer in *The Faith* resonates with that of the essayist as well as the essayistic filmmaker. As the enunciator speaks with an essayist’s voice, the camera tries to generate new thinking from the contingent encounters between “the subjectivity of the voice-over and the predominant objectivity of the camera.”⁹⁹ The dialogical dynamics between subjectivity and objectivity are tested in the exterior and experiential world, i.e., the natural, the familial, or the social. As Timothy Corrigan aptly puts it, the projection of “an interior self into an exterior world” is complicated by the “subjection of that instrumental or expressive self to a public domain.”¹⁰⁰ Echoing Yu Dafu’s three referential dimensions in essayistic writing (individuality, sociality, and nature), Corrigan points out that underpinning the essay film is the essayistic subject’s active negotiations with exteriority and public discourse.

By necessity, the triangular relationship among the camera-eye (the medium), the filmmaker (the subjective) and the profilmic (the exterior) is structured to manifest

the effect of experiential encounters. The experimental transgression of conventional cinematic genres and forms that is often deployed by the essay film contributes to the visualization of subjective expressions vis-à-vis the exterior world. Hans Richter in his foundational article lauds the imaginative and resourceful expressions articulated by the essay film, which “in its attempt to make the invisible of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film.”¹⁰¹ The reservoir of expressions comprises photograph, literature, archival footage, interview, to name a few, and it is also creatively generated by experimental techniques of shooting. On the one hand, *The Faith* uses sequence shots, talking-head interviews, and archival images such as photographs while the extra-diegetic narrative establishes the interconnections between scenes and asserts the subjective view embedded in the logic of essayistic filmmaking. On the other, the film experiments with novel and intricate techniques of shooting, which foreground the subjective camera and distinguish it from documentary realism. The camera positioning is deftly maneuvered to manifest the reflexivity, communicativity, and interconnectivity of the essayistic subjectivity.

In an improvisatory but ingenious scene, the filmmaker is being driven around the town with her camera on, and she catches the image of herself holding the camera



Figure 4
The filmmaker's own reflection on the rearview mirror is recorded by the digital video that she is holding in hands.

reflected in the rearview mirror. For a few seconds, she seems to be mesmerized by

her own reflection, but her gaze is fixed on the instant play on the screen of her digital video camera. This black-and-white shot is enriched by multiple and intricate interplays of looking and reflecting: 1) the camera-eye faces towards the rearview mirror; 2) the filmmaker fixes her gaze upon the digital image on her DV screen; and 3) the rearview mirror reflects the image of the filmmaker's filming of her own reflection. The reciprocity of the cornea (the subjective), the camera-eye (the cinematic), and the rearview mirror (the objective) construct a visual wonder (in its connotations of both "spectacle" and "puzzle"): what is looking and what is being looked at? The locale of the subjective gaze is destabilized while the looking subject is made part of the scene. The reflection in the rearview mirror seems to reveal the subject matter of the film—that is, the filmmaker herself. But the shot is clearly focalized on the reflected image of the DV or the camera-eye, whereas the filmmaker behind it is hidden in the dark. The structure of this visual composition foregrounds the presence and centrality of the digital medium, and allegorizes the contingent nature of subjectivity, which is conjured into existence (as an image) through mediating and reflecting. Moreover, in this shot, the camera-eye also captures the street scene on the blurred margins, i.e., the green belt and the back of the woman squatting next to the signboard with illegible characters. It reminds the spectator that even the most intense moment of self-reflexivity occurs in a public domain, or that the question of subjectivity becomes more acute in the presence of exteriority.

The intricate shot emblemizes the personal camera's inward gaze on the filming subject herself: the filmmaker's mirrored image is captured by the hand-held camera, which manifests "the *inward direction* of the filmmaker's interest and gaze."¹⁰² The mobile camera on the road that is framed at the center of the screen indicates the self's path of searching and eventually reformulating her own subjectivity through

experiential encounters. The constructed nature of essayistic subjectivity is effectively argued by Timothy Corrigan:

Essayistic subjectivity...refers then not simply to the emplacement or positioning of an individual consciousness before and in experience but to an active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes, or re-creates itself through experience, including the experience of memory, argument, active desire, and reflective thinking. Embedded within the textual action of the film, the essayistic subject becomes the product of changing experiential expressions rather than simply the producer of expressions.¹⁰³

Corrigan refers to the experiential encounter and expressive articulation of the essay film as “the textual action.” Drawing on the theory of the performative speech act that predicates that “language not only *reveals* a pre-existing phenomenon or a state of affairs, it also has the power to *create* and *install* something new,”¹⁰⁴ he argues that the textual action of the essay film tests and changes individual consciousness. Thus, the articulation of the essay film revolves around expressive experiences such as retracing memories, conducting dialogues with others, or thinking self-reflexively. This sophisticatedly configured shot articulates the textual action of the essay film, which brings self-awareness into dialogue with external reality.

Following this scene is a long black-and-white tracking shot filmed from the same roaming car. (After editing, the tracking shot is cut and removed to the end of the film.) The static camera (in relation to the filmmaker) is in motion (in relation to the profilmic), and records the fleeting and un-signifying signs and scenes in the exterior world in the same way that the subconscious mind holistically stores memory. The solemnity and gravity of black and white is in contrast to the bright, warm and rich colors that highlight other parts of the film. When analyzing Alain Resnais’s canonical essay film *Night and Fog* (1955) about the atrocities of Nazi concentration camps, Laura Rascaroli remarks, “Resnais’s tracking shots form a ‘visual analogue’ of the voice’s searching.”¹⁰⁵ In the same vein, the sequence of tracking shots at the end of *The Faith* analogizes as well as visualizes the enunciator’s searching for the

answer to her existential crisis. The weightiness of black and white, especially in the claustrophobic scene shot with the camera-eye pressing against the brick wall, constructs an affective camera that evokes feelings of uneasiness and stress. In this way, the camera-eye arrests the emotional upheavals experienced by Zhang Ci in her journey of self-searching and homecoming, i.e., the enormous pain of taking care of her suicidal mother and the overwhelming strain of rekindling the fire of life in the post-traumatic mother and daughter. The effect of examining the externalized emotions of the subject herself on the screen is nothing short of cathartic: the enunciator releases her suppressed feelings of anguish as the choking and stuttering of her voice amplifies the intensity and urgency of her emotional purging.

The catharsis is a landmark of the enunciator's self-searching, which turns pain into strength and wisdom. If subjectivity is in crisis at the beginning of the journey, the cinematic catharsis has reconstructed it with newly found purpose and power towards the end. Zhang, who first takes recourse to the expressive media of writing and filming to search for meaning, comes to the revelation that writing and filming are also performative media for worshipping the higher order of existence that transcends the limitations of both subjective agency and objective reality. In this sense, black and white also symbolizes otherworldliness and timelessness, which are indicative of her restoration of faith. The spiritual epiphany proffers a resolution to her existential crisis, but at the same time it decentralizes her subject position, as her subjectivity is interconnected with the exterior world via the transcendental power. In other words, the concluding sequence of *The Faith* illustrates both the essayistic expressions and the cathartic effects elicited by Zhang Ci's filmmaking. As her strangled emotion of pity and pain is discharged, her individual quest for meaning and purpose is fulfilled at the transcendental moment.

Conclusion

In the 1980s, Zhang Ci emulates the renowned Republican woman writer Xiao Hong in proclaiming self-liberation from the confinement of the patriarchal family (state). Her claim of a nomadic subjectivity defies state biopower that deprives and alienates individual agency and mobility. Her bumming life on the margins of the new urban milieu of postsocialist China promises intellectual freedom and self-determination. However, the dire material reality of living in displacement and marginalization catalyzes her decision to move abroad. Zhang's transnational migratory trajectory as it is represented in Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* and *At Home in the World* (1995) is illustrative of how the last dreamers seek nomadic autonomy in urban marginalization and diasporic displacement. Then, the nomadic subject that is persistent in her pursuit of subjective mobility at the beginning of the journey is transformed by an essayistic subjectivity that actively negotiates the limits of the subject through her cinematic encounters with exteriority and alterity. Zhang's film debut *The Faith of Ailao Mountain*, with its innovative implementation of cathartic and essayistic expressions, intervenes in the predominant tradition of *cinéma vérité* in Chinese independent documentary with a provocatively self-reflexive perspective.

¹ Xudong, Zhang, *Chinese Modernity in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.

² Xiaobin, Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 19.

³ Jian Yu, "Exodus: The Last Dreamers" (Taowang: zuihou de mengxiang zhe), in *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (Liulang Beijing: zuihou de mengxiang zhe), ed. Wu Wenguang, (Taipei: Wanxiang Press, 1995), 213.

⁴ Honghe Autonomous Prefecture is home to several minority ethnic groups, predominantly the Hani, as well as a considerable number of Chinese Muslims. A categorically isolated and outlying mountain region, Honghe lags behind in economic and cultural modernization. Therefore, Zhang Ci's move from the peripheral to the central, from the mountainous region to the urban area is intended to liberate her artistic creativity from the limitations of provincial locality.

⁵ Tze-Lan D. Sang and Sylvia Li-chun Lin, "Introduction," in *Documenting Taiwan on Film: Issues and Methods in New Documentaries*, eds., Sylvia Li-chun Lin and Tze-Lan D. Sang, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

⁶ "Wo shi mingfeng" was published in the second volume of the avant-garde magazine *Tamen* (They) in 1985.

⁷ Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.)

⁸ Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 57.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139.

¹⁰ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 17.

¹¹ My use of neoliberalism is informed by David Harvey's definition in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)—namely, "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (2). See the chapter on "Neoliberalism 'with Chinese Characteristics'" in the same book for more discussion on China's neoliberal turn since 1978.

¹² Ann Anagnost, 136.

¹³ David Harvey, 3

¹⁴ Yingjin Zhang, *New Chinese-Language Documentaries: Ethics, Subject and Place*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 86.

¹⁵ Yiman Wang, "From Bumming to Roaming: Xu Tong's *The Drifter Trilogy*," in *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-first-century China*, ed. Zhang Yingjin, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 135.

¹⁶ Jian Yu, 234.

¹⁷ Meng Yue, "Female Image and National Myth," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani, E. Barlow, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 132.

¹⁸ Jian Yu, 235.

¹⁹ Yiman Wang, 135.

²⁰ Wu Wenguang mirrors Zhang Ci's path of drifting from a provincial hometown to the national capital. A native of Yunnan Province and graduate of Yunnan University, Wu walked away from his state-assigned job as a middle school teacher in Kunming in 1983, and then, a couple of years later, joined the "blind flow" on the fringe of Beijing. In 1988, he, once again, gave up his job at state television, and started making his first independent film.

²¹ Suffice it to say that the first generation of Chinese independent documentarians like Wu Wenguang has lived in spatial proximity to and emotional affiliation with marginalized urban migrants. Thus, the natural alliance between the documentary camera and its marginal subjects distinguishes Chinese independent documentaries. When Chinese independent documentarians direct their cameras to the scenes and stories of everyday life on the margins of society, as their cameras dwell on "the quotidian and low" rather than "the elevated and eminent" (Aitken), they create an "alternative archive" untold by any state-sanctioned media (Berry & Rofel), and embody a dissident voice in postsocialist China.

²² Judith Pernin,

²³ Here I appropriate Matthew Arnold's famed poem "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" (1855), where it reads "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born,/With nowhere yet to rest my head,/Like these, on earth I wait forlorn./Their faith, my tears, the world deride—/I come to shed them at their side."

²⁴ See Wu Wenguang's "visual diary" (*yingxiang biji*) of "Zhang Ci, Cinematic Redemption of a Writer," accessed at <http://daotin.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=111566>.

²⁵ Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, "Alternative Archive: China's Independent Documentary Culture," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 135-36.

²⁶ Yingjin Zhang, 65.

²⁷ Later in his career, Wu theorizes "bumming" as the desirable lifestyle of the independent documentarian. In his "visual diary," Wu writes, "having abandoned the notions of themes and plotlines, abandoned the idea of pursuing, like a hunter, a single target; instead, I ramble around by myself, mini-cam in hand, distancing myself ever more from professional filmmakers." Quoted from "DV: Individual Filmmaking," trans. Cathryn Clayton, in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 53.

²⁸ Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 186.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 277.

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- ³⁰ Simon Patton, "Notes towards a Nomad Subjectivity: The Poetics of Gu Cheng (1965-1993)," *Social Semiotics* vol. 9: 1 (1999), 51.
- ³¹ Yiman Wang, 136.
- ³² Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 204.
- ³³ Ibid, 203.
- ³⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Subtitled "A Film about Pornography," *Not a Love Story* investigates the industry of pornography and interrogates the objectification of women's sexualities. Tracey, an erotic dancer and performer, is first observed and interviewed by Klein, and then joins her journalistic investigation.
- ³⁷ Bill Nichols, 187, (my own emphasis).
- ³⁸ Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1458.
- ³⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 390.
- ⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 20, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 13.
- ⁴¹ Richard Kearney, "Narrating Pain: The Power of Catharsis," *Trauma, Therapy and Representation* 30: 1 (2007), 61.
- ⁴² Ibid, 63.
- ⁴³ Thomas J. Scheff, *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 13.
- ⁴⁴ Luke Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 130.
- ⁴⁵ Chris Berry, "Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism," in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Zhang Zhen, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 118.
- ⁴⁶ Luke Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private': Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, eds. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 181.
- ⁴⁷ Luke Robinson, "Voice, Liveness, Digital Video: The Talking Head in Contemporary Independent Chinese Documentary," *positions* 22: 2 (2014), 495.
- ⁴⁸ Thomas J. Scheff, 13
- ⁴⁹ Ann Anagnost, 85.
- ⁵⁰ Vanessa Fong, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011,) 187.
- ⁵¹ Sau-ling C Wong, "Global Vision and Locatedness: World Literature in Chinese/by Chinese (shijie huawen/huaren wenxue 世界华文/华人文学) from a Chinese-American Perspective," in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 57.
- ⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 59.

⁵⁴ Bérénice Reynaud, "Translating the Unspeakable: On-Screen and Off-Screen Voices in Wu Wenguang's Documentary Work," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 169.

⁵⁵ Bérénice Reynaud, "Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera: The Emotional Vagabonds of China's New Documentary," *senses of cinema*, 28 (2003), accessed at http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/chinas_new_documentary/

⁵⁶ Zhang Ci related the story of her homecoming in an interview, which was accessed at http://www.uschina.usc.edu/article@usct?qa_with_ci_zhang_director_of_the_faith_of_ai_lao_mountain_20219.aspx

⁵⁷ The interview is accessed on <http://maymay.weidb.com/p30961>.

⁵⁸ Wu Wenguang's essay is accessed on <http://daotin.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=111566>.

⁵⁹ Her remarks can be read on <http://cul.qq.com/a/20131101/009911.htm>.

⁶⁰ In *Home Video*, Yang Lina investigates into the reasons for her parents' divorce and discloses a history of domestic violence in her family. She interviews her father, mother, and brother, and each of them relates a disparate version of the family story. Yang also films their respective reactions when being shown the others' interviews.

⁶¹ Tianqi Yu, "Toward a Communicative Practice: Female First-Person Documentary in Twenty-first Century China," in *China's iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu and Luke Vulpiani, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 23.

⁶² Efrén Cuevas, "Change of Scale: Home Movies as Microhistory in Documentary Films," in *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, ed. Laura Rascaroli, Gwenda Young, and Barry Monahan, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 146.

⁶³ Ibid, 141.

⁶⁴ Luke Robinson, "Voice, Liveness, Digital Video: The Talking Head in Contemporary Independent Chinese Documentary," *positions* 22: 2 (2014), 507.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 485.

⁶⁶ Accessed on http://www.uschina.usc.edu/article@usct?qa_with_ci_zhang_director_of_the_faith_of_ai_lao_mountain_20219.aspx

⁶⁷ The communist revolution from the beginning co-opted the women's liberation movement. Women's subjugation to the patriarchy was symbolic of the oppressive society and culture of pre-revolutionary China. Mao claimed that the potential labor force of women should be liberated and harnessed to construct a great socialist country; thus came his renowned epigram "Women hold up half the sky." In the frenzy of socialist engineering (1956-1976), women were called into the productive workforce to undertake what had previously been men's work. The model women workers were lauded as "iron women" who surpassed the physical constraints of the female body. This topic has been explored by many scholars, including Tani Barlow and Gail Hershatter.

⁶⁸ Ann Anagnost, 129.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Lingzhen Wang, *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-Century China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 139.

⁷¹ Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 166.

⁷² Studies on the etymology of the English term "essay" have agreed on its origin from Old French "*essai*" and Late Latin "*exagium*." The connotation of "attempt," "trial," and "test" derived from the original sense of "*exagium*" as "weighing."

⁷³ Nora M. Alter, "Introduction to *Essays on the Essay film*," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1.

⁷⁴ Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 39.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Theodor W Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 81.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 78.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 76.

⁷⁹ Zhou Zuoren in 1921 wrote a short piece on "Meiwen," wherein he briefly introduced the western essay (*lunwen*) and explained that *meiwen* was a subgenre of the essay centered on narrative (*xushi*) and lyric (*shuqing*) expressions. The seminal essay was then collected in his anthology *Tan hu ji*.

⁸⁰ *The Collection of New Chinese-Vernacular Literature 1917-1927 (zhongguo xin wenxue daxi)*, comprising ten volumes, was edited by Zhao Jiabi, and published by Shanghai Liangyou in 1935 and 1936.

⁸¹ In "Preface to *The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley*," Aldous Huxley argues that the extreme variability of the essay stems from a three-poled frame of reference: "There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal." In *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 83.

⁸² André Bazin, "Bazin on Marker," in *Essays on the Essay Film*. Ed. Nora M. Alter, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 103.

⁸³ Hans Richter, "The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 91.

⁸⁴ André Bazin, 103.

⁸⁵ Roland Barthes in his seminal essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Skills" distills three levels of meanings from a filmic scene: the level of communication, the level of signification, and the third level of significance. The level of communication encompasses all the factual and informational in a scene. The level of signification constructs the obvious symbolic meaning, such as ideology, whereas the level of significance generates the obtuse meaning that tends to undermine the obvious meaning, consciously or unconsciously. In *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978, 52-68.

⁸⁶ Paul Arthur, 164.

⁸⁷ Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

⁸⁸ Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework* 49: 2 (2008), 27.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 34.

⁹⁰ Timothy Corrigan, 33.

⁹¹ In *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Laura Rascaroli suggests, “we should resist the urge to overtheorize essayistic cinema and crystallize it into a genre.” (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009,) 2.

⁹² Michael Canan in his article “The Role of History in the Individual: Working Notes for a Film” espouses the classification of “first person film” that comprises “the self portrait film, the essay film, the video diary, as well as any other documentary form that endeavours to articulate rather than occlude or suppress the position of the filmmaker” (2). He objects to the film essay as a separate genre, which, for him is merely “a permutation of a repertoire of features” (17). In *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. Alisa Lebow, (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012.)

⁹³ Bérénice Reynaud, “Dancing with Myself, Drifting with My Camera: The Emotional Vagabonds of China’s New Documentary,” *senses of cinema*, 28 (2003).
http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/chinas_new_documentary/

⁹⁴ Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu and Luke Vulpiani, ed., *China’s iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014,) 12.

⁹⁵ In *At Home*, Zhang Ci told Wu Wenguang, “My biggest sense of guilt is over being a fake writer. As a matter of fact, I do have works. It’s just that some day I’ll make them available to readers. I’ll give readers of... major languages... a chance to read my stuff. This is my...dream.” The guilt at not being able to prove her literary accomplishments troubled her, and she believed that writing would fill in the lack in her heart. Thus Zhang Ci returned to Ailao Mountain to resume her literary career, for she assumed that the failure to fulfill her literary dream had engendered her abysmal disappointment with her life and self.

⁹⁶ Timothy Corrigan, 35.

⁹⁷ Laura Rascaroli, 32.

⁹⁸ Her interview in Chinese was accessed at: <http://xw.qq.com/cul/20131101009911>.

⁹⁹ Laura Rascaroli, 32.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 31.

¹⁰¹ Hans Richter, 91.

¹⁰² Caroline Eades and Elizabeth A. Papazian, “Cinéma-vérité and Kino-pravda: Rouch, Vertov and the the Essay Form,” in *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*, ed. Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades, (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2016), 88.

¹⁰³ Timothy, Corrigan, 31

¹⁰⁴ *Exploring Textual Action*, ed. Lars Satre, Patrizia Lombardo, and Ander M. Gullestad, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 9.

¹⁰⁵ Laura Rascaroli, 32.

Chapter Four
Performative Hunger and Vicarious Eating in the Age of Chinese Affluence:
A Study of Chinese Eating Broadcast

Affluence is not, then, a paradise. It is not a leap beyond morality into the ideal immorality of plenty. It is a new objective situation governed by a new morality. Objectively speaking, it is not therefore an advance, but quite simply something different.

—Jean Baudrillard

That imagination of the female body was of a socially shaped and historically “colonized” territory, not a site of individual self-determination.

—Susan Bordo

Mizijun, a twenty-six-year-old woman from Chongqing, which was Hong Ying’s hunger-beleaguered hometown, is known as an Internet influencer (*wanghong*) in Mainland China. Mizijun’s 2016 video went viral on Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing platform similar to YouTube, and received almost 4 million views, transforming her into a celebrated vlogger (video blogger) and broadcasting jockey (BJ) with millions of subscribers. In the 16-minute video, she ravenously gobbles up ten bowls of hot Korean instant noodles. The impressive binge-eating video instantly catapulted her to stardom and earned her the infamous reputation of being an eating machine (*da wei wang*) on the Internet. The launch of Mizijun’s broadcasting career is part of the Internet trend initiated by a netizen with the username “Virgo Foodie” (*chunüzuo de chihuo*) in 2015, which has successfully branded and promoted “Chinese eating broadcasts” (*zhongguo chibo*). Virgo Foodie had been following South Korean

mukbang for a couple of years before he built a live-streaming platform to localize and popularize the Internet fad in China. *Mukbang*, a portmanteau coined from a combination of the two Korean words for “eating” (*meokneun*) and “broadcast” (*bangsong*), is a live-streaming webcast, wherein BJs televise themselves consuming a staggering amount of mouthwatering food while interacting with viewers in a chat window. Viewers, watching via their webcams, instantaneously communicate with BJs and actively participate in the streaming by sending in comments, questions, requests, and sometimes even virtual gifts. The media genre of *mukbang*, purportedly inspired by Japanese competitive eating TV shows, “was first made in Korea around 2009 along with the boom of Korean live video-sharing website AfreecaTV.”¹ Since 2014, the *mukbang* fad has garnered worldwide media attention and coverage. It has now spread to Japan, Taiwan, and China, as well as to the rest of Asia and even the world. This media phenomenon emblemizes what Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein argue is “a thickening of media traffic between sites of production within Asia,”² and evidences “the critical significance of Asia to transnational traffic in media by positioning it not merely as a site of the reception of Western media but as another set of nodes for production and circulation.”³

Food Consumption and Consumer Nationalism in the Era of Chinese Affluence

To thoroughly investigate the new transnational media phenomenon of *mukbang*, one likely needs to navigate through a labyrinth of interlaced (trans-)social and (trans-)cultural factors. But what I attempt to achieve at the beginning of this chapter is to contextualize the *mukbang* fad in China’s purported transition from a developing country inundated with low-end manufactures and knockoff goods to a postindustrial society characterized by excessive consumption and entertainment. In 2010, China for the first time surpassed Japan in GDP and became the second largest economy in the world. Although its GDP per capita ranked less than 100 (and still does), China struck

the world as a rising economic powerhouse with an enormous domestic market to tap into. The essentialization of China as an ever-enlarging market is driven by the global neoliberal economy, while the mystification of China's potential purchasing power is fueled by the revival of nationalism. As the nation-state and the market together have gradually refashioned the Chinese as consumers following China's neoliberal shift in the 1970s, nationalistic sentiments are increasingly coupled with consumer practices. "By the early 2000s, at least in urban areas, consumerism and its trappings had become regular features of everyday life, whether through consumer practices or media imagery," a remarkable social transformation referred to as China's "consumer revolution."⁴ On the individual level, who one is materializes through what one can purchase, while on the national level, China, which used to be the factory of the world, is recast as a consuming engine. The illusionary conflation of purchasing power with power *par excellence* in consumer culture recharges both economic individualism and consumer nationalism in contemporary China.

That is to say, the re-configurations of Chinese individual subjectivity and national identity converge on the realm of consumption, or to be more specific, on the task of adapting to the emergence of social affluence. Rapidly steering towards consumerism, Chinese society sees the advent of a new era, hailing, "real affluence is here and we simply have to move from a mentality of scarcity to a mentality geared to affluence."⁵ In Jean Baudrillard's terms, China's consumer revolution unfolds concomitantly with the "Revolution of Affluence,"⁶ which is predicated on social restructurings on both the material and the psychological levels. But, under the guise of the euphoric myth of social advance and material gratification, Baudrillard critically asserts that the affluent society is yet another form of normative society, imposing a new set of social constraints and cultural imperatives. He elaborates on the ambiguity about affluence: "it is always simultaneously experienced as euphoric myth (of resolution of tensions

and conflicts, of happiness beyond history and morality) and endured as a process of more or less enforced adaptation to new types of behavior, collective constraints and norms.”⁷ In light of Baudrillard’s argument, the hailing of Chinese affluence is no less than a nationalist mandate, which ties a new national identity with a prescribed pattern of consumer behaviors.

Of course, consumer nationalism is not unique to contemporary China. Laura C. Nelson’s insightful analysis of the ways national identity is shaped by consumption and excess in South Korea provides a compelling example.⁸ When it comes to China, consumer nationalism is not as much about specifically consuming national brands as it is about publicly displaying material wealth and economic power. Conspicuous consumption, defined by the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen as the luxury and excessive consumption of the *nouveau riche* or the so-called leisure class, is a public display of economic prestige and social status.⁹ Contrary to critics’ warning against consumerism, the affluent class of Chinese indulge themselves in a collective competition of conspicuous consumption. In a significant way, the Internet aids and abets this unsalutary trend. Ying Jiang in her recent work on Chinese cyber-nationalism aptly argues that China’s cyberspace plays a pivotal role in spreading consumer values rather than spawning democratic ideals. She observes, “Interest in buying and personal pleasure is the most common feature of Chinese blogging. Ideologically, this has been called ‘consumerism as economic individualism.’ Chinese bloggers are self-managing consumers rather than free citizens. Their embrace of consumer values is a striking feature of China’s cyberspace.”¹⁰ The Internet gives rise to new business models and provides easier access to global consumer goods, while social media such as online blogs constitute a virtual public space for consumers to display their material riches. This display of riches, or *xuan fu* in Chinese, is characteristic of China’s Internet consumer culture. According to the 41st official

CINIC (China Internet Network Information Center) report, by the end of 2017, China's online user count had reached 772 million, more than half of its population, among which 753 million have daily access to the Internet via their mobile phones. With the integration of online blogging into everyday life in the digital and mobile era, blogging and boasting about conspicuous consumption has become routine for Chinese netizens. In cyberspace, the economic transaction of commodities occurs concomitantly with the social circulation of signs and images.

Jiang further points out, "Consumer culture in Chinese cyberspace, which the government encourages, in effect authorizes nationalist discourse. Personal freedom, nationalism and stability are empowered through the promotion of Chinese people's consumer identities."¹¹ That is to say, exhibitions of individual wealth and purchasing power are indicative of the nation's economic strength, and the formation of a new collective identity of the Chinese as neoliberal consumers evidences China's transformation into an affluent postindustrial society. In defiance of previous scholarship on Chinese cyber-nationalism that has focused on online pro-democracy activism, Jiang situates it in the permeation of consumerism in China's sociocultural scene. Consumption here should be understood in a broad way, referring to the consuming of food and goods as well as cultural products. Jiang's theoretical innovation sheds light on the understanding of Chinese eating broadcasts for two major reasons. For one thing, eating broadcasts promote excessive eating, a conspicuous way of consuming massive quantities of food. For another, the live-streaming or audiovisual display of excessive consumption of food in Chinese cyberspace was initiated by a bottom-up movement charged with nationalist sentiment. Thus, the emergence of Chinese eating broadcasts should be examined against the rise of conspicuous consumption by the affluent class in Chinese cyberspace. The popularity of this specific media genre is partially attributed to

Chinese cyber-nationalism that refashions the Chinese people as adept consumers of both food and new media. By contextualizing the Internet fad of Chinese eating broadcasts in the emerging discourse of Chinese affluence and the growing sentiment of consumer nationalism, I accentuate how sociocultural shifts are reflected in new media. Furthermore, it is also my firm belief that through scrutinizing the novel content and form of new media phenomena like Chinese eating broadcasts, we learn to grasp the significance and consequence of such sociocultural shifts that are still unfolding.

Roland Barthes, in his famous essay on the psychosociology of contemporary food consumption, elucidates the function of food within the psychological and social structures of consumer society: “For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.”¹² Food epitomizes social situations that have necessitated, enabled, or even prompted consumer practices. The pattern of food consumption is an important function and indicator of social structures. Barthes also highlights the social function of food as a communicative sign: “That is to say that it is not just an indicator of a set of more or less conscious motivations, but that it is a real sign, perhaps the functional unit of a system of communication.”¹³ Kevin Lattam notes that in China, the formation of a new consumer society is accompanied by conspicuous increases in food consumption: “At the same time as this massive growth in consumer spending on household, entertainment and electronic goods, there were accompanying increases in expenditure on food and leisure activities.”¹⁴ In an affluent society, eating is no longer just motivated by survival instincts, but by social and cultural purposes; thus, the intake of food is no longer measured by the standard of necessity but rather by that of symbolic value, such as consumer sovereignty and class distinction. Pierre

Bourdieu in his classic study on the social making of taste posits that “the antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition—linked to different distances from necessity—between the taste of necessity, which favors the most ‘filling’ and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty—which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function.”¹⁵ The taste of necessity is centered on the function of food as filling an empty stomach, whereas the taste of liberty, being freed from the physical constraint of necessity, prioritizes the social forms and media through which food is consumed.

As the taste of necessity is being superseded by the taste of liberty, China has transitioned to a new stage of consumer society. Bourdieu emphasizes the distinction between quantity and quality, and characterizes the taste of liberty as the consumption of quality or even luxury foods and goods. However, Barthes points out that quantity also plays a significant part in forming the taste of liberty. He claims that the consumption of “superabundant substances”¹⁶ such as sugar and wine, which elicit a gratifying psychosocial experience, signifies the distinct taste of the abundant societies of America and France. The tasting of superabundant substances through the form of excessive eating, as demonstrated by Chinese eating broadcasts, exemplifies what Bourdieu means by the taste of liberty. This taste of distinction reflects the material abundance of Chinese society, and signals the economic prestige and cultural prominence of the emergent affluent or leisure class in China. In like manner, Glen Donnar argues, “In many respects, *meokbang*’s celebration of consumption and excess in particular signals contemporary Korean affluence. In celebrating the capacity to eat without ends, *meokbang* disrupts Koreans’ historical relationship with food and hunger.”¹⁷ Donnar interprets the *mukbang* fad as part and parcel of the

discourse of affluence in contemporary South Korea, which attempts to overwrite the collective memory of historical hunger.

This celebration of consumption and excess, accompanied by historical revisionism and even collective amnesia, also permeates contemporary Chinese society. The discursive and visual construction of Chinese affluence often mobilizes images of Chinese cuisine. In 2012, China Central Television (CCTV) aired the first season of the food documentary series *A Bite of China* (*shejian shang de zhongguo*), which so far has been received with enthusiasm in and outside China. Besides publicizing the heterogeneous traditions of Chinese food culture, the narrated documentary conveys a significant message to the world—that is, people from all parts of China have been consuming an abundance and variety of food. With the camera zooming in on images of stylized and mouthwatering food, the documentary invites a gaze on Chinese affluence via food. With the same celebratory tone and visceral effect, Chinese eating broadcasts seem to be a grassroots counterpart to *A Bite of China*, contributing to the discourse (myth-making) of contemporary Chinese affluence. Taking Mizijun as an example: in her eating broadcasts, she travels and surveys the diversified cuisines consumed by the Chinese in different regions: western fast food, sushi, imported seafood, delicate pastries and dessert, as well as all kinds of local specialties. However, the construction of contemporary affluence obscures the collective memory of China's pre-affluence history, which is infused with the suffering of poverty and hunger.

The modern Chinese history of hunger is the central topic underpinning my discoveries and discussions in the first three chapters. The poverty-stricken Republican era of the 1930s, the devastating aftermath of misguided socialist engineering in the 1960s, the painful social transition to the post-socialist era in the 1980s: have all witnessed the mishap of hunger and starvation afflicting part of the

Chinese population. China's open door policy since 1978, in particular its integration into the global market circa 2001, has generated exponential economic growth for decades and lifted the majority of its population from poverty. While the international community is vigilantly watching China's breathtaking ascent as an economic powerhouse, China's material and financial wealth is widely advertised and celebrated by domestic media. It seems that China has transformed into an affluent society. However, under critical scrutiny, the dominance of the discourse of Chinese affluence comes at the cost of both the past and the present. On the one hand, the collective memory of the starving past is fading and eventually will be forgotten. Not only will the historical lessons that China should have learned from its previous mistakes and catastrophes be erased, but the struggles that heroic as well as ordinary individuals have endured and their efforts to overcome difficult situations will cease to be commemorated and validated by society. As long as the history of hunger is deemed as part of national shame (*guochi*), which would overshadow the glamor of the present economic achievement, suffering individuals are stripped of their right to remember and commemorate. It has become a social mandate to rewire collective memory and to recast the national imagery. On the other hand, China is not yet free from poverty, even if starvation is no longer a real concern. Statistics show that "in 2016 at least 5.7% of its rural population still lived in poverty, according to a recent UN report, with that number rising to as much as 10% in some western regions and 12% among some ethnic minorities."¹⁸ However the reality of poverty is scarcely covered in Chinese mainstream media unless in the context of the central government's anti-poverty (*fan pinkun*) measurements. Under the direct supervision of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, China has pledged to eradicate poverty (*xiaomie*) by 2020, which makes, more than anything else, a powerful statement about social amelioration fueled by Chinese

affluence. In other words, the abject reality of poverty is rhetorically masked by the celebratory discourse of development and affluence, as well as by the grand narrative of the party-state's benevolent social project.

Concurring with Glen Donnar's historical analysis, I take one step further to diagnose the celebration of conspicuous eating on the Internet as a psychosocial symptom caused by a drastic disruption of history. While the collective memory of historical hunger is suppressed, displays of contemporary affluence develop as a form of over-compensation. The dramatic re-orientation of social mentalities and cultural behaviors reflects both the positive aspect of China's so-called economic miracle and the negative aspect of the untold story of historical amnesia. Therefore, although the unprecedented popularity of eating broadcasts in Chinese new media seems to manifest China's entry into a "post-hunger" era, the unapologetic celebration of consumption and excess in the public space of new media actually provokes more urgent questions about both the past and the present. The historical memory of hunger and the existing reality of poverty should be called to mind, especially at the time of their impending "eradication." Against this emergent sociocultural shift in contemporary China, my project on hunger intervenes as a historical recall and an ethical response.

Moreover, through the lens of feminist analysis, I discern that the success of women eating broadcasters is also attributed to the visual shock constructed by the incongruous image of a slender female body binge eating. Despite the regular intake of an extraordinary amount of food, the body of Mizijun remains ideally slim on the screen. Thus, the seeming liberation and celebration of women's appetite and desire is restricted by the limits circumscribed by the social ideal of the slim female body. Ironically, the online display of women's binge eating conspires with what Susan Bordo refers as the ideology of hunger, which has triggered the epidemic of women's

eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia in the west. The widespread rumors about *mukbang* hostesses being bulimic and the reported cases of women audiences compensating for their own restricted diets with visual and vicarious eating testify to the biopolitics of gender authorized by this new cultural phenomenon. The gendered body performance in eating broadcasts is symptomatic of the hegemonic culture of slenderness, which is driven by “a deep fear of ‘the Female,’ with all its more nightmarish archetypal associations of voracious hungers and sexual insatiability.”¹⁹ Hence, I argue that eating broadcasts reinforce the administration over the female body in the age of consumer culture. Transforming women’s visceral appetite into a spectacle of visual hunger, *mukbang* disguises the reality of dieting with the hyperreality of binge eating. The emerging problem of eating disorders against the backdrop of social affluence and women’s empowerment is broached by this complex media phenomenon, which opens up my discussion on women’s hunger, in the form of voluntary food deprivation or self-starvation. As Bordo aptly puts it, “every proposed hallmark of ‘underlying psychopathology’ in eating disorders has been deconstructed to reveal a more widespread cultural disorder.”²⁰ Although disparate from the situations of starvation discussed in previous chapters, women’s pathological practice of food deprivation in the case of anorexia or bulimia is also coerced by social and economic circumstances, and hence, indicative of social and cultural disorders.

The Vernacular Creativity of the Everyday in New Media

The complexity and heterogeneity of new media present a daunting challenge to any researcher in the field, and eating broadcasts are no exception. Searching “*chibo*” on the Chinese Internet returns results consisting of countless videos and other forms of broadcasting: parents videotaping their babies inhaling food; housewives televising their cooking and food tasting; college students chatting with online viewers while

eating takeout in their dorms; or a group of friends sharing their first experience at a newly-opened buffet. It is almost impossible to define the content and form of eating broadcasts. Actually, being a popular subgenre of online live-streaming (*wanglou zhibo*), *chibo* is accessible to every Internet user with a webcam, and they can shape and define this new media genre on their own terms. The most-used Chinese live-streaming app, Kwai, with 700 million users worldwide, claims that it “provides everyone with the platform to record and share their lives,” and that it serves “men, women, or children with different routines in different places.”²¹ The manifesto of Kwai echoes YouTube’s world-changing exhortation to “Broadcast Yourself” in its early days and embodies the spirit of the user-led revolution of Web 2.0,²² which is spearheaded by video-sharing and live-streaming platforms. Centered on user-generated content (UGC), these platforms rally their customers into publicizing and sharing images and videos of their everyday lives. The latest data from iiMedia Research²³ demonstrate that by the end of 2017, users of live-streaming platforms in China have reached 400 million. The data also show that only 19.8% of mobile phone users have never watched live-streaming on their personal gadgets.²⁴ Live-streaming has become an integral part of digital literacy and social aptitude, especially among millennials. The openness of its platforms and the elevation of the everyday on these platforms are the keys to the popularity of live-streaming among users and viewers. The vernacular language and mundane content of eating broadcasts are easily relatable to an Internet audience. The widespread impact of eating broadcasts has redefined the meaning of food and the practice of daily eating in the age of digital and mobile culture. The streaming camera highlights “the elements of *display* in food,” in Barthes’ words,²⁵ and the act of eating generates media content and cultural production. “With the convergence of technologies and the incorporation of recording features on the mobile phone, food becomes a site for multiple iterations from

autobiography and memory making to self-representation,” as asserted by Yasmin Ibrahim.²⁶

For vloggers and broadcasters, live-streaming platforms enable them to attribute a social significance to their everyday lives and to imagine a virtual community of their own making. To illustrate the social and cultural aspects of food blogging, Ibrahim states that “marking life’s everydayness and paces of routine through images, communicating these everyday images and inviting the gaze of others authenticates everyday life experiences; capturing the ephemerality of life while archiving and displaying the banal and the usual.”²⁷ The digital display of the everyday, authorized by advanced communication technologies, is exemplary bottom-up cultural production. Michel de Certeau’s theorization of the everyday unpacks the productive efforts embedded in everyday consumption, and he emphasizes the distinction between two levels of operation: whereas “strategies are the instrumental actions of large institutions; tactics are the resisting practices of individuals and groups.”²⁸ In light of Certeau’s theory, self-broadcasting as an everyday practice is “tactical in character,”²⁹ for it allows a certain degree of resistance and sovereignty for ordinary consumers to operate on their own terms. At the same time that they consume the “mediated publicness”³⁰ produced by the platforms, which empowers consumers of new media to transgress the social and spatial borderlines separating the private from the public, consumers are also producing personalized media content for other consumers. In this way, the everyday experiences of ordinary people, such as cooking and eating, are re-invented as self-generated cultural products for public consumption. Following de Certeau’s line of argument, Jean Burgess explores the creative efforts embedded in everyday media practices. She postulates, “In place of resistance, there is at least the potential, whether realized or not, for cultural participation and self-representation.”³¹ This type of amateur cultural production is crystalized by Burgess

as “vernacular creativity,” which connotes “the wide range of everyday creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chatting) practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture or commercial creative practice.”³² The user-generated content on new media platforms epitomizes vernacular creativity that springs “from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions.”³³

Eating broadcasts are a conspicuous example of consumer production and vernacular creativity on live-streaming platforms. Media users become prosumers in the sense that they are simultaneously involved in consuming and producing media content. Based on their in-depth investigation on YouTube’s participatory culture, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green conclude, “Everyday creativity is no longer either trivial or quaintly authentic, but instead occupies central stage in discussions of the media industries and their future in the context of digital culture. Consumption is no longer necessarily seen as the end point in an economic chain of production but as a dynamic site of innovation and growth in itself.”³⁴ Eating broadcasts illustrate the everyday creativity of media prosumers, comprised by the performance of eating with gusto and the distribution of this performance in cyberspace. That is to say, the everyday practice of eating is enacted with spontaneous creativity and then consumed by the public as media content. Bottom-up participation and amateur creativity have engendered a decentralized and heterogeneous media culture in cyberspace. The vernacular and inclusive characteristic of user-led media platforms is responsible for the diversified form and content of eating broadcasts on the Internet, evidencing the autonomy and creativity of consumers. Eating broadcasters produce personalized shows via their tactical decisions on how to employ the media as well as on how to perform the content. As discussed in previous paragraphs, the rise of consumer nationalism has tied media consumption to national identity. With passive consumers

transforming into active prosumers, media practices also play a crucial role in constructing users' individual subjectivities and collective identities, as well as in shaping their relationships with the nation-state. Hence, Chinese eating broadcasters, through showing (off) the gratification of food consumption, not only identify with the emergent discourse of Chinese affluence, but also perform Chinese affluence on the individual level. As a matter of fact, their active participation in displaying material richness and gastronomic delight is part and parcel of Chinese affluence. Negotiations between consumers, media, and the nation-state converge in the milieu of everyday life.

However, in the second volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau also observes, "Ordinary life has been made into a vast territory offered to the media's colonization."³⁵ He cautions us against the tyranny of media in a way that also applies to the user-led new media: whereas the platforms constitute an online public space for self-expression, communication, and community formation, they are still "constructed on this strategic model."³⁶ With underlying social, commercial, and ideological rationalities, media corporations operate as "a subject of will and power"³⁷ in order to circumscribe a *proper* space for customer uses and media practices. The commercial enterprises of new media manage their systems and algorithms primarily for corporate interests. Although they are not content producers in the strict sense, these platforms are deeply involved in the production process and are directly responsible for the quality and visibility of the final products. Through gatekeeping, categorizing, promoting, rewarding, and even soliciting, the media companies supervise and, to some extent, control what the Internet audience can see and how they see it. Burgess and Green insightfully point out that new media platforms are "convergences of market and non-market modes of cultural production in the digital environment, where marginal, subcultural, and community-based modes of cultural production are

by design incorporated within the commercial logics of major media corporations.”³⁸ That is to say, the tactics deployed by users and consumers are subsumed into the commercial rationality upheld by media corporations. Everyday creativity embodied by self-broadcasting is also tailored to the demand of the market.

Although everyone, men, women, and children included, can broadcast their everyday lives in personalized ways, which attests to the democratizing potential of new media, the market still controls the distribution of resources and products with its invisible hand. In this context, the scarce resource and valuable commodity is human attention, in the form of views, likes, and retweets on the Internet. As cultural products, eating broadcasts are tailored to the tastes and interests of consumers, and the visibility or exposure rate of every BJ is determined by consumer preferences. Based on its financial analysis, iiMedia Research creates a business model for the live-streaming industry: the promotion of every BJ depends on adaptation to market demand, publicity of platforms, and professional management.³⁹ All players in the industry, directly or indirectly, have shaped the content and form of eating broadcasts. In the case of the transnational fad of *mukbang*, despite the spontaneous and heterogeneous creativity of individual BJs, the most-subscribed ones in Japan, South Korea, and Mainland China, are surprisingly, or not, alike. Yuka Kinoshita from Japan, who purportedly started the trend when she was a competitive eater on TV shows; Park Seo-Yeon (nicknamed the Diva) from South Korea, who was interviewed and reported on by several mainstream western media as the face of the trend; and Mizijun from Mainland China, who quickly rose to stardom with millions of viewers and followers, are all good-looking women in their twenties or early thirties, who broadcast their voracious appetites in front of the camera with visceral affect and personal style. This intriguing phenomenon bespeaks the homogenizing forces of the

global market and the transnational media. The ubiquitous audience preference for hungry women broadcasters also warrants critical investigation.

While the following analysis revolves around Mizijun's media trajectory and rise to celebrity, I do not want to reduce the transnational fad of *mukbang* to just one story. Nor do I believe that Mizijun is representative of average participants in eating broadcasts. Instead, her story rivets me for a threefold reason: first of all, her phenomenal rise to fame as an eating broadcaster is a result of the intricate interplays between prosumers, media (both the industry and its platformativity), and the market. Meanwhile, multifarious social and cultural factors contribute to the making of this media phenomenon. Secondly, Mizijun has adroitly navigated various media platforms, live-streaming, and video-sharing, as well as traditional TV, to successfully promote herself as an Internet influencer. Therefore, her media trajectory leads me to explore the specific functions and operations of different media forms. I believe that the case of Mizijun illuminates Thomas Lamarre's notion of platformativity, which addresses "the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and collective—a kind of performativity via platforms."⁴⁰ Finally, I am curious to explore how her gender and sexuality play a role in her eating broadcasts and why displays of women's hunger attract millions of viewers. I also want to investigate the rumor that she secretly suffers from bulimia, which has clouded her broadcasting career. Although it has never been confirmed, the rumor has brought the issue of women's eating disorders to light and provoked heated discussions in Chinese cyberspace. However, Mizijun's reticence on the matter submits to the stigmatization of the bulimic woman. I would argue that while the display of material richness and gastronomic gratification in eating broadcasts is the epitome of Chinese affluence, the bulimic hostess in the shadows is its pathological syndrome.

Mizijun's Media Persona on the Participatory Platform

Mizijun began her amateur eating broadcast career on DouyuTV in April 2016, one of the first BJs on the Chinese live-streaming platform after it became independent and changed its name from AcFun Live in January 2015. Similar to Twitch (a US media platform owned by Amazon), DouyuTV specializes in live games, but also advertises personal broadcasting and hosts independent broadcasters of all sorts. On the platform, BJs own their personal broadcasting channels, referred to as rooms (*fangjian*). On the screen display of a broadcasting room (as demonstrated by Figure 1), at the center is a video-streaming window, to the right of which is a chat window for viewers to instantaneously post their requests or comments, relevant or irrelevant to the broadcast itself. All comments are displayed on the screen for viewers to read while watching the stream. BJs respond by granting viewers' requests, answering their questions, or simply reading out their comments when they are not chewing or swallowing food. The communicative exchanges between viewers and BJs "contribute to constructing the narrative of live-streaming broadcasts between a BJ and viewers, in the form of ordinary or straight talk."⁴¹ This instantaneous two-way interaction simulates a spatiotemporal proximity between BJs and viewers, and the small talk is an integral part of the broadcasts, attracting many viewers. On the screenshot of Mizijun's eating broadcast (Figure 1), some viewers are asking her to say more about the location of the buffet or the taste of its food; some are poking fun at her enormous appetite; some are commenting on her looks and manner; and still others are simply sending spam of meaningless signs and emojis. Whether in positive, negative, or minimal ways, viewers respond to Mizijun's eating broadcast via their real-time requests and comments. Viewers' participation can potentially change the streaming for better or for worse. Therefore, it is an imperative for BJs to encourage or prompt viewers' participation by creating a friendlier environment for interaction or directly addressing them to solicit responses. It also depends on BJs to make

viewers' voices heard, as they can select and read aloud some of the comments.

Calling out the commentators' names during the streaming is a common and effective strategy to reach out to individual viewers and to create personal bonds. Usually, the usernames of fans are frequently mentioned by BJs, a gesture of honoring viewers' loyalty as well as a sign of intimacy.



*Figure 1
The Streaming
Screen of Chibo*

Noticeably, in the screenshot above, viewers are also communicating among themselves: answering others' questions about the location of the buffet, echoing others' remarks, or commenting that none of the viewers have sent Mizijun any tokens of reward during the streaming. While the interactions between viewers and BJs construct personal connections between the two, which often leads to an aggregation of fans, the interactions among viewers themselves simulate social intimacy, which forms the emotional foundation of an imagined community in cyberspace. Benedict Anderson's classical study on print culture concludes that the innovation of a medium generates a new way of imagining community, as "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation."⁴² In a conspicuously similar way, the joint forces of neoliberal individualism, consumer culture, and digital communication technologies propel a new form of imagined community. Antonetta

Bruno and Somin Chung's article sheds light on the formation of *mukbang* community. They argue that the first step towards an online community is for viewers who have never known each other to "recognize other viewers' presence through the chat screen." The social presence of other viewers, which is visualized by the chat screen, transforms the personal experience of watching *mukbang* into a social activity of sharing. At the same time, "an essential prerequisite for the existence of virtual space is the participation of agents who desire to communicate."⁴³ The desire to communicate in cyberspace is intensified by the convenience of using colloquial language and the protection of anonymity. The imagined community of print culture privileges print languages in the same way that the imagined community in cyberspace endorses vernacular language and digital literacy. Viewers are already equipped with the language and the tools for online communication. Whereas readers passively receive a uniformity of information in print culture, online viewers can actively communicate their diversified opinions. As the sense of imagined community is generated through real-time communication, *mukbang* viewers congregate as a "viewing community" mediated by the platform. iiMedia Research's 2016 annual report on China's live-streaming industry points out that only 29.1% of viewers rank BJs' talents as their top interest. 28.5% of viewers are mostly interested in the frequent interactions initiated by BJs, and another 21.2% are mostly excited about the enthusiastic participations of other viewers.⁴⁴ That is to say, it is the interactive and participatory functions of live-streaming that have attracted most of its audience. The personal connection and the community-building generated by real-time communication fulfill the viewers' need for socializing.

A distinctive feature of Chinese live-streaming is the prevalence of "*danmu*," — a function that allows users to post real-time comments while watching the stream and to plaster these comments on top of the stream screen. "*Danmu*," literally means "bullet

screen” or “barrage,” and the military reference metaphorizes a flood of comments that blocks viewers from seeing the stream. The Chinese term is borrowed from the Japanese term “*danmaku*” with the same meaning, and the commentary sharing system was first popularized by the Japanese ACG (animation, comic, game) video portal Niconico. But the function of “*danmu*” is endorsed by Chinese netizens to a much greater degree, to the extent that it has revolutionized watching videos on the Internet. The quantity of “*danmu*” even becomes an index of popularity to evaluate online streams and videos. When viewers’ comments overlay the entire screen so that the experience of viewing the stream is interrupted, the social presence of others becomes undeniable and even intrusive. The attention of the individual viewer is diverted from the content of the BJ’s broadcasting to the social environment of the media platform. The prominence of embedded comments on the stream screen draws out the technicality and sociality underlying digital media. As demonstrated on the screenshot, the comments on top of the stream screen are posted in small fonts that are hard to read. When a barrage of comments flies in and out of the screen instantly, viewers hardly have time to decode the flood of information. Replete with spam, the flood of information may not even be worth decoding. That is to say, the communicative function of “*danmu*” hinges not as much on accentuating the input of information from viewers as it does on drawing viewers’ attention to the social presence of others. Moreover, the military metaphor of “barrage” conjures up the imagery of a heated battle to comment and communicate. In “*danmu*,” the comments that are crammed together and overlay each other embody an intensified desire for communication. It is this desire for communication that fuels the ongoing exchanges and interactions among the Internet audience.

Another way that viewers can contribute to live-streaming is to gift BJs tokens of reward that can be purchased with and exchanged for money. Circulating on the platform as virtual currency, tokens of reward account for the largest source of income for BJs, which makes viewers their patrons. The reward function on the

platform is given a teasingly condescending name: “*da shang*.” The term, literally meaning “to hit a gratuity,” originates from a vernacular usage in traditional Chinese, and connotes an act of gifting money out of the master’s generosity and benevolence. Although the allusion to the master’s patronizing attitude towards his subordinates is meant half-jokingly, the term “*da shang*” bestows on viewers a dominating power in the relationship. To some extent, their patronage determines the fate of a BJ’s career and livelihood. The quantity of “*da shang*” also becomes an index of popularity to evaluate BJs. When a viewer of Mizijun’s eating broadcast mentions that no one has gifted her any rewards, the indication is that the audience lacks interest in the stream or in Mizijun, a signal for the BJ to spice up her performance. Paradoxically, “*da shang*” masks and simultaneously brings to the fore the implications of consumption embedded in the commercial function of live-streaming platforms. On the one hand, the function facilitates monetary transactions between viewers, broadcasters, and media companies. Viewers purchase tokens of reward from the platforms and gift them to BJs whom they like. BJs earn their rewards and cash out for money. The platforms can charge BJs for service and commission fees. This business model generates considerable revenue for live-streaming platforms. Hillhouse Capital’s⁴⁵ financial report (Figure 2) concludes that China’s live-streaming industry operates at a compelling monetization rate, significantly higher than online games and traditional TV. However, on the other hand, the function of “*da shang*” disguises the viewers’ (voluntary) payment as a gift and masks the act of consumption as an assertion of superior social status. Downplaying the commercial transaction between viewers and BJs, it also belittles the productive value of BJs’ vernacular creativity, as they are gifted tokens of reward instead of being paid for their cultural production.

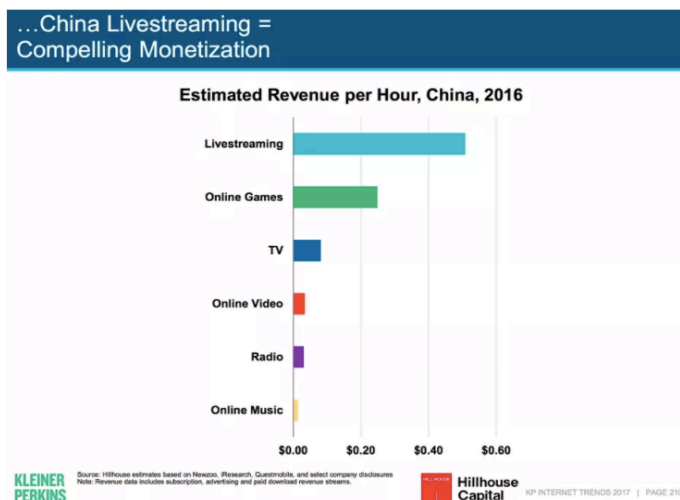


Figure 2
The Monetization
Rate of Media

However, the truth is, to compete for audience attention and to strive for higher exposure rates, BJs take creative efforts seriously, which is a means of distinguishing themselves from the rest. Bruno and Chung characterize this type of creativity on the part of BJs as “personalization”—to imprint a personal signature on the broadcast.

BJs need to develop their personal skill and know-how by creating a personal and unique character of their own. Given that the three characteristics of *mōkpang*—to eat a lot, to eat fast, and to eat with relish—have a fairly structured narrative, it is the personalization of the *mokpang* which differentiates one BJ from another. The efforts that BJs put into imprinting a personal touch challenges the general notion that “all you need to do is to eat a lot.”⁴⁶

The three defining characters of *mukbang*, “to eat a lot, to eat fast, and to eat with relish,” fail to explain why it is Mizijun but not other eating machines that has been wooed by media. To answer that question, the personal touch within her broadcasts deserves a close examination. Usually, the personalization of broadcasts centers on the look and personality of the BJ. Mizijun belongs to the category of “the girl next door” (*linjia nuhai*): ordinary, cute, a little bit chatty, but without any outstanding or threatening physical and personal attributes. Judging from her attire and the setting of her room in the broadcasts, she also comes from a humble family background. Thus, her most extraordinary personal trait is her insatiable hunger. Her ordinary look renders her familiar, relatable, and most of all, authentic in the eyes of viewers. One

noticeable singularity about Mizijun is her Chongqing accent while speaking Mandarin in streaming: for example, she often confuses the retroflex sounds “zh, ch, sh” with the non-retroflex ones “z, c, s,” making it harder to understand her, especially when she is talking with her mouth full. Although audience responses are bifurcated on the issue of her accent (a love-or-hate bifurcation), they all recognize the “flaw” as Mizijun’s personal marker, which makes her more real (as opposed to being pretentious or unrealistically perfect).

One particularly well-received personal imprint of Mizijun’s eating broadcasts is the element of romantic comedy. Her boyfriend, nicknamed “the Feeder” (*siyang yuan*) participates in a lot of her streams. “The Feeder” is sometimes the cameraman in charge of filming, and he also plays a mocking role in the broadcast. As he diligently brings more dishes to the table for Mizijun, he makes fun of her gluttony. Their bickering in the stream is funny and endearing. The contrast between how little he eats and how much she gorges upon for every meal also creates a hilarious effect. The element of romantic comedy, unique to Mizijun’s eating broadcasts, humanizes the female eating machine and supplements the visceral gratification of eating with some emotional stimulus. The flirtatious play with gender stereotypes, i.e., women being responsible for feeding children and preparing food for family, seems to reverse the gendered power dynamic and to validate women’s desires to eat and consume. Nevertheless, designating her boyfriend as her feeder, Mizijun jokes about herself as a docile animal waiting to be fed. The analogy to a hungry animal problematically attributes primitiveness to her appetite, but affectively creates a persona of cuteness. Global mass media, particularly in East Asia, have popularized cuteness, which is mainly associated with the infantile, the feminine, and the animal-like. Cuteness is perceived as less threatening and more vulnerable than the toughness of the

masculine. Mizijun's animal-like cuteness is characterized by her animalistic hunger, which suggests her passivity and dependence on the male feeder.

Sianne Ngai's foundational study on the affects and aesthetics of cuteness reveals that "the formal properties associated with cuteness—smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy—call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency."⁴⁷ Her remarks elucidate that vulnerability and pitifulness of others are aestheticized and consumed as the affect of cuteness, whereby the dominance of the consuming subject is established. She then concludes, "cuteness names an aesthetic en-counter with an exaggerated difference in power that does something to ordinary or communicative speech. More specifically, the concept names a relationship to a socially disempowered other that actively transforms the speech of the subject who imposes the aesthetic quality on that other."⁴⁸ The rhetoric of cuteness disguises the power play between the subject and the social other. It also aestheticizes and commodifies the affect deriving from power disparity and imbalance. Mizijun's persona of cuteness appeals to widespread taste. But her effective strategy of self-promotion complies with, rather than undermines, the sociocultural disempowerment of women. Whereas the public display of her insatiable hunger generates power and pleasure (for both her and a female audience) by transgressing social inscriptions of gender roles and gendered bodies, her transgressive performance is counterbalanced by her compliance with the gendered discourse of cuteness. The indication is that her hunger and desire, although voracious, are passive, non-threatening, and subjugated to the management of her male guardian. In this sense, the mocking of "the Feeder" in the stream embodies the disciplining voice of the benevolent but still authoritarian man.

Mizijun's media persona as an unpretentious, cute, and hungry woman broadcaster distinguishes her from other BJs. The likability of this persona considerably

contributes to the wide popularity of her broadcasts. Her media influence and value are quickly recognized and tapped into by other media and industries. She has participated in various entertainment shows on TV and the Internet, and has also appeared in several advertising and philanthropy campaigns. Mizijun's cross-media presence further consolidates her media persona, which circulates as an image commodity and produces exchange value in the market. Gabriella Lukács defines the concept of image commodity in her study on Japanese television celebrities (*tarento*): "The only form of value that *tarento* have is exchange value that they acquire in the process of their circulation. As the television, film, and advertising industries cast them in new roles across media platforms and genres, meanings and feelings are associated with them, and their media personas evolve. In other words, they become image commodities."⁴⁹ The media personas of celebrities are commodified so that they can circulate across media platforms and genres. The image commodities derive their exchange-value from the transaction of social meanings and affective messages attached to the media personas. Mizijun's personal signatures of authenticity, cuteness, and binge eating are valued by certain social propensities and cultural aesthetics. Lukács also asserts, "the transformation of the *tarento* into image commodities was a symptom of an emerging new economy characterized by a shift of production away from material things to immaterial commodities, such as image or affect."⁵⁰ In a comparable way, the new stage of China's consumer culture is witnessing the rise of the consumption of image and affect. Chinese affluence is also defined by the proliferation of image commodities and the emergence of affective consumption.

Eating with Eyes: The Visuality and Performativity of Food

Besides the configuration of her media persona, Mizijun undertakes more creative efforts in framing the camera and directing the shooting. It is crucial to the

effectiveness of eating broadcasting to simulate the authenticity of eating experience as well as the affect of gratification, so that viewers can imagine themselves eating through BJs. At the same time, BJs, driven by the goal of attracting attention and patronage from viewers, strive to impress with the amount and the ways they eat. Bruno and Chung observe, “More BJs place the camera on the same level as themselves so that viewers can feel like they are eating with the BJs.”⁵¹ This shooting technique addresses the difficulties of emplacing disembodied gazes and forging connections between bodies at a distance. As their gazes are positioned at the same level as the BJs’, viewers can easily picture themselves sitting and eating at the same table with BJs. The eye-level camera emplaces the distant viewers within the stream, and hence, bridges the gap between visibility and reality.

Some of Mizijun’s eating broadcasts are recorded at eye level, especially when she wants to emphasize that she is not dining alone, but with the company of “the Feeder.” However, more of her broadcasts are shot with a high angle, as shown by Figure 3. The camera is placed above eye level to create a frame that looks down on her. The visual effect is to make cakes on the table, which is placed close to the camera, look bigger, and at the same time, to make Mizijun, who is sitting behind the table, appear smaller. The high angle is also used by other hungry women broadcasters including Yuka Kinoshita. As mentioned before, the incongruous image of a binge-eating woman with a slim body elicits a visual shock for viewers: how can she eat so much and still stay so thin? The high angle shot enhances this visual shock by exaggerating the mass of food Mizijun manages to eat for one meal, on the one hand, and conferring petite-ness on her, on the other. In Figure 3, this effect is further exaggerated by Mizijun sitting on the floor instead of on the sofa that is behind her. Hiding her body behind and below the table, she appears tiny in front of a tableful of

cakes. The visual mismatch between the slender female body and the woman's enormous appetite is capitalized upon for its shock value.



Figure 3
The Taste of Cuteness
in Mizijun's Chibo

Ironically, the slim ideal imposed on women is not deconstructed by this public display of women's appetites and desires; instead it is reinforced and pushed to the verge of insanity, considering the feasibility of binge-eating and staying thin at the same time. For viewers, the pleasure of watching the female broadcaster's transgressive eating is guilt-free when her appetite does not seem to ruin the taste of cuteness or the social norm of the slim female body type. The visual images of the female broadcaster's thin body lend force to the propagation of this dominant discourse. Susan Bordo has ingeniously unpacked the schizophrenic logic of the patriarchal consumer culture underpinning the slim ideal: "Conditioned to lose control at the mere sight of desirable products, we can master our desires only by creating rigid defenses against them. The slender body codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contradictions of consumer culture."⁵² Whereas consumer society is fueled by proliferation of desires, the rigid administration governing women's bodies is premised on self-discipline and self-defense against such desires. The case of hungry women broadcasters further aggravates the contradictory situation: the unreserved celebration of consumer culture and social affluence mandates women's submission to desires and temptations, such as mouthwatering food, but it is still an imperative for them to control their bodies

and maintain a slender body type. With the contradiction of consumer culture unresolved, the physiology and metabolism of female broadcasters' bodies is mystified: their bodies must have some abnormal features to function in this exceptional way. (That is, of course, unless they are bulimic, the topic of which I will dive into later in this chapter). Medical science is called upon to explain the mysterious phenomenon: Yuka Kinoshita once broadcasted herself being examined by a physician, who suggested that Yuka had an exceptionally plastic stomach. But this kind of quasi-scientific opinion only sanctions the myth of the female body. Adeptly manipulating the camera angle to frame the spectacle of her thin body binge eating, Mizijun capitalizes on the shock value of the mysterious female body and feeds into the pathological taste of slenderness.

Besides the use of a high angle shot, Mizijun also creatively interacts with the camera to simulate the authenticity of her eating experience as well as the affect of gratification for the sake of viewers. Bruno and Chung also observe that because of the static camera, "It is the BJ who moves food close to the camera while zooming the image." They argue that "This technique creates more empathy with the viewers, and once the food is shown getting closer and closer to the camera, it seems much bigger and visually more appealing. For BJs, the camera is an alter-ego as well as an extension of their persona that can be almost touched by the viewer's eyes."⁵³ As most BJs use webcams or built-in smartphone cameras for broadcasting, their shooting techniques are far from sophisticated. The static camera is often preferred, and without a cameraman, the focus cannot be zoomed in and out as needed. BJs themselves have to move close to the camera in order to zoom in on the image of food. This shooting technique is effective in arousing the appetites of viewers, for it is as if the food is handed over to them, or even sent directly into their mouths. I would argue that instead of being the alter-ego of BJs, the camera/screen is an interface that

both BJs and viewers can reach out to touch. With their hands moving food closer to the camera, BJs appear to be pressing the food onto the screen. As viewers are faced with the close-up image of food, it is as if they have a taste of it through their eyes. Via the interface of the screen BJs and viewers seem to share the food and almost touch each other. It also elicits the effect of food spilling out of the screen, blurring the boundary between the virtual and the real. The technique evokes the affect of gratification from eating by stimulating different senses of perception. The sense of vision triggers the sense of taste, which is mediated by the sense of touch. As food is dissociated from the actual act of eating, it “bypasses the nose and the mouth,” and is subjected to extreme visual, and for that matter tactile and verbal, elaboration. Our eyes let us ‘taste’ food at a distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell.”⁵⁴

Laura Marks’s groundbreaking book *The Skin of the Film* contributes to the phenomenology of film with her theoretical innovation of haptic visuality:

Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision. Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.⁵⁵

Haptic visuality and optical visuality stand for two distinctive viewing experiences generated by different shooting techniques. When optical vision alone is privileged, the camera frames the object in distance and in perspective, so that viewers can perceive it in deep space. In contrast, when different senses of perception are to be activated together, the camera moves close to the object as if to touch it. “In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch,”⁵⁶ and a clear vision of the object is replaced by its tactility. Thus, viewers are stimulated to graze on (that is, to touch with their eyes and mouths), rather than gaze on the filmed object. The

screen, as the skin of the film, can be touched by eyes. The implication of haptic visuality is far-reaching: it revolutionizes the conventional conception of film as a visual art. Instead, “cinematic perception is not merely (audio)visual but synesthetic, an act in which the senses and the intellect are not conceived of as separate.”⁵⁷ Film and video are both intellectual and sensual, and they are generative of desires.

Viewers are prompted to respond to sensual stimuli, as if to interact with the screen.

The concept of haptic visuality also illustrates the elevation of senses in phenomenology and affect studies, which “invite us to read the bodily witness of the proximal senses not as regrettably obscuring our capacity to appreciate things as disinterested spectators but as an alliance between object and subject.”⁵⁸ Haptic visuality triggers the viewer’s bodily witness and response to the image.

Although in a less systematic and sophisticated manner, the shooting technique used by eating broadcasters like Mizijun also generates the effect of haptic visuality in their videos. In the screenshot of one of Mizijun’s eating broadcasts (Figure 4), she picks up a piece of chicken with chopsticks and moves it close to the camera, as if to send the food into viewers’ mouths. Viewers are spurred to imagine the touch of the piece of chicken with their eyes, noses, and mouths. Their senses of vision, smell, and taste are all activated as their brains are stimulated to retrieve sensual memories from past experiences. As Marks has pointed out, in haptic visuality, optical vision is subordinated to the sense of touch, as vision is often limited and blurred. Because the camera does not automatically focus on the piece of chicken in moving, it is hard for viewers to see it clearly, even in a close-up. Thus, the primary function of this technique is not to help viewers observe the food in close detail, but to simulate a tactile contact between viewers and the food. The viewers do not need to conceive the image of food in an intellectual way, but to desire the touch of food in a sensual way.

As shown on the screenshot, Mizijun slightly sticks her tongue out, which intimates that she is going to savor the chicken with her tongue and lips. It is also a suggestive expression of intense desire, usually for food or sex. The slightly-stuck-out tongue can be sexualized, for it transgresses the social etiquette of eating and draws attention to her private body parts. With such a sexually suggestive expression, Mizijun projects food as an object of desire and her body as a desiring machine. That is also to say, her hunger for the food is deliberately expressed and performed. At the same time, her embodied performance of hunger is sexualized. In other words, “in terms of food visibility, food is not just consumed orally and ingested, but consumed through other senses and a sense of play and desire.”⁵⁹ The sensuality of food is teased out by Mizijun’s play with the camera and her performative expression of hunger. When the food reaches the camera, Mizijun habitually pauses for a few seconds, adding a temporal dimension to haptic visibility. Then, she puts the piece of food in her mouth and describes its texture and taste while chewing. Although Mizijun does not have the culinary vocabulary of professional hosts of food television, she compensates with exaggerated facial expressions and body gestures. She takes in a mouthful of food each time in such a way that the movement of her chewing mouth is conspicuous on the screen. Embodying the act of eating and the affect of gratification, Mizijun performs an act of hungering for and gorging on food for the sake of the viewers’ pleasure.



Figure 4
Haptic Visibility in
Chibo

To sum up, Mizijun's signature technique of moving and framing food in broadcasting simulates the haptic visuality of digital images, which effectively arouses viewers' desire to touch food on the screen with their eyes as a substitute for eating. Then, in a sequence of movements, Mizijun performs an act of hungering and gorging for the sake of viewers' pleasure. That is to say, viewers' consumption of food is authenticated and embodied by the vicarious eating of the BJ. As Pauline Adema puts it, vicarious eating is a "visual and psychological consumption,"⁶⁰ which paradoxically comprises psychophysical gratification and visceral hunger at the same time. Vicarious consumption is authorized by visual and digital technologies. In our time, image and video have become the most prominent commodities, although they are still deployed as media for other commodities. Fredric Jameson sees the historical rise of video in human society and culture as a marker of late capitalism:

If we are willing to entertain the hypothesis that capitalism can be periodized by the quantum leaps or technological mutations by which it responds to its deepest systemic crises, then it may become a little clearer why and how video—so closely related to the dominant computer and information technology of the late, or third, stage of capitalism—has a powerful claim for being the art form par excellence of late capitalism.⁶¹

If late capitalism is characterized by the permeation and domination of consumption in society, its default art form, video, has transformed the method of consuming, or engendered new ways of consuming.

According to Bruno and Chung, the effect of vicarious eating is the primary drive for viewers to subscribe to eating broadcasts: "the main beneficiaries of vicarious pleasures are especially individuals who eat alone but desire a social presence, these who are on a diet, and those who have health problems; all three types particularly enjoy the vicarious aspect of *mökpang*."⁶² The vicarious aspect of eating broadcasts supplies the social and physical functions that viewers have been deprived of in everyday life. This vicarious function evidences the collapsing of the actual and the virtual worlds. Rather than being segregated from reality, the virtual world

compensates everyday life with what is desired but physically unattainable. It is a primary function of media platforms, as explicated by Thomas Lamarre: “the platform may operate in a therapeutic or quasi-psychiatric manner, providing a kind of ideal supplement that smooths over the jolting, even painful, everyday transitions between disciplinary sites and household, making life feel liveable after all.”⁶³ The therapeutic effect is described by many *mukbang* viewers: their symptoms of stress, loneliness, and despondence are assuaged by the gratification from watching others’ eating on their laptops.

Echoing Bruno and Chung’s finding about the social and physical compensation granted by viewing eating broadcasts, Lamarre unpacks the psychosociological factors underpinning vicarious eating in greater detail:

First, there is commensality: eating is social; people want to share meals with somebody or other. Second, people like eating but want to avoid gaining weight. Usually, this desire is attributed to women. BBC News, for instance, quotes a highly popular eating-broadcaster, Lee Chang-Hyun, saying, ‘in Korea, for women especially, the figure is quite important. There are dishes which are quite fattening, so me eating those foods for them provides them with a bit of satisfaction’ (Evans 2015). In other words, broadcasting eating allows for eating by proxy, vicarious no-cal eating. Let them feed on broadcasts. Let them eat air.⁶⁴

Besides emphasizing the social function of vicarious eating, Lamarre draws out a more controversial aspect: it consumes no calories and it sanctions the consumption of no calories. As the anecdote of Lee Chang-Hyun showcases, women, who eschew fattening food to keep thin, watch eating broadcasts to compensate for their thwarted desires or denied appetites. In this sense, the actual and the virtual worlds converge on the discipline of women’s hunger. Notably, for these women, vicarious eating equates to no eating or self-starvation. Thus, the obsession with vicarious eating is also a symptom of women’s anxiety over their bodies, which may result in eating disorders. (The issue of eating disorders will be discussed later in this chapter.)

To simulate vicarious eating in their streams, BJs need to effectively convey to viewers the multi-sensual information of food, which helps them construct the

imagined experience of eating. Eating is a multi-sensory act, as the information of food is collected by various senses before it is synthesized and analyzed by the brain. In *mukbang*, eating is performed sensually and affectively by BJs. On the matter of performativity of food in digital images, Yasmin Ibrahims states, “Food, when dislodged from the kitchen and devoid of its nutritive or taste qualities enters a realm of the performative; valorizing the visual above all else and situating it within the performative.”⁶⁵ Her remarks shed light on the construction of performative food on the screen. The visuality and performativity of food, mediated by the movement and verbalization of the BJ, distinguishes the image of food in eating broadcasts from its physical presence. Taking Mizijun’s video of eating a king crab as an example (Figure 5), I dissect the performative construction of food and analyze the effect of her performance.

To begin with, unlike live-streaming, the short video is edited in post-production. In March 2017, Mizijun set up her own company and began her professional career in the media industry. She stopped live-streaming eating broadcasts and continued to post short videos with editing effects on numerous video-sharing platforms and social media including Weibo and YouTube. Despite not being instantaneous and interactive, short video is more versatile and can reach a wider audience. Most importantly, post-production enhances the performative effect of video with various strategies, such as adding a special filter to the camera so that the colors of food appear brighter on the screen, fast-forwarding the stream so that the speed of eating is accelerated, using soundtracks or special sound effects to add a sense of drama. Mizijun’s short videos still highlight her broadcasting persona and personal signature; for example, the overlying emojis and text boxes are cute and funny to read.

At the same time, the choice of food in Mizijun’s short videos is made more strategically and the staging of shooting is more elaborate. Sometimes, restaurants and

companies sponsor her videos so that she can advertise their foods; other times, she visits trendy places to taste popular foods. Her short videos more eagerly capitalize on the commercial and social values of food consumption. The signifying and communicative functions of food, as mediated on by Barthes, are salient in the case of king crab, which is a highly symbolic food commodity. With its extravagant price and exotic look, it emblemizes the potent purchasing power and the luxurious and cosmopolitan taste of Chinese consumers. However, eating a king crab is hardly a daily routine accessible to everyone; instead, it stands for a lifestyle desired by everyone but only enjoyed by the affluent class. In this sense, eating a king crab itself constitutes a performance of social affluence and class distinction. The extravagantly decorated restaurant and the quality service provided by waiters in the video further enhance the performance of excess consumption. In watching, liking, or retweeting the video, viewers also participate in the discursive construction of social affluence and class distinction. Considering the high symbolic value of the king crab, Mizijun expends extra effort in performing the experience of eating it. To give a multi-dimensional and multi-sensory presentation on the screen, she invites the viewer's gaze on the color, size, texture, temperature, and smell of the king crab.

First, she moves the king crab far from the camera to frame its whole body. Again, using the visual contrast between her tiny figure and the king crab's giant body, she dramatizes both her slenderness and the size (thus the quality) of the king crab, to the amazement of viewers. The layout of the screen image (on the upper left) is arranged quite deliberately and suggestively: the king crab is at the center, surrounded by bowls of red shrimp that are placed as though they are worshipping the king. This visuality assists to illustrate the food and to draw out its sociocultural value. At the same time, the animated image of food adds a sense of humor to the broadcast, an extra entertainment effect enjoyed by viewers. Then, Mizijun uses the close-up

technique to frame some details of the king crab meat. The mouthwatering image exemplifies the haptic visuality that is integral to the affect of eating broadcasts. The temptation to touch and bite it is almost irresistible. Other than the standard techniques she has employed in most of her broadcasts, Mizijun creatively plays with her king crab. To demonstrate the tender chewiness of the king crab, she dangles a piece of meat in her hand and makes a noise of a bouncing ball. Then, to show the steaming hot temperature of the freshly cooked king crab, she blows the hot air towards the camera and asks viewers to smell it. Her theatrical performance undercuts the visual border perceived by viewers. The performativity of food is animated, as if the scent could penetrate the screen to reach the noses of viewers. Suffice it to say that visual and vicarious eating is affected by multiple sensual stimuli in this example. The performativity of food is mediated by Mizijun's embodied performance, both of which enhance viewers' experience with vicarious eating.



*Figure 5
Mizijun's Food
Performance*

Food television in the United States that predates eating broadcasts has already spurred a discussion on vicarious eating. Back in the 1990s when the Food Network was first launched, the immediate success of food television, especially among

middle-class women, posed a challenging question for feminist scholars. Pauline Adema was the first to argue that food television allows food to be consumed vicariously: “A safer way to benefit from the comfort inherent in food is to increase consumption vicariously, by ingesting food television. Food television delivers calorie- and labor-free pleasure, important characteristics in a body- and time-conscious society. Food television is a way to consume food without consequence.”⁶⁶ Ironically, the satisfaction of vicarious eating for women stems from what they have not eaten, rather than from what they have. Food television allows women to substitute visual pleasure for visceral gratification, which testifies to their self-control and compliance with social norms. But, the calorie- and labor-free pleasure is actually imposed on women, who are coerced by the threat of consequences, mostly social ones. While the production of eating broadcasts is carried out through a different medium than television, the function of vicarious eating is strikingly similar. In like manner, eating broadcasts are a medium for women to channel their desires and to negotiate with social inscriptions.

Moreover, the economic and social contexts for the emergence of food television and eating broadcasts are comparable. Adema explains, “Increased consumption of food might satiate some emotional needs, but in a society that values control over indulgence, especially for women, excessive eating can generate other problems. Anxiety about food and consumption may become a personal obsession that manifests itself as an eating disorder or as hard-core body building.”⁶⁷ She brings up a couple of illuminating points: first of all, the rampant growth of the consumer society has inevitably led to excessive consumption; secondly, the social problem of excessive consumption is more salient in the matter of eating, and women are more subject to the consequences of over-eating; finally, women are coerced into taking extreme measures to neutralize the consequences of excessive consumption. Further still, food

television should be examined against the social background of gender equality and women's empowerment. Bordo astutely observes, "Anxiety over women's uncontrollable hungers appears to peak, as well, during periods when women are becoming independent and are asserting themselves politically and socially."⁶⁸ Society's anxiety over women's uncontrollable hungers reflects its fear of women's "threatening" power and desire. Thus, the control over the former assuages the threat of the latter. In like manner, eating broadcasts emblemize the age of excessive consumption that China has just entered. Meanwhile, healthy eating and body building are becoming trendy among urbanites. Although the social problem of eating disorders hasn't drawn much attention from the public, it is high time that it does. Interrogating the biopolitics of gender that women's vicarious eating embodies is a starting point. The issue of women's eating disorders also casts into doubt the state-driven propaganda of gender equality and the public celebration of women's empowerment.

Erotic Food and the Bulimic Eating Broadcaster

Another critical concept in food studies that illuminates the affect and visceral response stimulated by the viscosity and performativity of food in eating broadcasts is "food porn." The concept of the term is alluded to and probably best illustrated in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, wherein he discusses food photography in *Elle* magazine as a gastronomical example of modern myth-making. He comments that food can be "a visual category, and "cooking according to *Elle* is meant for the eyes only, since sight is a genteel sense."⁶⁹ The actual use of the term did not occur until 1979 when Michael Jacobson criticized unhealthy food as food porn in *Nutrition Action Healthletter*. The term has been populated by mass media with the booming growth of food photography and cooking shows all over the world. The images that are considered food porn are usually shot in high-resolution quality and with a focus

on vivid details in order to evoke strong reactions in viewers. Food porn epitomizes “an aesthetic of excess”⁷⁰ embraced by consumer culture, and “remains associated with complex notions of affluence and choice.”⁷¹ In affluent societies, food is not taken in primarily for survival, but is consumed for its symbolic value, often derived from excessive refinement and ornamentation. With provocative sexual innuendo, the term draws out the eroticization and fetishization of food in mass media. Under the gaze of gastronomical voyeurism, food is sexualized, not only through the overt association of food with sex and body, but also in the sense that food is essentialized as an object of desire. In the context of the emergence of digital and mobile culture, Yasmin Ibrahim contends that the term food porn is “increasingly used to describe the act of styling and capturing food on mobile gadgets, eliciting an invitation to gaze and vicariously consume, and to tag images of food through digital platforms. The mundane and ordinary food is attributed a spectacle in this economy premising food as the message and the medium.”⁷² The production of food porn has been decentralized, as every Internet user now can post their amateur works on social media and digital platforms. Images of food porn have been incorporated into the daily scene, with a concomitant process of the aesthetic of excess being internalized by ordinary consumers.

Food porn is categorically erotic, activating the senses and stimulating the bodies of viewers. Mankekar and Schein argue that media consumption, for “its less logocentric characteristics, its sensory multidimensionality, which often privileges the visual, the aural, and even the haptic,”⁷³ often engenders a dynamic interplay between media and erotica. In such mechanisms of media consumption, they further contend, “not only does the body become involved, but these moments of what we might call affect efface distinctions between the psychic, the cognitive, and the corporeal.”⁷⁴ The coalescence of the psychic, the cognitive, and the corporeal in media consumption

heightens the erotic effect of visuality. Instead of passively beholding, viewers are excited to imagine a relationship with the object of desire. For Laura Marks, this subject-object relationship defines the essence of the erotic, and she argues, “Haptic images are erotic regardless of their content, because they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image. The viewer is called upon to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves.”⁷⁵ The haptic images of food porn prompt viewers to engage with food in an imagined way, sometimes mediated by other bodies. Eating broadcasts integrate some elements of food porn and invite gastronomical voyeurism and vicarious consumption. Although BJs, unlike photographers hiding behind food images, still play an active and central role in the making of eating broadcasts, the subject-object relationship between viewers and food is conjured up by the haptic visuality and performativity of food.

Thus, vicarious eating for viewers of these broadcasts generates a heightened form of pleasure from both gastronomical and erotic gratifications. Krishnendu Ray, a prominent scholar in food studies, brings up the positive cultural impact of food porn: “This tactile, embodied conception of culture is a useful corrective to culture understood primarily as representation or artifact.”⁷⁶ The tactile and embodied cultural concept of food porn supplements the orthodox assumption of culture as abstract and intellectual. In a redemptive way, the haptic and visceral response elicited by food porn spurs viewers to become aware of and to reconnect with their own bodies, which temporarily frees them from the habitual state of alienation in a society dominated by capital and technology. According to Tisha Dejmancee, food porn created by female food bloggers is championed by postfeminist media culture.⁷⁷ Subscribing to ironic sexism, female bloggers and viewers assert their subjectification through flaunting their visceral appetite and sexual desire:

In this coalescence of sexual and gustatory desires, the postfeminist viewer is left desiring empowerment through her aggressive assertion of both sexual and

physical appetites. In place of the secretive binge-eating, restriction, and repression that have historically and pathologically defined women's relationship to food (Bordo 1993), postfeminist rhetoric locates women's empowerment in the unabashed pursuit of corporeal pleasure.⁷⁸

Dejmanee interprets women's deployment of food porn as a postfeminist tactic, which undercuts the sexist objectification of women ironically by owning it and doing it on their own terms. Her analysis is premised on gender awareness and the cultural sophistication of postfeminist bloggers and viewers. I am inspired by the positive cultural implications of food porn raised up by Ray and Dejmanee and tempted to see the elements of food porn in eating broadcasts as an empowering cultural technology. In the same vein, Glen Donnar postulates that the female eating broadcaster "resists the invisibility of female (over)eating, affording what is otherwise unseen—and unspoken—celebrated visibility."⁷⁹

However, compared to the positive aspects of food porn, its ethical problems seem to be more prominent and urgent. Krishnendu Ray expends more effort in detailing the moral issues brought up by food porn:

Food porn means the following: (a) it is porn when you don't do it but watch other people do it; (b) there is something unattainable about the food pictured in magazines or cooked on TV shows; (c) there is no pedagogical value to it; (d) it hides the hard work and dirty dishes behind cooking; (e) there is something indecent about playing with food when there is so much hunger in the world.⁸⁰

The five points listed by Ray castigate food porn for its lack of social awareness, pedagogical value, and human decency. The pleasure and gratification granted by food porn is trivial, transient, and unconstructive. The fetishization of food in food porn erases the rudimentary function of food as sustaining life and essentializes the display element of food as its core value. The celebration of the unattainability of food showcases a lack of consciousness of social inequality based on the division of labor and the blindness to the worldwide issues of poverty and hunger. It is unethical in a threefold way: first, to celebrate the unattainability of extravagant food is to validate class distinctions, which undermines critical and political efforts to equalize

society; secondly, to make food look unattainably delicate and sexy is to cover up the hard and unsexy manual labor of people; finally, this fetish of unattainability seems ignorant and immoral when the attainability of food is the real issue at stake in the world. Ray's critique of food porn resonates with mine about Chinese eating broadcasts, in which food is also alienated from its basic function and infused with social and cultural values. Chinese viewers are susceptible to the lure of unattainability affected by Mizijun's streams and videos. Many of them regard hers as superior to those of Yuka Kinoshita, for Mizijun always has quality food and often tries high-end cuisine while Yuka only eats "ordinary" (*putong*) food. Even when "ordinary" food is filmed, its "unattainability is instead represented by overabundance and excess."⁸¹ The emphasis on the "unattainable" food in eating broadcasts is suggestive of Chinese affluence and echoes the recent exhortation to "upgrade consumption" (*xiaofei shengji*) from the state and the market.

The ethical implications of eating broadcasts in China have not yet been explored, and that is why I hope this study would provoke more discussion. Here, I want to add some ethical issues pertaining to female eating broadcasters. First, the sexualized, voyeuristic gaze upon women's hunger should not be normalized, and it deserves critical and feminist interrogation no less than the social fear of women's hunger. The hungry women broadcasters turn their consuming bodies into a media spectacle. The vicarious function of eating for viewers' pleasure, the deliberate incorporation of food porn, and the suggestive facial expressions all evidence Mizijun's self-sexualization and self-commodification. Then, as mentioned above, Mizijun is suspected of being bulimic by some viewers, who believe that bulimia is the only logical explanation for the noticeable mismatch between the size of her body and that of her appetite.

Western feminist scholars have persisted in castigating patriarchal society and consumer culture for policing and commodifying women's bodies. Their criticism has

educated the public about the psychophysical and sociocultural mechanisms underpinning women's eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Jennifer Brady and others emphatically recapitulate the feminist stance on this issue: "feminist psychologists and health scholars have critiqued the dominant (white, upper-middle-class) cultural obsession with thinness and the ways that this obsession keeps women perpetually dissatisfied with their bodies, promotes pathological relationships with food, and benefits capitalism by encouraging women to buy products and services to achieve the elusive "perfect body."⁸² Women's eating disorders are a symptom of the pathological obsession with slenderness in society, which operates to contain women's power and desire by controlling the size of their bodies. As China's consumer society is embracing the slim ideal, Chinese women are increasingly subjected to scrutiny and administration over their bodies. In spite of the rise of eating disorders, which used to be seen as "western" diseases, among Chinese young women, the issue has not received much attention in society. The rumor of Mizijun's secret suffering from bulimia brought the issue to light on China's Internet for the first time, despite her reticence. But Chinese netizens' response to the rumor, in the form of shaming and blaming, have evidenced that they are not yet ready to have a critical or ethical discussion on the matter.

While a full-length study on the interlocking of the ideology of slenderness in contemporary Chinese society and the emergence of Chinese women's eating disorders is warranted, here I choose to focus on the ethical implications of Mizijun's "bulimia scandal." On the one hand, in light of the "exposition" of her bulimic condition, a moral conundrum presents itself: would it be ethical for the bulimic to publicly brand herself as an eating machine and to profit from her pathological eating? The question becomes thornier considering that her eating broadcasts not only advertise unattainable food but also the unattainable perfect body to other women. If

this were true, she would be perpetrating the oppressive cultural norm of thinness and sending a misleading message to society. More so, her self-disguise on mass media would hinder the public from knowing the true condition (and suffering) of bulimia. It would also reinforce the stigmatization of bulimic girls as liars who are dishonest about their pathological eating condition.

On the other hand, the rumor instigated netizens to investigate her health and other personal matters, which led to more rumors about her having undergone plastic surgery. Although they have never come up with substantial evidence for Mizijun's bulimic condition, she has already been widely blamed for cheating in her eating broadcasts and deceiving the viewers. She is also often shamed for self-induced vomiting, a common symptom of bulimia. Violation of privacy and Internet vigilantism, as showcased here, permeate Chinese cyberspace. Haomin Gong and Xin Yang's recent book contributes to the incipient study of ethics in Chinese cyberspace. They remark that "the mediality of the Internet shapes the construction of Internet ethics. The Internet is rapidly reshaping human beings' relationships with media as well as the relationships among human beings themselves. Therefore, this process of reshaping also figures in a process of redefining social ethics online and offline."⁸³ The reconfiguration of social organization and human relationships is quickly unfolding via the mediation of the Internet. But the impact on human ethics has not been fully grasped. What does it mean and what does it take to act ethically when the encounter with "the face of the Other"⁸⁴ in cyberspace is always mediated by the screen and is often reduced to images? Mizijun's "bulimia scandal" brings to the fore the complexity of ethics on the Internet, and more specifically, the ethical controversies involved in Chinese eating broadcasts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the social and political significance as well as the cultural and ethical implications of Chinese eating broadcasts via the example of the influential female BJ Mizijun. My findings pertain to the formation of Chinese consumer culture, the vernacular creativity of the everyday, the platformativity of new media, the performativity of food images and videos, and the biopolitics of gender. I argue that: 1) Contemporary Chinese consumer culture underpinned by nationalism is characterized by conspicuous consumption, and the development of new media provides affluent consumers with digital platforms to publicly display richness and flaunt excess. The aesthetic of excess and the discourse of Chinese affluence are embodied by the images of food and (over)eating in *mukbang*; 2) To televise eating on media platforms is a form of user-led cultural production. The mundane aspects of everyday life are infused with new social and cultural value through amateur creativities. But the commodification of the everyday is still susceptible to the control of the market; 3) The participatory and interactive functions of live-streaming platforms generate an affective transaction among BJs and viewers, and thus enable a new way of imagining community and social intimacy. While female *mukbang* viewers experience the therapeutic effects of vicarious eating, they may secretly suffer from anxiety over their own bodies; 4) In eating broadcasts, food is perceived through haptic visuality and performativity, and the embodied performance of the hungry woman broadcaster simulates the sensual and affective experience of eating. Food as well as the hungry female body can be fetishized and sexualized. The coalescence of sexual and gustatory desires attributes a transgressive feature to eating broadcasts; 5) The public display and celebration of women's hunger seem to undermine social prescriptions for gender roles and gendered bodies. However, the slenderness embodied by the female broadcaster reinforces the ideology of hunger. The contradictory logic of (patriarchal) consumer culture results in the serious issue

of women's eating disorders, of which, eating broadcasts and vicarious eating are symptoms. In the end, I want to reiterate my concern regarding the ethical controversies of Chinese eating broadcast: its unreserved celebration of contemporary affluence dismisses the history of hunger as well as the current social problem of poverty; in addition, by making women's overeating a media spectacle, it disguises women's struggle with the tyranny of hunger, in the form of culturally-coerced self-starvation.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary and multimedia project, my dissertation examines literary work, genre film, independent documentary, and new media content created by Chinese women writers and artists from the Republican era up to contemporary China. Their lives have been tested by corporeal experiences of hunger and starvation, which, in return, have sparked and shaped their distinctive forms of literature and art. On the one hand, my project intervenes in the historical discourse of Chinese modernity with the embodied testimonies and gendered self-representations of women's hunger; on the other, it contributes to the evolving theorization of the corporeal and performative subjectivity and women's authorship in poststructuralist feminism. Mapping a genealogy of hungry women artists in different stages of Chinese modernity, my analysis evidences how the concrete socioeconomic challenges paradoxically feed their intellectual and artistic aspiration by stimulating an introspective examination as well as a critical diagnosis of social reality. My original theorization of "hungry women artists" attests to the female body being a site of historical memory as well as to the performative nature of women's literary and visual self-representation.

The introduction outlines the theoretical domains wherein to situate my conceptualization of "hungry women artists." I argue that the corporeal and performative authorship of the hungry women artists counters the victimizing

representation of female hunger in modern Chinese literary history, and complicates the Euro-American romantic tradition of the hungry young artist by intersecting the private with the political. The first chapter examines Xiao Hong's autobiographical work *Market Street*, which is centered on her suffering of hunger after her Nora-esque escape from the patriarchal family in the 1930s, and reads it against the visualization of her work and life in Ann Hui's biopic *The Golden Era*. Contrasting the literary and cinematic representations of the Republican woman writer's hunger, I dispute the enlightenment model of women's liberation as breaking with the past and the tradition, and propose the Deleuzian paradigm of becoming-woman-artist in deterritorializing hunger. The second chapter analyzes Hong Ying's autobiographical novel *Daughter of the River*, a heartrending family story of starvation amid the Great Famine in socialist China. I argue that in a Benjaminian fashion, the storyteller borrows her narrative authority from death (of starvation), and that the centrality of the specter of hunger in her storytelling evokes an ethical injunction to redress historical traumas, as postulated by Jacques Derrida's hauntology. Then, the third chapter delves into the material and emotional deprivation suffered by a migrant artist Zhang Ci in postsocialist Beijing. I contend that in pursuit of the Deleuzian nomadic subjectivity, the hungry woman artist lives in self-imposed displacement, and suffers structural inequality and urban marginalization. Being exposed to the observational camera of Wu Wenguang's documentary, she experiences a cinematic catharsis in *xianchang* and on screen, which is then re-appropriated in her own essay film *The Faith of Ailao Mountain*. Finally, the last chapter explores the transnational media phenomenon of eating broadcast in China and conducts a visual and discursive analysis of the performance and commodification of women's hungers on new media platforms. I observe that against the backdrop of the emergence of Chinese affluence and conspicuous consumption, women's excessive eating is manufactured into a

media spectacle, whereas the mystification of the slender female body permeates contemporary China's social and cultural milieus to discipline women's appetites and desires.

Haiyan Lee's 2014 monograph *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination* marks an ethical turn in contemporary Chinese study. Following Benedict Anderson and Lynn Hunt's line of argument, Lee rejuvenates social and ethical values of literature and art against the grain of a withering civil society. Either Anderson's "imagined community" or Hunt's "imagined empathy" can only be cultivated by an imaginary and imaginative audience and via literature and art's "ability to promote the suppleness of mind by portraying imaginary worlds in vivid concreteness and by encouraging deep and thoughtful interaction with the perspectives of others."⁸⁵ Many philosophers, Emmanuel Lévinas in particular, have articulated the ethical implications of otherness. "The face of the other" hails to us and calls upon a temporary transcendence of self-interest. We are prompted to face alternative worlds and perspectives delineated by literature and art, and consequently are impelled to react ethically to the presence of others, firstly in literary imagination and then in social reality. Contemporary Chinese society renders the study of ethics a more urgent subject, as the increasing social tension and antagonism necessitates the rehabilitation of the other as an ethical subject. Hence, it is high time that Chinese literary scholars attended to the ethical others that have been marginalized in historical discourses. Lee's re-introduction of ethics into contemporary Chinese study responds timely to the pressing social issue and invigorates Chinese literary and cultural criticism, from which the formation of an ethical and civil society derives its momentum.

Hunger engenders an ethical subjectivity and elicits an ethical response in intersubjective relations, for hunger intimates the emptiness and mortality of the self and demands the formulation of a relational and affective personhood. The sensation

of hunger simultaneously stimulates desires to consume objects from outside and to materialize the subject from inside. Hence, hunger is a vestibule experience through which subjectivity is substantiated by alterity. The conceptualizations of both a relational subjectivity and a valuable alterity inspire ethical acts. For western antiquity, hunger of the body emblemizes the force of necessity that should be mastered and transcended, whereas Chinese thinking has invested high moral value in the tolerance of starvation. Both the moralistic hermeneutics of Confucianism and the teleological ideology of communism have made hunger a key component of their discursive bio-power. Consequently, the hungry other is marginalized or instrumentalized (another way of marginalization) in both traditions. My dissertation is premised on a theoretical revision of both Western and Chinese traditions—that is, to rethink hunger's organic and ethical role in the imagination of life and in the formation of female subjectivity and creativity.

Centered on the multiplicity of hunger narratives and performances of modern and contemporary Chinese women, the dissertation is a feminist intervention into the sociocultural prohibition against women's public display of their hunger. It is imperative for women to suppress their hunger and to silence themselves in the public discussion of hunger. Against the backdrop of this sociocultural silencing, women's hunger narratives attest to the subversiveness and transformativeness embedded in women's literature and art in general. Hence, I advocate the critical centrality of the hungry female body, including its impact on individual's subject formation and its embodied outcry against discursive officialdom of grand history. The hungry others experience Chinese modernity from in its dark side: either she is marginalized because of her abject hungry body or she is an outcast of society so that hunger, in its various forms perpetually haunts her. Women's hunger narratives and performances are centered on their somatic and sensuous sufferings, wherein the otherized

hungering female body becomes the locus of ethical interrogation. Although these narratives and performances are at risk of being trivialized for their feminine traits of being highly fragmentary and emotional, it is precisely the fragmented structure and the emotionally charged undertone that reveals intensity of visceral hunger, intimacy between bodily hunger and subject formation, as well as antagonism between embodiment and disembodied transcendence.

Finally, I believe that the ethical study of hungry others should foreground women. This is so not because that women's somatic vulnerability fits into the semiotics of victimology, but because that the embodied combat with hunger is imposed on women more than on men, due to misogynistic cultural norms and androcentric economical structures of patriarchal society. Hungry women should not be a literary trope that is exploited by male writers in order to depict the calamity of famines, for example. They are, instead, historical agents who bear individual testimonies to difficult times of starvation. Among them are also creative agents who shape collective memory and culture with their self-reflective narrative and performances of hunger. Hungry Chinese women artists make an ethical subject for both China and postcolonial studies. Their hunger narratives and performances via multifarious media showcase an embodied and ethical intervention of the marginalized social others.

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¹ “Meokbang emerges as new way to relieve stress,” *Korea Times* (February 17, 2017).

² Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, “Introduction” in *Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ Kevin Latham ed., *Consuming China: Approaches to Cultural Change in Contemporary China*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 176.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 175-176.

⁸ Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁹ Thorstein Bunde Veblen (1857–1929) was a Norwegian-American economist and sociologist known for the concept of “conspicuous consumption.” In his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen explained that people engage in conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure to demonstrate wealth or to mark social status.

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- ¹⁰ Ying Jiang, *Cyber-Nationalism in China: Challenging Western Media Portrayals of Internet Censorship in China*, (Adelaide, South Australia: University of Adelaide Press, 2012), 21.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 106.
- ¹² Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," in *Food and culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 29.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Kevin Latham ed., 2
- ¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 6
- ¹⁶ Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology," 28.
- ¹⁷ Glen Donnar, "'Food Porn' or Intimate Sociality: Committed Celebrity and Cultural Performances of Overeating in Meokbang," *Celebrity Studies* 8:1 (2017), 124.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/07/china-move-millions-people-homes-anti-poverty-drive>
- ¹⁹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 155.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 55.
- ²¹ <https://www.kwai.com/>
- ²² According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Web 2.0 differentiates itself from World Wide Web with its emphasis on social networking, content generated by users, and cloud computing.
- ²³ iiMedia Research Group (*aimei jituan*), established in 2010 and headquartered in Hong Kong, is a leading consulting company specializing in data mining and market researching in the digital and mobile industry. Its annual reports on Chinese Internet and mobile industries have been a useful and reliable resource for companies and researchers.
- ²⁴ http://www.sohu.com/a/220006990_376476
- ²⁵ Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology," 29.
- ²⁶ Yasmin Ibrahim, "Food Porn and the Invitation to Gaze," *International Journal of E-Politics*, 6:3 (2015), 6.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Mark Poster, "Consumption and Digital Commodities in the Everyday," *Cultural Studies*, 18:2 (2002), 414.
- ²⁹ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans., Steven Rendall, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1988), xx.
- ³⁰ A term coined by John B. Thompson in his groundbreaking book *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). Thompson argues that the development of the media has given rise to the new forms of "mediated publicness" at a distance, supplementing the traditional publicness of co-presence.
- ³¹ Jean Burgess. "Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 20: 2 (2006), 3.
- ³² Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, (Malden: Polity, 2009), 25.
- ³³ Jean Burgess, 5.

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- ³⁴ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, 13.
- ³⁵ Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard, Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Living and Cooking*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 251.
- ³⁶ Michel de Certeau, xix.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, 75.
- ³⁹ http://www.sohu.com/a/114938772_185924
- ⁴⁰ Thomas Lamarre, "Platformivity: Media Studies, Area Studies." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4 (2017), 301.
- ⁴¹ Antonetta L. Bruno and Somin Chung, "Mokpang: Pay Me and I'll Show You How Much I Can Eat for Your Pleasure," *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 9:2 (2017), 161.
- ⁴² Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 46.
- ⁴³ Antonetta L. Bruno and Somin Chung, 157.
- ⁴⁴ http://www.sohu.com/a/114938772_185924
- ⁴⁵ Hillhouse Capital Group is a leading investment management firm in China. It provides industrial and financial data and consulting for global clients.
- ⁴⁶ Antonetta L. Bruno and Somin Chung, 159.
- ⁴⁷ Sianne Ngai. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde." *Critical Inquiry* 31:4 (2005), 816.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 828.
- ⁴⁹ Gabriella Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 54.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 55.
- ⁵¹ Antonetta L. Bruno and Somin Chung, 160.
- ⁵² Susan Bordo, 201.
- ⁵³ Antonetta L. Bruno and Somin Chung, 160.
- ⁵⁴ Yasmin Ibrahim, 4.
- ⁵⁵ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Laura U. Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," *Screen* 39:4 (1998), 339.
- ⁵⁸ Tom Lee, "Contemporary Perspectives in Aesthetic Theory: Steven Connor, Sianne Ngai and the Edible World," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 8:1 (2016), 4.
- ⁵⁹ Yasmin Ibrahim, 4.
- ⁶⁰ Pauline Adema, "Vicarious Consumption: Food, Television and the Ambiguity of Modernity," *Journal of American and Comparative Culture*, 23 (2000), 114.
- ⁶¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1990), 76.
- ⁶² Antonetta L. Bruno and Somin Chung, 163.
- ⁶³ Thomas Lamarre, 300.
- ⁶⁴ Thomas Lamarre, 296.
- ⁶⁵ Yasmin Ibrahim, 4.
- ⁶⁶ Pauline Adema, 119.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Susan Bordo, 161.

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans., Annette Lavers, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 78.

⁷⁰ Tisha DeJmanee, “‘Food Porn’ as Postfeminist Play: Digital Femininity and the Female Body on Food Blogs,” *Television & New Media* 17:5 (2016), 429.

⁷¹ Glen Donnar, 123.

⁷² Yasmin Ibrahim, 2.

⁷³ Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Laura U. Marks, “Video Haptics and Erotics,” 341.

⁷⁶ “Food Porn,” *Gastronomica* (Winter 2010), 41.

⁷⁷ Rosalind Gill’s foundational work, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility” argues that “postfeminism is best understood as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.” (*European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10: 2 (2007), 147.

⁷⁸ Tisha DeJmanee, 434.

⁷⁹ Glen Donnar, 125.

⁸⁰ “Food Porn.” 41.

⁸¹ Glen Donnar, 123.

⁸² Jennifer Brady, Elaine Power, Michelle Szabo, and Jacqui Gingras, “Still Hungry for a Feminist Food Studies,” in *Critical Perspectives in Food Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 82.

⁸³ Haomin Gong and Xin Yang, *Reconfiguring Class, Gender, Ethnicity and Ethics in Chinese Internet Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 139.

⁸⁴ The phenomenological account of the “face-to-face” encounter serves as the basis for Emmanuel Lévinas’s philosophy of ethics. For Lévinas, the “living presence” of the Other implies that someone genuinely exists outside of oneself, and the undeniable reality of the Other cannot be reduced to images or concepts confined within one’s head. Instead, the Other’s face expresses itself and obliges one to build an authentic intersubjective relation.

⁸⁵ Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 290.

Conclusion

An interdisciplinary and multimedia project, my dissertation examines literary work, independent documentary, and new media content created by Chinese women writers and artists from the Republican era up to contemporary China. Their lives have been tested by corporeal experiences of hunger and starvation, which, in return, have sparked and shaped their distinctive forms of art. On the one hand, my project intervenes in the historical discourse of Chinese modernity with the embodied testimonies and gendered self-representations of women's hunger; on the other, it contributes to the evolving theorization of the corporeal and performative subjectivity and women's authorship in poststructuralist feminism. Mapping a genealogy of hungry women artists in different stages of Chinese modernity, my analysis evidences how the concrete socioeconomic challenges paradoxically feed their intellectual and artistic aspiration by stimulating an introspective examination as well as a critical diagnosis of social reality. My original theorization of "hungry women artists" attests to the female body being a site of historical memory as well as to the performative nature of women's literary and visual self-representation.

The introduction outlines the theoretical domains wherein to situate my conceptualization of "hungry women artists." I argue that the corporeal and performative authorship of the hungry women artists counters the victimizing representation of female hunger in modern Chinese literary history and complicates the Euro-American romantic tradition of the hungry young artist by intersecting the private with the political. The first chapter examines Xiao Hong's autobiographical work *Market Street*, which is centered on her suffering of hunger after her Nora-esque escape from the patriarchal family in the 1930s and reads it against the visualization of her work and life in Ann Hui's biopic *The Golden Era*. Contrasting the literary and cinematic representations of the Republican woman writer's hunger, I dispute the

enlightenment model of women's liberation as breaking with the past and the tradition and propose the Deleuzian paradigm of becoming-woman-artist in deterritorializing hunger. The second chapter analyzes Hong Ying's autobiographical novel *Daughter of the River*, a heartrending family story of starvation amid the Great Famine in socialist China. I argue that in a Benjaminian fashion, the storyteller borrows her narrative authority from death (of starvation), and that the centrality of the specter of hunger in her storytelling evokes an ethical injunction to redress historical traumas, as postulated by Jacques Derrida's hauntology. Then, the third chapter delves into the material and emotional deprivation suffered by a migrant artist Zhang Ci in postsocialist Beijing. I contend that in pursuit of the Deleuzian nomadic subjectivity, the hungry woman artist lives in self-imposed displacement, and suffers structural inequality and urban marginalization. Being exposed to the observational camera of Wu Wenguang's documentary, she experiences a cinematic catharsis in *xianchang* and on screen, which is then re-appropriated in her own essay film *The Faith of Ailao Mountain*. Finally, the last chapter explores the transnational media phenomenon of eating broadcast in China and conducts a visual and discursive analysis of the performance and commodification of women's hungers on new media platforms. I observe that against the backdrop of the emergence of Chinese affluence and conspicuous consumption, women's excessive eating is manufactured into a media spectacle, whereas the mystification of the slender female body permeates contemporary China's social and cultural milieus to discipline women's appetites and desires.

Haiyan Lee's 2014 monograph *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination* marks an ethical turn in contemporary Chinese study. Following Benedict Anderson and Lynn Hunt's line of argument, Lee rejuvenates social and ethical values of literature and art against the grain of a withering civil society. Either Anderson's

“imagined community” or Hunt’s “imagined empathy” can only be cultivated by an imaginary and imaginative audience and via literature and art’s “ability to promote the suppleness of mind by portraying imaginary worlds in vivid concreteness and by encouraging deep and thoughtful interaction with the perspectives of others.”¹ Many philosophers, Emmanuel Lévinas in particular, have articulated the ethical implications of otherness. “The face of the other” hails to us and calls upon a temporary transcendence of self-interest. We are prompted to face alternative worlds and perspectives delineated by literature and art, and consequently are impelled to react ethically to the presence of others, firstly in literary imagination and then in social reality. Contemporary Chinese society renders the study of ethics a more urgent subject, as the increasing social tension and antagonism necessitates the rehabilitation of the other as an ethical subject. Hence, it is high time that Chinese literary scholars attended to the ethical others that have been marginalized in historical discourses. Lee’s re-introduction of ethics into contemporary Chinese study responds timely to the pressing social issue and invigorates Chinese literary and cultural criticism, from which the formation of an ethical and civil society derives its momentum.

Hunger engenders an ethical subjectivity and elicits an ethical response in intersubjective relations, for hunger intimates the emptiness and mortality of the self and demands the formulation of a relational and affective personhood. The sensation of hunger simultaneously stimulates desires to consume objects from outside and to materialize the subject from inside. Hence, hunger is a vestibule experience through which subjectivity is substantiated by alterity. The conceptualizations of both a relational subjectivity and a valuable alterity inspire ethical acts. For western antiquity, hunger of the body emblemizes the force of necessity that should be mastered and transcended, whereas Chinese thinking has invested high moral value in the tolerance of starvation. Both the moralistic hermeneutics of Confucianism and the

teleological ideology of communism have made hunger a key component of their discursive bio-power. Consequently, the hungry other is marginalized or instrumentalized (another way of marginalization) in both traditions. My dissertation is premised on a theoretical revision of both Western and Chinese traditions—that is, to rethink hunger's organic and ethical role in the imagination of life and in the formation of female subjectivity and creativity.

Centered on the multiplicity of hunger narratives and performances of modern and contemporary Chinese women, the dissertation is a feminist intervention into the sociocultural prohibition against women's public display of their hunger. It is imperative for women to suppress their hunger and to silence themselves in the public discussion of hunger. Against the backdrop of this sociocultural silencing, women's hunger narratives attest to the subversiveness and transformativeness embedded in women's literature and art in general. Hence, I advocate the critical centrality of the hungry female body, including its impact on individual's subject formation and its embodied outcry against discursive officialdom of grand history. The hungry others experience Chinese modernity from its dark side: either she is marginalized because of her abject hungry body or she is an outcast of society so that hunger, in its various forms perpetually haunts her. Women's hunger narratives and performances are centered on their somatic and sensuous sufferings, wherein the otherized hungering female body becomes the locus of ethical interrogation. Although these narratives and performances are at risk of being trivialized for their feminine traits of being highly fragmentary and emotional, it is precisely the fragmented structure and the emotionally charged undertone that reveals intensity of visceral hunger, intimacy between bodily hunger and subject formation, as well as antagonism between embodiment and disembodied transcendence.

Finally, I believe that the ethical study of hungry others should foreground women.

This is so not because that women's somatic vulnerability fits into the semiotics of victimology, but because that the embodied combat with hunger is imposed on women more than on men, due to misogynistic cultural norms and androcentric economical structures of patriarchal society. Hungry women should not be a literary trope that is exploited by male writers in order to depict the calamity of famines, for example. They are, instead, historical agents who bear individual testimonies to difficult times of starvation. Among them are also creative agents who shape collective memory and culture with their self-reflective narrative and performances of hunger. Hungry Chinese women artists make an ethical subject for both China and postcolonial studies. Their hunger narratives and performances via multifarious media showcase an embodied and ethical intervention of the marginalized social others.

¹ Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 290.

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