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Sylvia Li-chun Lin

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Engendering Victimhood: Women in Literature of Atrocity

Sylvia Li-chun Lin

What is remembered of the Holocaust depends on how it is remembered, and how events are remembered depends in turn on the texts now giving them form.

—James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*

This essay deals with a body of literary works that represent Taiwan's 2/28 Incident and its aftermath, the White Terror. By looking at this mushrooming corpus of works, I explore aspects of contemporary Taiwanese culture as it is manifested in this literary restoration of history, situating my analysis in the larger context of third-world women and their changing roles vis-à-vis tradition during national crises. I have chosen the term *literature of atrocity* to serve two purposes: one that will become evident in my discussion of the 2/28 Incident and White Terror, the other a more ambitious attempt to contribute, by examining these writings from Taiwan, to scholarship that deals

with similar issues elsewhere, such as Holocaust studies, or John Treat's eloquent examination of the atomic literature.¹

The 2/28 Incident and the White Terror

The 2/28 Incident is by now an event well known to historians and scholars of Taiwan. Briefly, on February 27, 1947, a Taiwanese woman selling illegal cigarettes was severely beaten by agents of the Tobacco and Alcohol Monopoly Bureau formed by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, which had taken over Taiwan from the Japanese colonial administration. A bystander was shot and killed in the ensuing public outcry. The unnecessarily violent assault sparked an island-wide protest against the brutality toward, and prejudice against, indigenous Taiwanese by the Nationalist government, which would soon be driven off the Chinese mainland by Mao's Communist forces. In retaliation, Governor Chen Yi ordered the arrest and execution of any Taiwanese related, however remotely, to the protests. Martial law was declared. The beating and the ensuing massacre of Taiwanese elite, known as the February 28, or 2/28, Incident, was promptly buried in history, and any mention of the event could result in arrest and imprisonment, even execution.

The subsequent decades-long silencing of public opinion and persecution of dissidents is generally referred to as the White Terror. It was only after the lifting of martial law on July 1, 1987, that many people, particularly the young, became aware of this forgotten page of Taiwanese history. Following the election of Lee Teng-hui, the first Taiwan-born president, materials on the incident, no longer taboo, have been gradually unearthed through both official and civilian efforts. Reparations were discussed and later implemented; a memorial park was designated. Apparently to compensate for forty years of silence, relatives of the victims, scholars, and artists have vied to represent the event, supplanting "official history" with "personal histories."

Concurrent with scholarly research and compilation of eyewitness accounts has been a burgeoning body of literary works that describe both the incident and its aftermath. Most people agree that the era of White Terror, which exerted a pervasive pressure for people to censor themselves to

avoid arrest and imprisonment, was the result of the incident.² It is fitting for literary production dealing with these two topics to be studied together, hence, the inclusive term, literature of atrocity, in which neither is privileged over the other; the “atrocity” can take on diverse forms, including indiscriminate shooting and extralegal execution, as well as infringements upon basic human rights such as living without fear of persecution or enjoying freedom of speech, freedom of congregation, and freedom of information.

Women and National Crises

In her essay “The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Manchuria in Xiao Hong’s *Field of Life and Death*,” Lydia Liu examines the co-optation of Xiao Hong’s work by male-centered critics throughout modern Chinese literary history. Beginning with Lu Xun and Hu Feng, Xiao Hong scholarship has been subsumed in a national discourse that insists on interpreting her novel as an anti-Japanese allegory while obscuring or ignoring the plight of rural women in a field of life and death.³ In a way, by refusing to acknowledge that the women in Xiao Hong’s novel are women first and Chinese second, critics (mostly male) deny them a gendered victimhood and actually inflict a second (albeit symbolical) victimization. Using a rape scene in Xiao Jun’s *Village in August* (*Bayue de xiangcun*) as a contrast, Liu is critical of this patriarchal national consciousness: “As a sign of symbolic exchange, the raped woman often serves as a powerful trope in anti-Japanese propaganda. Her victimization is used to represent—or more precisely, to eroticize—China’s own plight.”⁴

What is revealed in Lydia Liu’s now classic essay is, among many insights, the contestation over the representation of women and interpretive ownership of the female body vis-à-vis foreign aggression at a time of national crisis. Such contestation is by no means unique to China; similar battles were waged over the matter of women’s veils in colonial Algeria or the practice of sati in British-ruled India. In “Algeria Unveiled,” Frantz Fanon delineates the changing role of the women’s veil in colonial Algeria: “If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hid themselves and in the houses where the men kept them

out of sight.”⁵ Unveiling the women, the French colonizers believed, would lead to the total subordination of the Algerian (male) population, owing to the veil’s metonymic nature. During the Algerian struggle for independence, many women unveiled and reveiled themselves in their participation in the revolutionary action. Whether the aim was total subjugation or independence, the Algerian women, veiled and unveiled, were called forth to perform for colonial conquest and later national salvation. Ironically, as Winifred Woodhull points out in “Unveiling Algeria,” the postindependent Algerian government demanded reveiling the women because it was essential in recovering the Algerian traditional culture and critical in uniting a nation that would otherwise be torn apart by economical disparity and political struggle.⁶ The imposed reveiling exposes the high stakes and underlying anxiety at issue when colonial or nationalist patriarchal narratives address the symbolic value of women.

Similarly, sati, or widow self-immolation, took on overcharged religious, nationalistic, and colonial implications in British-ruled India. Lata Mani investigates how the image of self-immolating widows was manipulated by the British colonial government to solidify and substantiate its authority: “The widows were presumed to be uneducated and incapable of both reason and independent action.”⁷ What necessitated this denigration of Indian women in general was an imperialistic desire to demean the colonial subjects via a convoluted route of reasoning: “Officials in favor of abolition argued that such action was in fact consistent with upholding indigenous tradition. And indeed this was how the regenerating mission of colonization was conceptualized by officials: not as the imposition of a new Christian moral order but as the recuperation and enforcement of the truths of indigenous tradition.”⁸ In other words, the Hindu intelligentsia were considered ignorant of their own culture, hence, their endorsement (active or passive) of sati; the widows were double victims of such ignorance. It is therefore not surprising to see that “the widow was often described as a ‘tender child.’”⁹

This is not to say that Indian male intellectuals were all staunch defenders of the practice; there were, among them, passionate and eloquent opponents of sati. What is of interest here is the exploitation of “widow’s will,” that is, whether the widows willingly burned themselves along with their husbands. The proponents of sati emphasized women’s will, but “the petition [against

the prohibition of sati] seeks to demonstrate that the East India Company's criminalizing of sati is based on an erroneous reading of the scripture."¹⁰ Women receded to the background but at the same time were turned into a battleground, where the colonial authority and indigenous intelligentsia vied to prove each other wrong in their interpretation of the Hindu tradition. In short, a debate on a practice that is cruel beyond measure became a competition for the claim of authoritative reading of the scripture, while the contest between indigenous sovereignty and colonial domination remained the underlying subtext.

Whether in overtly ideological or fictional discourse, women in these three regions at various times of their nations' history were classified and then declassified as victims of the conquest of imperialism; they were simultaneously the manifestation of indigenous tradition and the embodiment of the inferiority of their culture. Each case points toward a similar tendency to exploit women in the name of nationalism, while simultaneously relegating women to the margin of national discourse. By looking at these regions together, I am not suggesting that the issues facing the women in China, Algeria, and India were necessarily identical or comparable. Rather, these three regions provide us with a multifaceted point of departure in our inquiry into the interplay between women and the restoration of history in Taiwan. What we have seen is the changing demand made by the nation (read males) on women at a time of colonial domination and national crisis. But what happens when the crisis is long over, or when the crisis has remained obscured for decades? What role are women then asked to play in the recuperation of that critical moment?

Literature of Atrocity and Women

As we have seen, the four decades following the 2/28 Incident were marked by a government-imposed collective amnesia.¹¹ Essential to the Guomindang (GMD) government's successful domination on Taiwan, this amnesia is similar to what Homi K. Bhabha calls "the obligation to forget": "It is through this syntax of forgetting—or being obliged to forget—that the problematic identification of a national people becomes visible. The national subject is produced in that place where the daily plebiscite—the unitary

number — circulates in the grand narrative of will. However, the equivalence of will and plebiscite, the identity of part and whole, past and present, is cut across by the ‘obligation to forget,’ or forgetting to remember.”¹² To defy this “obligation” and dismantle the nation imagined by the Nationalist government, scholars and creative writers have undertaken to reconstruct history by recording and constructing narratives, a process that attempts to recoup the Taiwanese past and redefine Taiwanese culture. However, in most of the current scholarship and witness accounts on the 2/28 Incident, women are simply called forth to recount the men’s stories, while their own stories inevitably recede into the background.¹³ It is as if the sole significance of their existence were to bear witness to the fact that atrocity happens; their victimhood is thus obscured.

Literary works dealing with the 2/28 Incident, in contrast, generally present women as victims in a much more complex and sometimes controversial circumstance. The complexity derives partially from the fact that the choice is virtually obligatory, since the men were either executed or in prison. As Shen Xiuhua notes, “For the men who died in the 2/28 Incident, the day marked the end of their stories, while for the women they left behind the 2/28 Incident was the beginning of theirs.”¹⁴ However, while women are unavoidably portrayed as victims, the discussion would go no further if that was all the writers accomplished, since women as a trope for victimhood is a well-worn literary device, as seen in the scholarship on Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death*, or the debates surrounding self-immolated widows in colonial India. Although women can serve as a powerful metaphor for atrocity, Taiwanese women are victimized twice in the 2/28 discourse; they are expected to represent themselves while signifying something larger than themselves. Then, too, a problem inevitably arises in the literary project of restoration of history. History, as Jacques Le Goff so succinctly traces, is related to seeing: “This conception of vision as the essential source of knowledge leads to the idea that istor, the one who sees, is also the one who knows, istorien.”¹⁵ In the Taiwanese situation, we must interrogate how women, who were mostly absent at the scenes of atrocious acts, and who, therefore, do not see, can lay claim to legitimate representational authority, and to what extent their absent presence in history accomplishes the monumental task of restoring history.

In the following, I analyze four short stories by prominent Taiwanese writers to examine their portrayals of female victims of government atrocity, both the 2/28 Incident and the persecution of dissidents during the White Terror era (1950–87). To trace the evolution of the image of women as victim, I begin with Chen Yingzhen's "The Mountain Road" (1983), continue with Lin Shuangbu's "A Minor Biography of Huang Su" (1983) and Yang Zhao's "Yanhua" (1987), and conclude with Li Ang's "The Devil in a Chastity Belt" (1997). As my analysis shows, these stories entail literary exploitation of women as victim, but I seek also to highlight the complexity of engendering victimhood in post-martial law Taiwan.

"The Mountain Road" and Revictimization

Chen Yingzhen's "The Mountain Road" ("Shanlu") is one of the earliest and best-known stories on the effects of the White Terror.¹⁶ Written in 1983, before the lifting of martial law, the story is significant on at least two levels: historically speaking, it is audacious in its subject matter, as Chen's own personal life can attest to the intolerance of the ruling Nationalist government for any dissenting or critical views.¹⁷ Structurally, "The Mountain Road" sets an example for a narrative style that Yomi Braester calls "post-Chiang mystery,"¹⁸ a retelling of the past that can never be complete, as opposed to a straightforward, linear narration, such as that employed by Lin Shuangbu for his "A Minor Biography of Huang Su" ("Huang Su xiao biannian"), also published in 1983.¹⁹

"The Mountain Road" is told from the perspective of Li Guomu, whose sister-in-law, Cai Qianhui, is hospitalized at the beginning of the story. Doctors at various hospitals have not been able to diagnose the cause of her illness. Li Guomu recalls how his sister-in-law wept over a newspaper report on the parole of four political prisoners who were arrested in the early 1950s along with Li's older brother, Li Guokun, who was executed. The report marks the beginning of the deterioration of the sister-in-law's health. After she wills herself to die, Li finds among her effects a letter to one of the newly released prisoners, Huang Zhenbo, with whom she had a romantic relationship. The letter discloses that not only was she not married to Li's brother, but obviously did not even know him well. In the early 1950s, when the gov-

ernment conducted massive arrests of left-leaning intellectuals, her parents made a secret deal with the government for her brother to turn himself in; he complied but was ultimately arrested nonetheless. Guilt and shame over her family's action prompted her to pretend to be the wife of Li Guokun and toil for them for the following thirty years.

In this story, Chen Yingzhen creates the figure of a self-sacrificing woman in order to launch his indictment of capitalist society as a stark contrast to the idealism and self-devotion of young men like Li's brother and Huang Zhenbo. In the process, Chen describes the inhumane and lasting effects of the White Terror—a family sacrifices other families in order to save their son; a woman sacrifices her own youth as a form of reparation; a younger brother's inability to face the past is the result of many decades of self-censorship.

Examining "The Mountain Road" in terms of the ways in which literature bears witness against history, Yomi Braester argues that the story "points to literary testimony as always-already belated, addressing either the mute dead or the deaf living. The author cannot recover a voice free of the doubts—his own and his readers'—that have been ingrained during years of oppression and suppression."²⁰ Indeed, literary recuperation of a historical past by its very nature cannot but remain fragmentary at best. In Braester's view, such a characteristic in fictional works by Chen and others "is a sign of Taiwanese writers' recognition of their inability to redress past wrongs and rewrite history into a narrative of progress and redemption."²¹

The inability posited by Braester is not a strictly personal failure, but, more importantly, is caused by the White Terror; the devastating effects of oppression are exemplified in the action of the main character, Cai Qianhui, which can be best analyzed by applying Maurice Halbwachs's notion of autobiographical memory. As summarized by Lewis A. Coser: "[Autobiographical memory] is memory of events that we have personally experienced in the past. It may also serve to reinforce the bonds between participants, . . . It stands to reason, however, that autobiographical memory tends to fade with time unless it is periodically reinforced through contact with persons with whom one shared the experiences in the past. . . . In any case, autobiographical memory is always rooted in other people."²² What the power of suppression exerts on people is not solely the loss of historical memory (the

“forgotten” 2/28 Incident) but also the more sinister effect of isolation, of which Cai Qianhui is a prime victim. Without the periodic reinforcement through contacts with other participants, because they were either killed or still imprisoned, she “loses” her memory of the past until the day she reads about the release of one of the political prisoners — a coparticipant.

On the other hand, the fading of Cai Qianhui’s autobiographical memory, though serving the purpose of protest against government suppression, is exploited by the author in his attack on the detrimental effects of capitalism, which in turns calls into question the portrayal of victims of atrocity, particularly women. Like Li Guokun, whose brother is executed, Cai Qianhui, who also loses a brother, is a victim herself, though she may not consider herself to be one, for she believes that her parents, by collaborating to save her brother, have deprived her family of the victim status. The development of the story suggests that there can only be one kind of victim. Moreover, what is most disturbing about Chen’s story is the double victimization the author inflicts upon Cai Qianhui in order to convey his well-known hostility toward capitalism. As Braester points out, “her survival seems immoral when compared to the fate of the long-imprisoned and the dead.”²³ To put it more bluntly, Chen Yingzhen criticizes the Taiwanese people’s complacency and indulgence in material comfort by having Cai Qianhui confess in her letter to Huang Zhenbo: “Your release from prison has shocked me into awareness. I have been tamed by the capitalist commodity society, have been so well nourished that I have become a sort of domestic animal.”²⁴

One cannot help but question the employment of women as the embodiment of comfortable domesticity and, more importantly, Chen’s portrayal of a self-sacrificing devotee to the dissidents’ cause. Her redemption is denied her twice; she willingly turns herself into a *de facto* servant of the victim’s family to redress the crime committed by her family. She slaves away for the victim’s family, not only as a way to compensate for the family whose son is implicated by her own family, but also as a way to punish herself: “I worked extremely hard. I worked myself as though I were being driven by a cruel and abusive master, making myself a slave physically and emotionally.”²⁵ But her labor only leads to the enjoyment of a comfortable life (albeit self-proclaimed), from which she needs to be redeemed once more, this time, by her death. On the narrative level, when her mission of atoning

for a crime she did not commit is accomplished, author Chen Yingzhen has her summarily will herself to die, in order to deliver his political diatribe. We are reminded of the Algerian women, who were unveiled and veiled at the whim of the male colonial and Algerian governments in their effort to recoup (male) dominance and authority.

On the surface, Cai Qianhui appears to be a positive, sympathetic character, a figure like Mother Earth; she is, in fact, a triple victim: of White Terror, of her own convictions, and of the author's need to condemn capitalism. Her death, as David Wang has noted, "is a necessary means for filling in the blanks in history."²⁶ One can even argue that her death is inevitable, for the author needs her to die to make a point. Moreover, the narrative strategy renders her a powerless woman who seems to live in the past and for the past. The occasions in which we see her speaking are mostly taken up by reminiscences of the past and often in fragments, as she lacks contacts with coparticipants in the past. The last instance of her inability to speak for herself is the letter — unsent, discovered posthumously. The mystery of the cause of her death and the reason for her self-sacrifice is finally solved by the male narrator, who refuses to share the letter with anyone, including his wife, who is also portrayed as a caring, hard-working woman. The textual violation and narrative violence in the way female victims are presented is disturbing.

"A Minor Biography of Huang Su" and Madness

Compared with other works analyzed in this essay, Lin Shuangbu's story falls into a category all by itself; it presents a different kind of female victim. While women in the other stories are all "guilty" by association, "A Minor Biography of Huang Su" places the female victim at the scene of the massacre. In other words, the female victims in other stories suffer because men in their families (parents, a brother, or a husband) are implicated or involved, while Lin's story, rather than characterizing these women as victims of family connections, describes the firsthand experience of an innocent victim who happens to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"A Minor Biography of Huang Su" relates the story of nineteen-year-old Huang Su, who, in the space of a single day, changes from a happy bride-to-

be into an accused murderer, and eventually into a madwoman. The story opens on a spring day in 1947, as Huang Su awakens at the crack of dawn, filled with excitement. She is getting married in two weeks and her mother is taking her shopping in town. After making purchases at a fabric store, Huang Su and her mother arrive at a sundry shop where her mother picks out a cleaver for Huang Su, just as a commotion breaks out on the street. Two angry mobs attack each other with clubs, pieces of brick, and broken liquor bottles. Huang Su, separated from her mother, is carried along with the mobs and eventually falls down on a corpse when she suffers two heavy blows on her back. The cleaver, intended as a domestic instrument for her wifely duties, is mistaken as a weapon in the public outcry, and she is arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to death. But she is proclaimed not guilty just moments before she is to be shot. She is literally shocked out of her wits and goes mad. When she returns home, she learns that her parents have both fallen ill during her imprisonment and that the marriage proposal has been withdrawn. After both parents die, she is neglected by her brothers and sisters-in-law and wanders around the village aimlessly as an aging madwoman. The story ends with her walking down a railroad track as a train bears down on her.

Scholars who have examined this story by Lin Shuangbu inevitably mention the author's revelation of its background. According to Lin, the character of Huang Su is based on a madwoman in the village where the author received six years of high school education. But the significance of this story is enhanced by another extratextual figure—Lin's high school English teacher, who somehow let the words 2/28 slip into his lecture one day. Lin claimed that he raised his hand to ask the meaning of 2/28, but the teacher, in a state of panic, adamantly denied he had said anything. The author continued with questions after class until finally the teacher, using Taiwanese, told Lin some things about the 2/28 Incident, which Lin had never heard before. The teacher also mentioned the madwoman in town and explained how she had gotten to that pitiable state.²⁷ It was many years later that Lin Shuangbu finally decided to write the story.

It is difficult, perhaps pointless, to determine the veracity and credibility of the extratextual story, but the author's intention to re-create history is crystal clear, as Lin himself explains: "A concrete individual case in a his-

torical event emerges and the cold setting now finds a lively protagonist.”²⁸ In a way, we can argue that the re-creation of history — the story of Huang Su — is the joint effort of a high school English teacher, his student, the adult author, and the madwoman; the story would likely be radically different if it were missing any one of the participants. The creation process mirrors the unearthing of 2/28 history: from ignorance (the young author) and self-imposed silence (his teacher), to inquiry, to finally putting a name to the victims. While one may fault the author for exploiting the image of a madwoman, one can also make a valid case that the author is attempting to redress historical wrongs and is providing a name to the suffering woman.

Both Xu Junya and Jian Suzheng consider the story to be a manifestation of gender stereotype by male writers: “[Lin Shuangbu] employs a gender conception based on a patriarchal value system and turns women into a symbol of Taiwan. When the country is in turmoil, women cannot help but be dragged in to become the most innocent victims.”²⁹ Echoing Xu Junya’s reading, Jian Suzheng adds that what truly concerns the author is not women’s experience but the destiny of the collectivity. Indeed, what can better represent the ultimate effect of the 2/28 Incident than an innocent woman, particularly one who is just about to be married? We recall how the widow who carried out sati was often portrayed as a “tender child.”

On the other hand, Xu and Jian’s critique seems incomplete, if not misapplied altogether. What is at issue in this story is not merely a helpless woman representing a powerless Taiwan at the total mercy of the Nationalist government, but the trope of betrothed woman and madness. In her analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested that the function of the madwoman, Bertha Mason, is “to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law.”³⁰ In a similar vein, it is only through a description of the subhuman figure of Huang Su that the author can convey a sense of outrage over injustice and senseless killing. A novel published in 1989, Chen Ye’s *Muddy River*, also features a woman gone mad after her fiancé was arrested and executed.³¹ But madness alone cannot and does not adequately represent the severity of suffering endured by the Taiwanese. Interestingly, Chen Ye’s madwoman, Yinchai, like Huang Su, also loses her fiancé, which makes one wonder if the combination of a mar-

riage proposal, a woman, and her madness is the most effective means of representing atrocity (we recall that Cai Qianhui and the nameless woman in Yang Zhao's story are both unmarried).

“Flower in the Smoke” and Questionable Victimhood

In an essay on women, provincial origin, and history in 2/28 fiction, Jian Suzheng delineates three stages in the fictional representation of women in 2/28 literature: the period between retrocession and the martial-law era (1945 to early 1980s), the years shortly before the lifting of martial law (in 1987), and the post–martial law era. This periodization helps illustrate the changing portrayals of women, from innocent victims, to ameliorating and unifying figures of provincial divides, to personification of the complex relationship between public/national history and private life.³² The lifting of martial law in 1987 was indeed a watershed for Taiwanese literature; prior to that demarcation year, writers understandably practiced self-censorship, whereas the post–martial law era ushered in a cacophony of literary subjects, including political satire and female sexuality. Hence, the periodization encompasses this subgenre of 2/28 literature both synchronically and diachronically, although the expansion of topics and increasingly transparent reference to 2/28 were contingent upon the gradual relaxation of government control. While it is not my intention to conduct a survey of Taiwan's literature of atrocity, let alone in a periodized manner, it is important and imperative to examine how the representation of women evolved. To do that, I look at a 1987 story by Yang Zhao titled “Yanhua” (“Flower in the Smoke”).³³

Narrated by a third-person omniscient voice, “Yanhua” tells of an encounter between a young Taiwanese woman and a man from the mainland named Jin Hongzao, who was a friend of her deceased father. The young woman's father, who had been a member of a local committee investigating the bloodshed caused by the illegal cigarettes incident and later a member of a settlement committee, was arrested and then executed shortly afterward. Jin Hongzao's wife, also a mainlander, died during the incident when a group of angry demonstrators stormed the police station where she sought refuge. The intertwined past of the only two characters in the story is

revealed through their conversation; the story does not contain much action until one day the young woman invites Jin to her house, where she asks him in and guides his hand in touching her naked body. Shortly after that night, which appears to be the climax of the story, Jin is arrested and dies in prison.

Jian Suzheng places Yang Zhao's story in the second period, with the following justification:

2/28 fiction written toward the end of the martial law era was gradually divested of its angry, dark accusatory tone, and the indiscriminate antipathy toward the Mainlanders slowly dissipated. Most of the works now took into serious consideration the fact that the Mainlanders were also victims of political persecution. Yang Zhao's "Yanhua" . . . , though also using female characters to describe the fate of the Taiwanese, broadens the definition of "Taiwanese" to include the Mainlanders and eliminates the dichotomy of "self" and "other" that in earlier 2/28 fiction placed the Taiwanese at the center. Moreover, the kindness and tenderness of female characters was also used as a medium of communication between provincial groups.³⁴

Jian's characterization of Yang's story aptly underscores the common features of fictional works written during this period.³⁵ However, without a critical analysis, Jian's approach merely points out similarities. A closer examination of the story exposes the fallacy of deploying women as a trope for harmonious coexistence between the mainlanders and the Taiwanese.

What immediately attracts an informed reader's attention is the fact that the young woman does not have a name, whereas the mainland man is called Jin Hongzao, although, at one point, the woman is referred to as Wang Heshun's daughter. The lack of a name symbolizes the absence of a discernible individuality, which may signal the author's intention to present her as the quintessential Taiwanese woman, or the "Everywoman" of Taiwan, if you will. Moreover, it also underscores the double victimization derived from the contaminating effects of the 2/28 Incident. For many members of the victims' families, the 2/28 Incident was a contagious disease; they were shunned by society and harassed by military police or the secret service. In the young woman's own words: "Except for the closest relatives,

‘none of his friends, colleagues, supervisors and subordinates dared come [to pay respects at his bier]. Not a single one of them dared to come.’ All of a sudden, [the family] was isolated like quarantine during the plague. . . . From then on, she felt she was just like a plague. Shunzi’s daughter. That was Shunzi’s daughter. Occasionally someone would sneak something to her or help her secretly because she was Shunzi’s [Wang Heshun’s] daughter, but in public every one of them stayed clear of her, absolutely clear of her.”³⁶

Her profession seems to confirm this authorial intention. Although nowhere in the story does the author explain how she becomes a prostitute, it requires little imagination to deduce that, after her father’s death, the girl’s family fell on hard times and she turned to prostitution as a means of survival. Prostitution, like rape, is a well-worn metaphor for the injustice inflicted upon the subjugated.³⁷ In this story, prostitution carries another level of significance and serves an important if disturbing narratological function. The woman sleeps with American GIs, not Taiwanese men. Although one can read too much into this trope, it is impossible to avoid discussing the meaning of such a choice of profession (albeit by the author). Is prostitution the only weapon in the author’s narratorial arsenal to portray the devastating effects of the 2/28 Incident? Can no other line of work adequately convey the sense of injustice? By personifying the atrocious crimes of the 2/28 Incident in this way, the author symbolically victimizes the victim’s daughter a second time.

The young woman’s profession further serves to criticize the absurdity of provincial differences. She reveals to Jin Hongzao that, after her father’s death, her grandmother made every child in the family swear never to marry a mainlander. Her own romantic relationship with a mainlander is forcefully terminated by the elders in the family. “‘I cannot marry a mainlander,’ she said, giving him an eerie but enchanting smile, ‘but I can sleep with foreigners.’”³⁸ Jian Suzheng reads this passage as a stricture against control of the female body: “The female body becomes a battleground for political struggle; women, under the domination of family clan and provincial groups, lose autonomy and control over their own bodies and sexuality.” Earlier in the essay, Jian describes Yang Zhao as a male writer with a feminist consciousness, and the comment quoted above suggests a positive reading of Yang’s work, as one that condemns irrational hatred for mainlanders.

While it is difficult to disagree with such a reading, it is important to question whether the juxtaposition of provincial divides and nationality difference is itself biased and whether a censure of provincial disharmony must be presented in a way that further emphasizes the division between self and other. In other words, the author seems to imply that sleeping with foreigners is a more serious violation of Taiwanese individuality and supremacy than marrying a mainlander. He has found it necessary to articulate the narrowly defined provincial identity through a nationalistic paradigm.

Jian Suzheng approaches the issue from a drastically different perspective, particularly in regard to the scene where the young woman asks Jin Hongzao to touch her. The section is worth quoting in full:

His hand shook slightly as it rested on her gaunt, bony shoulder. He wanted to remove his hand, but he couldn't. . . . Taking a deep breath, he let his hand slide along her shoulder, her right arm, her right elbow, her right wrist, and her right palm. Her hand grabbed his and put it on her neck. . . . Carefully he moved his hand along the space between her breasts all the way down to her abdomen and her navel. He realized it wasn't as difficult as he'd imagined, but she suddenly grabbed his hand again, this time to place it on her right breast. . . . She took a deep breath and placed his hand on her private part while opening her legs slightly. . . .

Shaking his head, he said, "No, we can't." She said insistently, "You promised." His hand touched her hair, very very gently caressing the most sensitive area. He arched his upper body to look at her. The expression on her face was not the kind of flushed beauty or charm associated with sex; instead it was more like peace from redemption.

She nearly jumped up to grab hold of him. Choking on tears, she said, "I always felt that my body was so filthy I could never cleanse it no matter how I tried." Her tears dripped onto his body through the open collar of his shirt. "Last night that White GI pushed down hard on me and kissed every part of my body, including . . . I hate him. It's fine now; now I feel fine. My body is mine again."³⁹

In Jian Suzheng's view, the young woman's action represents a new attitude toward provincial identities: "The contradiction that [the young woman] 'cannot marry a Mainlander but can sleep with foreigners as a prostitute' can

be resolved only after the barrier between provincial groups is dismantled and the provincially based labels of 'self' and 'other' are peeled off. There is nothing sexual about the young woman playing an active role and guiding Jin Hongzao to caress her body. First of all, it is a symbolic gesture of the mingling of the Taiwanese and mainlander, and secondly, it represents a female resistance to political struggle and demand to take back control of her own body."⁴⁰ Jian's well-intentioned reading notwithstanding, it is difficult not to consider this passage an expression of male fantasy, as it remains unclear how a young woman guiding an older man, her own father's friend, to touch her naked body constitutes the elimination of provincial differences. Jian, and perhaps the author, seems to suggest that the mere fact that the young Taiwanese woman asks a mainland man to touch her is evidence enough for the emergence of a new attitude toward provincial differences. Such a reading/writing inevitably elides the issue of atrocity and simplifies the cause of the 2/28 Incident. That is, by using the intimacy between a Taiwanese woman and a mainland man, both of whom are victims of 2/28, to suggest the elimination of provincial hatred, Jian's reading of Yang's work appears to claim that provincial differences were the sole cause of the incident. I do not intend to present historical research to refute such a simplistic explanation, but the voluminous work conducted by historians and scholars clearly points to far more complicated causes.

Then, too, how the young woman's action represents a resistance against political struggle remains unclear, logically or narratologically. The reading likely comes from the fact that since, at the request of her grandmother, and before her father's bier, she had sworn not to marry a mainlander, her action in seeking body contact with Jin, a mainlander, can be considered a defiant act. But the passage displays at best a crude understanding of female subjectivity vis-à-vis ethnic conflict. If indeed the young woman is motivated by a desire to defy familial control over her body, does Jian Suzheng's idea of symbolic attitude toward provincial harmony not then mean a different kind of ideological yoke? Once again, female subjectivity has been subsumed under ethnic politics.

Who Is the Victim in “The Devil in a Chastity Belt”?

“The Devil in a Chastity Belt” (“Dai zhencaodai de mogui”) is the first story in Li Ang’s famous (and infamous) collection titled *Everyone Sticks Incense into the Beigang Burner* (*Beigang xianglu renren cha*).⁴¹ Criticism of the collection following its publication is well known but not particularly relevant to the present study.⁴² Suffice it to say that the story and others in the collection explore the relationship between sex and politics and how women gain power in Taiwan. However, the debates and scandal have obscured the aspect of victims of atrocity and Li Ang’s subversion of the definition of victimhood. The stories examined so far focus on female victims who suffer either because of family members (father or brother) or because of an untimely presence at the scene of massacre; all of them are “guilty” by association. Common among literature of atrocity in Taiwan, women seem to be “innocent” even by today’s standard; that is, none of them are portrayed as members of the Communist party or as left-leaning intellectuals. Furthermore, these women are usually presented as passive recipients who atone for others’ crimes or are simply incapable of living on their own. It is within this discursive milieu that Li Ang’s story becomes especially poignant and meaningful.

The nameless protagonist, later nicknamed the “Grieving Founding Mother” (or “Grieving Mother of the Nation”) comes from a Taiwanese middle-class family, which furnishes her with an education in music, Japanese tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and literature. A high school music teacher, her only connection with politics at first is her husband, “Cannon,” a legislator who was arrested during a crackdown on political dissent. After her husband, whose only “crime” was meeting with foreign observers, is sentenced to fifteen years in prison, she is elected as a people’s representative and later becomes a legislator.

Similar to other female protagonists in stories dealing with the 2/28 Incident or the White Terror, this nameless woman is an involuntary participant in politics. Thus, Li Ang underscores the gendered political arena in Taiwan; women are not expected to play, and likely discouraged from playing, any active political roles. Unique to Taiwanese opposition politics, however, a few women gained visibility and political positions when the men in

their lives were arrested and imprisoned during the White Terror, and this circumstance is mirrored in the protagonist's life. The irony of the Grieving Mother is that it is precisely her husband's arrest that gives her the opportunity to be in politics. If active participation in politics is a form of female empowerment, then Li Ang has subverted the definition of a female victim by problematizing the meaning of victimhood. That is, without her husband's arrest, she would never have become a victim, but her victimhood, in turn, gives her political resources unavailable to many other Taiwanese, men and women alike.

However, the author refuses to pin down the definition of victimhood by making the character's participation dubiously motivated; she has thrown herself into politics not because she is interested in the cause of the opposition, but because she believes it is the only way for her to be reunited with her husband. Even she, despite a remarkable performance in Congress, intimates to a woman who is writing about her that "there is nothing great or admirable about me; I didn't choose to make these sacrifices willingly. All I want is to go back to the life I had before, with my husband back beside me, and a home of our own, and our two children."⁴³

Moreover, we can detect a different kind of victimhood, one derived not from the imprisonment of the protagonist's husband but from the unbearable burden of martyrdom. Although ambiguous about the force behind the character's transformation from gracious music teacher into political activist, Li Ang is explicit in portraying her as a desexualized being: "Her romance and her love-life as a woman had forever ceased to be in her thirty-second year, on the Christmas Eve of the Big Arrest."⁴⁴ From then on, frozen in time and space, she could only be the Grieving Mother of the Nation, not a woman with feeling and desires.

This kind of victimhood is gender specific, and inflicted upon the woman not only by an oppressive government but also by the men in the opposition camp. In order to exploit the image of a political prisoner's wife, the men in the party prescribe a rigid quasi-widowhood, and her career as a public figure is forever shrouded in a cloud of suspicion regarding her ability to fully participate in opposition politics.⁴⁵ As Kathleen B. Jones points out, "Since women were defined in terms of reproductive and caretaking functions for which they were assumed to be suited by nature, they were excluded from

full participation as citizens.”⁴⁶ Ironically, it is precisely this function of caretaker that is exploited by the opposition camp; that is, the image of a mother grieving for her fatherless children (not for her loss of a husband, mind you) serves as the ultimate gesture of accusation against government oppression.

Also noteworthy is Li Ang’s moniker for the female protagonist: the Grieving Founding Mother (of the Nation) (*Beishang de guomu*). Quoting John Schaar, Jones observes that “the founding of communities constitutes a symbolic birth unique among all births: it is a birth without mothers.”⁴⁷ But the birth of an imagined Republic of Taiwan is precisely a birth by mothers alone. Whether by serendipity or by design, Li Ang creates a *guomu* (mother of the nation) that not only counters the dominant discourse of the GMD, whose iconic founder, Sun Yat-sun, is a founding father (*guofu*), but who can also function as a gesture toward reclaiming women’s authority within the opposition camp. Consequently, the Grieving Mother in Li Ang’s story operates in a narrow space cracked open by the unique political conditions of Taiwan; but she is forever walking a tightrope that is the very embodiment of such ambiguous victimhood.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I discussed the pivotal role that women from three different regions have played (willingly or unwillingly) in the shaping of their respective nation’s traditions at a particular historical juncture. In colonial Algeria, the unveiling of the indigenous women became a civilizing project for the French and their revealing by Algerian male authority represented a sign of recovered Algerian cultural heritage; Indian widows and sati were turned into a virtual site of immolating Indian tradition in a contest of scriptural interpretation. In both these cases, women were inevitably marginalized; they were set aside as trophies to be claimed by the victors. Similarly, in their readings of Xiao Hong’s novel about women and suffering, Chinese male intellectuals chose to view the women as victims of foreign aggression rather than as women oppressed by Chinese culture and poverty.

It is no coincidence that women in Algeria, India, and China gained such

discursive attention at similar junctions of their history—the birthing of a new nation, which was carried out through the contestation of traditions and creation of new historical narratives. In a similar way, post-martial law Taiwan witnessed the birthing of a new nation with burgeoning writings of a new historiography, particularly in the literary field. Writers have re-created scenes of atrocity and its effects to fill in the gaps in history, and a new Taiwan is being written into existence. In this body of literature, women as victims have been clearly considered the most powerful trope to convey a sense of injustice. However, as I have shown in analyzing Li Ang's story, the definition of victimhood is, in fact, never readily transparent. As David Wang has noted: "A ritual account of the most repugnant crime can degenerate into a most boring pastime and ultimately trivialize the crime itself. A literature of constant engagement will produce the effect of a literature of alienation."⁴⁸ In this sense, the equivocal portrayals of women as victims not only constitute a sign of an evolving understanding of Taiwanese history, but also serve as a crucial narrative device that helps to avoid the pitfall of trivialization.

Notes

All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise specified.

1. See John Whittier Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
2. Some, however, such as Chen Yingzhen and Lan Bozhou, have argued that the White Terror was the by-product of the Cold War and American imperialism on Taiwan. See, for instance, Chen's introduction, "Meiguo diguo zhuyi he Taiwan fangong pusha yundong" ("American Imperialism and Anti-Communist Extermination in Taiwan") to Lan's *Huang mache zhi ge* (*Song of the Covered Wagon*) (Taipei: Shibao Chuban Gongsi, 1991), 15–24.
3. Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Manchuria in Xiao Hong's *Field of Life and Death*," in *Body Subject and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 159–77. A different version of the essay, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: *The Field of Life and Death* Revisited," which I consulted but do not quote, appears in *Scattered Hegemonies*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 37–62. As Liu points out (176 n. 4), scholars such as Howard Goldblatt (in 1976) and Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua (in 1989) have resisted a nationalist reading.

4. Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse," 161.
5. Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 35–67.
6. Winifred Woodhull, "Unveiling Algeria," *Genders* 10 (1999), 114.
7. Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 27.
8. *Ibid.*, 29. This is but a simplified account of Mani's extensive analysis of colonial presumption in terms of Indian tradition and its malleability in the British imperialistic endeavor.
9. *Ibid.*, 32.
10. *Ibid.*, 51.
11. In the meantime, deliberate measures were taken to ensure that the local heritage was suppressed and supplanted by a constructed national memory. See Marshall Johnson's "Making Time: Historic Preservation and the Space of Nationality" for an insightful analysis of how the GMD government claimed its political legitimacy, in *positions* 2 (1994): 177–249.
12. Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 310.
13. Shen Xiuhua made a similar observation in her introduction to a volume devoted to adding women's voice to the 2/28 scholarship; see Shen Xiuhua, *Chamouren de Eerba (Women's 2/28)* (Taipei: Yushan she, 1997), 11.
14. *Ibid.*, 14.
15. Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 101.
16. Chen Yingzhen, "Shanlu" ("The Mountain Road"), in *Chen Yingzhen duanpian xiaoshuo xuan (A Collection of Short Stories by Chen Yingzhen)* (Taipei: Renjian Zazhishe, 1985). The English translation is by Anne White with Chu Chiyu and Huang Liangbi, *Renditions* 39 (1993): 3–25.
17. In 1968 Chen Yingzhen was sentenced to ten years in prison for his "subversive" activities by the Garrison Command but was released after seven years, following the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1975. For more details, see Lucien Miller, "A Break in the Chain: the Short Stories of Ch'en Ying-chen," in *Chinese Fiction from Taiwan: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Jeanette L. Faurot (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 108n1.
18. Yomi Braester, "Retelling Taiwan: Identity and Dislocation in Post-Chiang Mystery," in *Witness against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 156–76.
19. Lin Shuangbu, "Huang Su xiao biannian" ("A Minor Biography of Huang Su"), in *Eerba Taiwan xiaoshuo xuan (A Collection of Taiwan 2/28 Short Stories)*, ed. Lin Shuangbu (Taipei: Zili wanbaoshe, 1989), 58–68.
20. Braester, "Retelling Taiwan," 166.

21. Ibid., 100.
22. Lewis A. Coser, "Introduction," in Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24. Halbwachs analyzes autobiographical memory in its relation to historical memory preserved in written records and other types of records.
23. Braester, "Retelling Taiwan," 163.
24. Chen, "Shanlu," 25.
25. Ibid., 23.
26. David Der-wei Wang, "Lichengbei xia de chensi—dangdai Taiwan xiaoshuo de shenhua-xing yu lishigan" ("Lost in Thought under the Milestone: Myth and History in Contemporary Taiwanese Fiction"), in *Zhongsheng Xuanhua (Polyphonous Clamor)*, quoted in Braester, "Retelling Taiwan," 163.
27. Lin Shuangbu, "Jianzheng yu guwu—bianxuan xu" ("Witness and Encouragement: An Introduction") in Lin, *Ereba Taiwan xiaoshuo xuan*, n.p.
28. Ibid.
29. Xu Junya, "Bianxuan xu: xiaoshuo zhong de 'Ereba'" ("The '2/28' in Fiction: An Introduction"), in *Wu yu de chuntian: Ereba xiaoshuo xuan (Silent Spring: A Collection of 2/28 Short Stories)*, ed. Xu Junya (Taipei: Yushan she, 2003), 20.
30. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 268.
31. Chen Ye, *Ni he (Muddy River)* (Taipei: Zili wanbao wenhua chubanbu, 1989).
32. Jian Suzheng, "Ereba xiaoshuo zhong de nüxing, shengji yu lishi" ("Women, Provincial Origin, and History in 2/28 Fiction"), www.complit.fju.edu.tw/complit98/papers/paper12.htm (accessed July 14, 2003).
33. *Yanhua* is a euphemism for a prostitute, but also refers to a kind of flower that thrives and blooms in smog, the subject studied by one of the main characters, Jin Hongzao. For lack of an English counterpart, I have chosen to translate the title literally and have used the romanized title throughout my discussion. Yang Zhao, "Yanhua," in Xu, *Wu yu de chuntian*, 195–218. The story first appeared in Yang Zhao, *Wu Xiang Zhi Hun (Soul of My Hometown)* (Taipei: Shibao Chuban Gongsi, 1987).
34. Jian, "Ereba xiaoshuo zhong de nüxing, shengji yu lishi."
35. Jian includes a brief analysis of another story, "The Base of Wind and Snow" ("Fengxue diceng") by Lin Wenyi, which features a woman with a mainland background who is arrested at the airport after attending several lectures given by mainland Chinese in the United States.
36. Yang, "Yanhua," 216.
37. We recall how Huang Chun-ming criticized Taiwan's economic reliance upon Japan by

portraying the narrator in “Sayonara/Zaijian” as a pimp for seven Japanese businessmen on their pleasure trip to the narrator’s hometown.

38. Yang, “Yanhua,” 217.
39. *Ibid.*, 213–14.
40. Jian, “Ererba xiaoshuo zhong de nüxing, shengji yu lishi.”
41. Li Ang, “Dai zhencaodai de mogui” (“The Devil in a Chastity Belt”), in *Beigang xianglu renren cha* (*Everyone Sticks Incense into the Beigang Burner*) (Taipei: Maitian chubanshe, 1997), 49–82. The English translation is by Laura Jane Way, in *The Chinese PEN* (2000): 75–111.
42. A huge scandal ensued when one of the stories was first serialized in one of Taiwan’s preeminent newspapers; the story became an instant roman à clef. The director of public relations for the DPP was identified as the purported real-life model for the female protagonist, who sleeps her way to power. Li Ang was sued by the director, and many in the opposition camp attacked her for painting such a negative picture of women in politics. The controversy turned a serious exploration of women’s accessibility to power into a sensational catfight between two women.
43. Li, “Dai zhencaodai de mogui,” 59; “Devil in a Chastity Belt,” trans. Way, 87.
44. Li, “Dai zhencaodai de mogui,” 69; “Devil in a Chastity Belt,” trans. Way, 97.
45. Before her husband’s arrest, people even raised the possibility that she might become an obstacle to her husband’s political career: “Would she ever stand in the way of her husband’s opposition work for the sake of her young son and daughter and her lovely home though? Nobody openly discussed this. People spat betel-nut juice on the ground and said with gruff tenderness, ‘Well, she’s a woman.’ What they left unsaid was: ‘They’re all like this.’” (Li, “Dai zhencaodai de mogui,” 55; “Devil in a Chastity Belt,” trans. Way, 81).
46. Kathleen B. Jones, *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.
47. *Ibid.*, 83.
48. David Der-wei Wang, “Reinventing National History: Communist and Anti-Communist Fiction of the Mid-Twentieth Century,” in *Chinese Literature in the Second Half of a Modern Century: A Critical Survey*, ed. Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 61.