Zhu Tianxin's Eros of Home/Land: Nostalgia as a Literary Strategy

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ABSTRACT

In Zhu Tianxin's recent writings, nostalgia is deployed as an interpretative figure to examine the problematic of home—a problematic that is activated by the disruption of the postmodern temporality into the modern space and the resulting dissociation between the place which one inherits and the space of home which one must endlessly invent. Her novels set into motion the double logic of nostalgia both as homesickness and as home sickness. Presenting nostalgia as both symptom and diagnosis of the current identity crisis in Taiwan, Zhu's recent writings nevertheless give the nostalgic impulse an ironic twist. Her nostalgic gaze problematizes the location of home not to dismiss the home as a valid spatial marker of identification but to proffer a different logic of nostalgia, making the failure of homecoming a productive one.

KEY WORDS

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Home
Temporal dislocation
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modernity
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Modernity in Taiwan is, from its very beginning, a very ambivalent project, caught as it is between tradition and its erasure, localization and its marginality, westernization and its violence. Unlike the development of modernity in the West which is rooted in the context of Enlightenment metaphysics, the modernity project in Taiwan has proceeded out of a moment of identity crisis and cultural depletion as a response not primarily to the pressures and challenges of western colonization but as a reaction to the needs rising from the home culture to invent and legitimate a new cultural practice, whatever it is. The intense and well-documented debates in the 70s between literary modernism (*xiandai wenxue*) and literary nativism (*xiangtu wenxue*) have revolved around the foundation of that legitimacy; namely, whether the formation and legitimation of the local culture needs its replenishment from the West so as to build up a firmer link with a global culture, or does it require the concentrated efforts of a writing back to the West (or China) so as to reclaim the locutionary positions for the local culture.[1] It is in this sense that the rise of nativist literature in the 70s has been taken to be "an unmistakable expression of Chinese nationalism" (Lin 8). But if it expresses a strong nationalist sentiment, what is the "imaginary homeland," to borrow a phrase from Salman Rushdie, that it embraces, China or Taiwan, or neither? And to put it more radically, is there such a place that one can truly feel at home?

Experiencing Modernity as Dislocated Temporality/Temporal Dislocation

Though a historical narrative that considers the 60s as an age of literary modernism and the 70s and the early 80s as an age of literary nativism has been a matter of scholarly truism in Taiwan,[2] the rigid binarism—between a welcoming mimicry of the West and a trenchant rejection of the West, between a turning towards the global and a fetishization of the local, between disloyalty and betrayal, in other words—that informs this historical narrative bespeaks a rather simplistic view of literary activities as a confrontation between East and West, Taiwan and China. With high modernism and nativist realism pitted against each other, modernity in the literary and cultural discourses of Taiwan seems to have but two opposing faces, with two diametrically opposed modes of articulation. If, however, we understand modernity as a cultural movement that is defined by a sense of its ever-changing newness and of its role in forging radical changes, modernity may have quite a number of repressed modes of expressions that need to be recognized, each of which gives an alternative account of the ongoing experience of modernity.[3] But if literary historians insist upon two opposing symbolizations of the modern, it just shows how politicized the problematic of modernity is in Taiwan, bound up as it is with the debate over the political identity of the nation-state of Taiwan and the geopoltical locale of our homeland. The dichotomized historiography of modern Taiwan literature in this sense is a historical narrative projected onto two differently situated geopolitical spaces, with Taiwan and China being the two spatialized expressions of the experience of modernity. However, this intense historical contestation, though seemingly structured around two powerful spatial signs—Taiwan and China—is also a conflict over "time": linear and teleological time that promises progress or repetitive time that has the past interrupt and inhabit the present. Modernity is not merely a contestation over spaces; it forces us to reconsider and rewrite historicity from within (and between) these imaginary geopolitical spaces and it also challenges us to think of the question

of history (time) and geography (space) without any pre-given certainty. The ambivalence and antagonism between the two geo-political imaginations centering on either China or Taiwan produces the impossible chasm in the discourse of national identity which in turn makes the space of homeland both real and imaginary. Whereas modernity clears a space for itself by constructing a radical discontinuity in time, nostalgia—often recognized as the signature modernist malaise—also takes place on the knowledge of the absolute severance between the irretrievable past and the depressing present. But why does a subject act nostalgically when she or he knows that there is no home to return to? Can nostalgia be a political posture theatrically performed to expose the "elsewhere" as both the cause and effect of a nostalgic desire for home?

In discussing the deviating forces of the modernist malaise: nostalgia, I do not intend to repeat the obvious: nostalgia as homesickness; rather, nostalgia, in activating a repetitive time, further marks out the absence of home through each repetition, producing thereby something more than what the past can contain. This residue time opens up a supplementary space that problematizes the very project of modernity, rendering it fantastic. The repetitive impetus of nostalgia translates the yearning for home (homesickness) both to a satirical critique of home (home as sick and dis-eased) and to the un-topian production of makeshift homes. And it is this nostalgia as the site of ambivalent desires that structures my reading of Zhu Tianxin's recent writings.

Nostalgia, as its etymology suggests, is homesickness, and as such, a movement back in time and space. But as the Greek root of nostalgia, *nostos* and *algos*, literally also mean homecoming and pain, nostalgia signifies the desire for re-turn without ever reaching home. The luxury of nostalgia implies the stability of a localized and localizable place called "home" to be yearned for, but it so saturates "home" with supplementary signification that home becomes so over-coded with meanings and sentiments that it disappears into the thickness of language. Not surprisingly, nostalgia, so stylized, can be taken to be a duplicable structure of feelings that is not activated by the

yearning for a lost home, but the desire to have a home to be mourned for. In this sense, nostalgia is haunted by the double logic it simultaneously makes possible: it implies the loss of a home in the past and it also, through repetitively retrieving the lost home in memories and stories, generates other homes and alternative spaces. Rey Chow, in her study of the nostalgic filmic image in the movie *Rouge* [*Yanzhi kou*] asks two questions that are pertinent to my discussion here:

> Two sets of questions, then: First, instead of thinking that nostalgia is a feeling triggered by an object lost in the past (a mode of thinking that remains linear and teleological in orientation), can we attempt the reverse? Perhaps nostalgia is a feeling looking for an object? If so, how does it catch its object? Could the movement of nostalgia be a loop, a throw, a network of chance, rather than a straight line? Second, how can nostalgia be "represented" in film? (61)

While Rey Chow proposes to reconsider nostalgia by reversing its logic and take it instead as "a feeling looking for an object," I think Chow's argumentative force will be better served if nostalgia is taken to be a feeling that, instead of looking for objects to be mourned for, actually generates objects to be retrieved in an on-going process of displacement. The political effects of Rey Chow's alternative nostalgia accords with Homi K. Bhabha's exploration into the ambivalent temporality of the modern nation-space. If the construction of the modern state demands the manipulation of a narrative linearly assembled to displace the multiplicity of the people with the singularity of the nation, then the discourse of the nation can be effectively interrupted by a "supplementary strategy" that adds a "metonymic, iterative temporality" to the "homogenous empty time" of the national narrative (155). But how does the narrative of nation-space manipulate time? For Bhabha, this narrative articulates time both by constructing a singular History and by producing a collective amnesia or the desire to forget to remember. Bhabha claims that this strange obligation to forget, through a sleigh of hand, can be taken as another

instance of the supplementary logic of the narrative of the nation. Bhabha stresses that the project of nation building is predicated upon this forced obligation to forget and the national identity is secured through this coerced forgetfulness that the discourse of the nation encourages and promotes. Obviously, Bhabha, by modifying Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an "imagined community," proposes an understanding of the national identity as "a form of social and textual affiliation," and a narrative effect replete with ideological contradiction (140). As such, the construction of the national identity, an intrinsic project of the nation's modernization, carries voices of the other to warrant its own deconstruction. "Being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification" (161). While the national discourse constitutes the cultural space of the nation by articulating a collective will to forget to remember, the idiom of nostalgia, however, undermines the national amnesia by disrupting into the linearity of the national time with its repetitive temporality. The nostalgic compulsion to remember activates this alternative temporality of repetition which in each repetition arrives at a home while leaving another behind. Though the rhetoric of nostalgia has often been considered as conservative and regressive, it is nevertheless an idiom that continues to haunt the language of modernity as if it is constitutive of that language. If, therefore, we understand nostalgia as an ambivalent site of cultural negotiation, we may be able to focus more critical attention on where the nostalgic subject is located and how she interacts and negotiates with the other mechanisms that determine her position in the fractured history of the nation-state. After all, since the discourse of the nation insists on the double-edged desire to forget to remember, it is not dissimilar to the semiotics of nostalgia that also operates on the simultaneity of remembering to forget and forgetting to remember.

What is "home" anyway? To be at home necessitates the construction of borders that divide, categorize and discriminate. To be nostalgic, on the contrary, is the movement towards an unstable and indefinite space in time. It is this movement of never getting there

that constitutes the political force of nostalgia which constantly renegotiates the many shifting borders of this home-space to make the idea of home viable to sustain alternative forms of cultural identification; that is, alternative routes of homecoming. To be nostalgic, in this sense, is to live on the borderlines where different time and space meets. Such borderlines do not necessarily constitute a new horizon; they constitute instead a movement of continual differences and an in-between space of connection and exclusion. The nostalgic subjects are, in this sense, subjects who are negotiating with their experiences of always living in and with borrowed time and rented space. If the nostalgic subject is always already living on a temporal and spatial border, the border that each has to live with and to cross is a different border, but each passage is accompanied by the displacement of home. In other words, the home, as that which activates an ongoing movement of reterritorializations, needs to be endlessly displaced and remapped before its instability can be recognized without guilt or glee.

On the one hand, nostalgia is often deployed as a strategy to register and negotiate the border experience of this "unhomeliness." On the other hand, as a narratorial mode that exposes the multiplicity of time that we simultaneously inhabit, nostalgia can easily slide into a tactic of reinforcing linear time and singular identity. In this sense, nostalgia demands a self-conscious deployment and even an ironic distance to maintain its critical force. But the awareness of the double-edgedness of nostalgia needs not detain us from perceiving it as a tactic of intervention whose failure of arriving home is actually a valuable and productive failure. Since the nostalgic citation of the past produces rather than reproduces the past, it archeologically exposes the many repressed histories that the discourse of the nation does not want us to know. Moreover, the nostalgia citation of the past is not an arbitrary process; it involves a deliberate process of metonymic extension and metaphorical displacement. For better or for worse, the rhetoric of nostalgia and the language of identity discourse are mutually constitutive as well as mutually disruptive. A self-conscious deployment of nostalgia can be a productive response to the forward vision of the modernity project. When, in Taiwan at least,

historical amnesia has become the price we pay for the modernization of the state, the erasure of history needs to be countered by a deliberate re-turn to histories—macro and micro—if only to retain the force of the past in haunting and disturbing us through its uncanny familiarity and irretrievable loss. Rather than dismissing it uncritically, we need to engage a rigorous examination of the constitutive ambivalence of nostalgia to determine its political uses and abuses.

Narrating Nostalgia: Repetitive and Disruptive Time

Xiang wo juancun de xiongdi men [Thinking of my brothers of the military dependents' village],[4] is a collection of six stories by Zhu Tianxin. Each of the six stories focuses on the daily life and consciousness of one marginalized group in an effort not only to represent or record their life but also to comment on and annotate the daily, mundane problems of their urban existence. Together, the six stories parade a gallery of Taipei people who suffer from an inexplicable paranoia of the future, an irresistible fascination with the present, mixed with a melancholy nostalgia for the past. The stories register a keen sense of the postmodern angst experienced by the metropolitan misfits who are uncomfortably situated at one kind of border or another. The term "border" here is not used in legal terms to refer to the dividing line that separates one nation-state from the other. The border is here used rhetorically as an effect of radical othering, difference and marginality, either social, cultural or sexual. The border-effect can be imposed on the individual or it can also be self-adopted. There are also many different borders, each of which gives people who temporarily convene within its boundary a transient identity. "Border" can also be taken as an interpretative strategy that, by staging a confrontation between the two sides of the border and by causing both to be invaded by the in-betweenness of the borderland, brings the subjects who are situated at the borders to a radical self questioning and a remapping of intersubjective relations.

In Zhu's book, she sorts out six marginal subject positions or situations: a suicidal yuppie who has lost his purposes in life and

whose response to the postmodern limbo is to plunge into death; a second generation mainlander from the Military Dependents' Village who is still haunted by the memory of that enclosed community; a disillusioned political dissident with persecution phobia; people paranoid about and sensitive to the approach of death; young housewives who have no sense of who they are; and a heterosexual husband who has just found out his wife has secretively entertained homosocial passion towards her old college classmate. These people are not economically underprivileged, nor do they constitute a politically oppressed class. Their experience of being at the border is an uncanny experience of suddenly finding themselves not at home. Such an experience throws these otherwise "normal" people out of balance into a state of migrancy in which an older identity no longer makes sense but newer and more tangible subject position is yet to be negotiated and constructed. Zhu's writing registers the paranoia of this border experience, especially the psychic violence this experience of psychic migrancy has inflicted upon those who are situated at the fractured borders. While critics find the book unsatisfactory because of its failure to offer an emancipatory exit out of this postmodern limbo, the critics' demands for literature to assume the "ethical" responsibility to yield the answer to "solve" social dis-eases may have been too demanding.[5] The text, as critics have correctly pointed out, is a contradictory site that suffers from the irrepressible schizophrenia between its "postmodernist" narration and its modernist nostalgia. But such textual schizophrenia perhaps is inevitable for writers of contemporary Taiwan since contradiction has always already been the only feasible "reality" for Taiwan, caught as it is between different spatial figurations of homelands, as I have explained above. Contradiction, in this sense, marks the condition of literary writing rather than signifying its failure. And in registering the full force of the border experience and especially the psychological woes it can inflict on the border people, and by inviting the reader to look at the first person narrator critically, Zhu's novel has articulated an implicit resistance to and critique of the narrator's complicity with a social system that leaves its people disoriented and disillusioned.

Noticeably, none of the subject positions of the six marginal identity-groups is explanatory under the existing identity markers of race, class and gender. Instead, these groups are situated on the threshold of change precisely because their angst cannot be glossed over by existing explanatory systems. By zooming in on the border consciousness of each marginal group, Zhu highlights the contradictory determinants in the formation of the identities of these marginal people. Technically speaking, the people of these marginal groups may not even be aware of their membership in a marginal group or agree with such labeling. But the contingency of their membership is precisely the marker of their living in and with the borders. Alienated from the mainstream cultural identities, the border people feel acutely the paralyzing tensions of being simultaneously inside and outside of several different social spaces. By giving these border positions "names," Zhu constructs an alternate set of vocabulary to articulate the pain and alienation the border people are suffering. To write the contradictory subjectivities of the border people, she also travels randomly across generic borderlines and juxtaposes story telling with cultural commentary, showing with telling, producing a hybrid writing with "jagged transitions between the analytical and the poetic," "so that theory and poetry necessarily mesh, both determined by an awareness of the sign and the destabilization of the meaning and writing subject" (Trinh 43, 42). However, despite being at the threshold which makes possible both backward and forward visions, Zhu's border people are caught in the pain of continual displacement, without the will power to counter strike, nor the spirit to play with hybrid identities. They indulge themselves in longingly lamenting for a world and a perspective long gone, disillusioned and even psychologically paralyzed by their newly-found situation of homelessness. By making these nostalgic misfits the central focus of her stories, Zhu may seem to have aligned herself with her characters in aesthetically fetishizing the past. No wonder critics have hastened to accuse Zhu of indulging in a modernist nostalgia for the good old days of nationalist control and literary modernism. But Zhu's satirical stories seem to invite the reader to pity as well as criticize her imperceptive

narrators and nostalgic characters. It is important for the reader to realize that she offers these nostalgic subjects not for sentimental memorialization but for public scrutiny and analysis.

Accordingly, in reading Zhu's novels, we need to take into account the canceling effects that first-person narrators have on the narratives, recognizing especially that the first-person "narrator" is not the same person throughout. Since this chameleon narrator is not collapsible with his/her addressee or the author, the narrator is in the position of not only relaying the character's interior thoughts and monologues but also making critical commentary on and analysis of the character's indulgence in his/her border experience. But the narrator is also an object of critical scrutiny for the reader. Both the narrators of the first story, "Wo de pengyou Alisa" [My friend Alisa], and the last story, "Chunfeng fudie zhi shi [Romantic matters]," exhibit a lack of understanding of the psychic pain their friend or wife is suffering. As an unperceptive and even unsympathetic reader of Alisa, the narrator of "My Friend Alisa" sounds equally unpersuasive when he bombasts the younger generation for their blind pursuit of brand-name commodities. Yet, despite his disapproval of this cult of faddists, in listing an endless catalogue of outlandish magazines, exotic resort spots, names, smells, he proves himself as overwhelmed and fascinated as they are by the endless circulation and display of new and newer products. Disgusted with the meaningless pursuit but overwhelmed by the vitality and transformational force of this pursuit, the narrator is caught in between two value systems and can find no way out of this existential dilemma, just like his friend Alisa. Also suffering from a border consciousness, Alisa is a "headless fly" wandering around the wastelandish cityscape of Taipei and attempting to affirm his identity through sexual pursuits. When nothing eases his anxiety, he goes to the ancient cities of Greek and Turkey to locate a cultural anchor to rest his weary spirit. Though in his letter to the narrator he writes that "I wish I were dead before I get old" (51), he is yet to come to the belated realization that he is already old in his thirties for having already used up all his energies in the first thirty years of his life and finding no more meaning to go on.

When the story begins, the narrator was recounting Alisa's sexual adventures in Thailand to his friends. It is clear that the narrator only takes these stories as jokes, believing Alisa is never to return. Then the narrator self-consciously addresses the reader as "you," whom he believes is definitely under thirty on the ground that "you are reading this particular newspaper, this page, this writer's story, and can spare the time and the mood to do so" (28). This age difference is then translated into a generation gap and the resulting failure of cross-generational understanding. He self-mockingly explains to the implied reader that being old and admitting it can yield "such a pleasant feeling of relief" (28). "Just a few months back, it was difficult for me to admit that the world will not be a different place without him, so difficult that it can shatter my will to live" (28). The realization that he is no longer the center of his world makes him suddenly feel psychologically old and out-of-place. He even begins to sublimate his erotic impulses into art, displacing sexual acts with seductive gabs and flirtatious gestures. "This is the first pleasure that I have experienced in being old: give things up, give many things up. Please note: this is not an act of giving in, nor is it an obligation; it is rather a privilege . . . It is when I am indulging in this mood of delight with no one, including my wife, being able to share my feelings that I received the letters from Alisa" (39-40). As he proceeds to record Alisa's letters from Greece and Turkey, he begins to perceive in Alisa's escape into the mother countries of Greek mythologies an unwillingness to give things up. "I don't understand what on earth Alisa is struggling for" (54), so wonders the narrator. In reading Alisa's letters, the narrator imagines himself a participant in Alisa's tour to the "barren" islands of the Mediterranean Sea, curious to know what his next stop will be but also certain that the final destination of the tour is "to merge into the remoteness of the sea, into Death" (56). Knowing that Alisa cannot settle easily or quietly for the nothingness that he sees in the lands of the Greek God, the narrator is not at all surprised to hear that Alisa has chosen to end his own life as a last act of rebellion against the barrenness of postmodern existence. Of the two "old" men in the story, Alisa chooses death as a way of respond-

ing to the challenge the postmodern situation has posed to the centrality of Man; the narrator decides to passively experience the pleasure of "giving things up." What is the response the writer is endorsing? What are other possible responses? Humor, for example. Has it been easy for the narrator to "give things up"?

If we can answer the above questions without any hesitation, Zhu has failed to register the psychic complexity of people who have to travel from the metaphysical certainty of one era to the schizophrenic landscape of the next. The process of border crossing is never an easy movement, nor can it ever be completed. The border experience is one that is fraught with contradictions and difficulties, demanding one not only to conduct endless dialogues with oneself but also the strength to live with the pain of belonging to neither one nor to the other social group. Writing about this contradictory experience requires the weaving together of different genres and voices into an oxymoric writing that writes to negate itself and to bring into presence the space that is yet to be.

As a fictional character, Alisa is flat and static, with neither psychological depth nor the capacity for change. His alien name and the geographical names associated with him (Thailand, Greece, and Turkey) weave out a textual space of exoticism that is neither of this time nor of this place. In other words, Alisa simply doesn't fit in the time and the place of the postmodern Taipei; he is not at home with Taipei. Eventually he can only choose to "find" other homes among the relics of a different cultural tradition, in the ancient city of Troy. In this sense, by concluding the story with Alisa's failed attempt to arrive at Troy, the novel also hints at the impossibility of healing the postmodern angst by re-turning to a mythic past; Troy is not and cannot be his home. At the end of the story, with the narrator sitting in the coffee house still waiting for the letter that Alisa should have sent out from the city of Troy but has never arrived, the novel further suggests the dis-ease of Alisa cannot be cured by his meaningless fetishization of the mythic Troy as his home. There simply is no homecoming for the restless soul of Alisa.

On a narrative level, the novel inscribes its critique of the post-

modern condition through plaiting together Alisa's letters, the narrator's monological criticism of the so-called "spenders," and his self analysis. By using a first-person male voice to narrate her critique, Zhu Tianxin also establishes an ironic distance between the narrator and the author, rendering the narrator another focus of Zhu's ambivalent critique of the postmodern Taipei. The story becomes retrospectively meaningful when towards the end of the story we find out that Alisa has committed suicide and a reporter is calling the narrator for his views on Alisa's suicide. The story, then, is the narrator's answer to the reporter's question, except that the narrator tells the story not to the reporter but to the anonymous "you," the reader. The answer, which deals with a historical and psychic trauma, can best be represented through the narrator's alternately gossiping, critical, confessional and nostalgic voices, oscillating between objective reportage, ironic distancing and subjective identification. This alternating distance and proximity between the narrator and Alisa allows an otherwise unnameable angst to assume a content configured to expose the solipsism of the discomforting yuppies—both Alisa and the narrator. Such a mode of address involves the narrator and the character into a process of varying degrees of irony and empathy. The address to the anonymous "you" is an invitation to the reader to visualize the narrative situation. The presence of this unnamed "you" can be found in every one of the six stories in this collection, and the insertion of this narratee "you" splits up the narrator "I" into two voices that interact dialogically.

Take "Daishu zu wuyu" [The story of the kangaroo people], for example, from the very start, the narrator invites the narratee to close his/her eyes and visualize "them"—the kangaroo people—because "they can be easily spotted among the crowd." Aware of the narratee's possible objection to the identification of these young housewives as a sub-social class, the narrator then gives a few possible explanations to the assumed "invisibility" of the kangaroo housewives. Though in the beginning the "you" seems to be a "generic" figure with whom any one reader can identify with, the narrator then proceeds to specify "you" as the narrator tells the narratee that "you

may be surprised to find one day in the future, at a time not too remote from now, the girl you have so dearly loved is going to become a member of the Kangaroo club" (177). This statement clearly conjures up a young male reader unaware of the daily routines and the "inscapes" of young housewives as the intended narratee. So engendering the narratee/reader, the text seems to involve the reader in its rather politicized self-incriminatory discourse and even exposes the reader to assume the ethical responsibility of being an unknowing accomplice in a social structure that denies young mothers their individuality. This use of the second person also implicates the reader into the narrative structure by making the second person narratee an additional focus of the story. The dialogic function of the second person "you" emphatically brings out the tension of alternate involvement and confrontation between the sympathizing narrator and the naïve narratee, implicating the male narratee as an accomplice and motivating in him an awareness of and sympathy for the trauma suffered by the kangaroo mothers. Zhu's accusation becomes even more forceful by projecting the narratee as a man insensitive to the injustice done to sacrificing mothers and even blind to his complicity with the patriarchal familial structure. In other words, this dialogic mode of narration that Zhu adopts in her recent fiction may be seen as a muted form of satire, involving either the dialogue between self and the others or an introspective dialogue within the self between identification with and distance from the character. It also achieves the effects of the Bakhtinian carnivalization, disorienting, hyperbolic, and self-destructive. Such a narrative style, I would venture to speculate, is not merely another bow to the postmodernist textual experimentation, nor does it simply add another chapter to the modernist exploration into the interior. Rather, it can be taken as the writer Zhu's stylistic response to the cultural and political contexts of the post-martial law Taiwan: the narrator, knowing what has been lost and what needs to be rejected, is not yet certain about feasible alternatives. As a consequence, the dialogic narration becomes a self-questioning style that, in exposing the stupidities and insensitivity of the self and the others, reveals the contradictory process through which the society responds

to the conflict between the modernist earnestness and postmodern banality.

Setting up the contradictory relation of alternate involvement and confrontation besides, the "you" address also emulates the temporal contemporaneity of oral story telling, placing the narrator and the narratee in the same narrative level. Accordingly, a reviewer, Lukuang (pseudonym), places this novel in the generic category of traditional vernacular short story, "huaben," which, as a genre, sustains the audience's interest by organizing the stories on thematic novelty to satisfy their voyeuristic curiosity in "what has happened" and "what is yet to happen." According to this reviewer, with the disruption of the postmodern, too many things have simultaneously happened in the last few years, but when we turned around to ask "what has happened," we can only be surprised to find that "no-thing" has happened. Zhu's novel exhibits this novelistic curiosity in archeologically and nostalgically unearthing and recording "what has happened" to the society with the catastrophic collapse of the older authoritarian system. But if the question "what has happened" is wrongly posed, if not unanswerable, Zhu's strenuous effort at responding to that question has only nostalgically recorded what has disappeared. In other words, the narrative of presence is displaced by the narrative of absence, the hermeneutic narration of "what next" by the catastrophic narration of "nothingness" (188). Lukuang further argues that the language of nostalgia and memory, considered as the "white noise" released at a moment when the social system implodes from within, is the inevitable "blind spot" or "residue" of an incomplete disappearance and inadequate forgetting. From this perspective, Lukuang then considers the dis-ease of such nostalgic and decadent yuppie as Alisa a symptom of this modernist narcissism. "The problem with such cynics is not that they are nihilistic and decadent; instead the real problem is that they are not truly and thoroughly nihilistic and decadent enough" (189).

Zhu, in setting up such a dialogic narrative voice to emulate the involving and voyeuristic voice of traditional oral story telling, wanders around the "white space" that people at the margin of society

occupy so as to paint a quick portrait of them. She collects all the "white events" that are their private sufferings but are nevertheless transparent to other people, and gathers the ambiguous "white noises" that they have released. Nevertheless, Lukuang further points out, all of these efforts of approaching the otherwise invisible margin of society fail to disclose and opening up "the kind of white noise that has truly been scraped off all colors: a 'neutral voice' that is audible at the very limits of life or death" (189). Towards the end of this very provocative review, Lukuang suggests that the only exit out of the ongoing cracking up of the cultural and ideological fabrics of society is to adopt a "clean break." As a genuinely secretive flight of no-return, such a "break" has already unknowingly occurred in "the unintentionally forgotten 'blind spot' between forgetting and disappearing" (190).

Though Lukuang does not elaborate on the narrative possibilities of this "blind spot" in this otherwise very perceptive review, we can nevertheless gather from what the reviewer considers to be the failure of the text to achieve a "neutral voice" and conclude that such a voice is exactly what the reviewer considers to be the voice of a secretive flight from the postmodern angst in an act of a "clean break." However, it is questionable whether the "neutral voice" is an ideology-free voice or not, and the idea that we can have a "clean break" with the postmodern angst is also suspect. The "neuter," etymologically speaking, means "neither and nor."[6] It promises a space that is bound up by the two terms that it simultaneously affirms and negates; accordingly, the neutral voice is contaminated from both sides by these two opposing voices. In other words, if anything, the neutral voice is the voice of ambiguity and contradiction, and the neutral space a site of continual displacement and suspension. But this is not to say that the neutral voice is then an impotent voice, incapable of radical resistance or even critique. Rather, the neuter by implicating both sides of the terms that frame it opens up a historical trauma that disturbs the very basis of our linguistic, psychological, and ethnical knowledge. And the neuter space thus opened up by the disruption of the postmodern and the disturbance it produces demands a critical act that

addresses and works out the contradictions of a disappearing present haunted by a vaguely remembered past and an uncertain future. The act of writing, of letting memory to speak, needs to make visible the repressed memory and the deliberate forgetting of the many unrepresented pasts. But the ethical responsibility of writing does not end with the writer's coming to terms with a collective amnesia; it also extends to the reader who needs to engage with the text critically, not on the basis of a resurrection of history but a remembering that goes beyond the master narrative of History.

Zhu's novel does not signal the moment of going beyond; it rips open a historical wound and releases the voices of anger, paranoia, disbelief, embarrassment and guilt. The narrating agent of her stories is not an all-knowing narrator with omniscient access to every consciousness that s/he happens to gaze upon. Instead, the narrator presents himself/herself as both diagnosis and symptom of the current identity crisis. In giving us a narrator who in his/her ideological stance doubles back upon the people s/he gazes upon, the novel releases the fullest force of his/her self-incriminatory gaze on the others. For example, the implicit critique of bourgeois conformity inherent in Alisa's tragic suicide, when narrated by the ironic voice of the self-conscious narrator, is rendered suspicious and even insignificant. Alisa may have been a sentimental romantic, unrelentingly seeking the "home" that is not there in the first place and dying an insignificant death, but the ontological and psychological questions that Alisa's death raises cannot be explained away by layman psychology. The narrator is both judging Alisa's "meaningless" resistance to the materialist society of contemporary Taipei, and judged by Alisa's uncompromising death. From this perspective, the narrator's decision to "give things up" may not be conflict-free, nor is it the strategy the author recommends for resisting the cultural logic of late capitalism.

In the final story of the collection, "Romantic Matters," a surprising twist of plot occurs towards the end of the story to render visible an otherwise invisible and unnameable wound hidden under a seemingly totally "normal" heterosexual relation. The story begins with a first person narrator making the proposal to "deconstruct,"

"subvert," "undermine" what he considers to be the cultural hegemony of homosexuality in contemporary Taiwan. Homosexuality, so says the narrator, though still a derogatory term among conservative people, has strangely been occupying a site of privilege and taken as a mark of authentic royalty and wisdom by the elite. The narrator, a self-proclaimed "descendant of Apollo the sun god and citizen of the sun god republic" (208)—a metaphor to glorify his identity as a "normal" heterosexual man—then proceeds to further differentiate people into even minuter classes depending upon their sexual orientations and preferences. In his lengthy critique of homosexuality, he distinguishes heterosexuality from homosexuality, homosexuality from lesbianism, homoeroticism from homosociality. While this prolonged monologue on homosexuality seems to suggest his voyeuristic interest in it, despite his avowed denouncement, the narrator establishes his enunciatory authority and sexual identity by citing his personal experience as support. He claims that his love for his wife has not diminished at all even after ten years of marriage. On this basis, he considers himself in the rightful position to discredit the claim made by the gays that "their love-making [*jiehe*] is better than ours" (219). The story ironically concludes when the narrator accidentally finds a letter his wife wrote to a female college classmate. In the letter his wife wrote: "In the last ten years, I have experienced love, became a wife and a mother. I have experienced every kind of human emotion, but nothing can ever equal the feeling that we shared with each other in those days . . ." (221). This nostalgic letter effectively undermines the enunciatory authority that the narrator has earlier claimed for himself on the basis of his own happy sexual experience with his wife. "I have failed," the narrator admitted, "I have not been able to delaureate anyone, and I have even lost the courage to laureate them—the 'spring-breeze butterfly' women" (221). In the narrator's earnest attempt to prove the undesirability of sexual activities, both homosexual and heterosexual, he has earlier idealized the "spring-breeze butterfly" women whose lack of sexual desires, in his view, gives the purest expression to intersubjective relation. The homosocial overtone of his wife's letter, however, proves him wrong. His failure does not

merely affect his narrative credibility; it is a telling failure that exposes the double marginality that the heterosexual system of marriage has condemned those "spring-breeze butterfly" women to social invisibility and psychological repression.

Reduced to speechlessness, the narrator ends the story with the final note: "Therefore, the last one to leave the republic [of the sun god] (whoever you are), please do not forget to turn off the light but do forget its darkness" (221). The republic of the sun god is "dark" because the sun is so bright that it blinds the narrator's vision and makes it unable for the citizen of the heterosexual republic to see the others at the border. This blinding effect of the heterosexual system has prevented him from perceiving his wife's unspeakable plight, and what is registered in the story is exactly the uncertainty at the heart of this heterosexual man. This uncertainty also splits up the narratorial voice into alternately identifying with and distancing from his self-proclaimed identity as the descendant of the sun god. He sometimes refers to the so-called "descendants of sun god" as "us" and sometimes as "them," giving further hints to his repressed awareness that he is at the threshold of several identities, heterosexual or otherwise. Obviously, he is already at a moment of identity crisis and his wife's letter and her secretive desire thus disclosed disturbingly allows him to see and admit his own blindness, and accordingly the very basis of the categorical and differentiating system of his thinking also undergoes a radical revision.

If the novel has failed to effect a clean break from the modernist narcissism and postmodern gloom, whose failure is that? While Lukuang seems to suggest that the failure is the author's, we need to take into consideration a basic narratological lesson about the distinction among author, narrator, character, narratee, and reader. Though the intermixture nature of postmodern fiction has rendered such a subtle distinction no longer valid, yet we still need to explore into the cultural significance the deliberate confusion of narrative levels implies. As I have said above, Zhu's stories border playfully between monologues and dialogues, between self-address and audience-address. Such an ambiguity in narration, claims Dorit Cohn in her

analysis, "reflects precisely the contradictory structure of [the narrator's] psyche; he can find a road to self-expression only when he takes on the dual roles of protagonist and antagonist" (176-77). The first person narrator in Zhu's fiction, in a similar vein, adopts an ambiguous mode of double addresses: he confounds writing, thinking and talking to others all in the same narrative level. While Dorit Cohn thinks that the "other-directedness" of the narrator's thought which shapes "self-communion into a social posture" suggests that "sincerity is no more available in a discourse addressed to the self than it is in a discourse addressed to others" (177), I propose that this "other-directedness" divorces self-person narration from any presumed claim to aesthetic or ethical authenticity, thereby exposing its fictionality. In other words, the use of first person narrator in an ambiguous mode of self-address and audience-address is a deliberate decision on the author's part. Its confessional voice can not be equated with the author's own; rather, in its desperation for a sympathetic narratee to share his/her guilt, this "I" becomes precisely an ideological site to be scrutinized and criticized. The narrator is at the crossroads of a number of histories, at the borderline of civilization. In his attempt to write into presence the forgotten or the invisible, he may have left out more than he can make visible and he may have imagined into presence what is not there in history in the first place. Failure is a difficult concept, implying the presence of a politically correct criterion against which it is measured. Sometimes the failure of the "old soul [*lao linghun*]," as David Der-wei Wang aptly puts in his study of Zhu's fiction, "can also be a different kind of triumph" (1997, 18). And the triumph of Zhu's novel is that it never ends with the last word. The various critical responses to the novel's ideological stance ever since the novel's first publication is itself a cultural phenomenon warranting careful analysis. As each critic reveals more of his/her ideological position than the author's, the critics are themselves mimicking the solipsistic monologue of Zhu's narrators.[7] This cultural chapter of the critical reception of Zhu's novel, I will argue, reveals a much wider-reaching cultural anxiety with the postmodern condition. And by studying the diverse criticism that Zhu's novel has

received, we can see the discourse of postmodernity has become more than a site of individual struggle; rather, the debate on and over postmodernity has become a site of ideological struggles, with far-reaching political repercussions and ideological stakes.

With Zhu's book at the center of their critical gaze, the critics engage in a web-like intertextual dialogue on the aesthetic and political representation of the postmodern condition and, more importantly, what ethnical responsibility a writer must realize in approaching the postmodern moment. Especially at issue is the question of how to consider the past. Should we discard a segment of our past as embarrassing and unmentionable? Should we simply forget our past in excitable anticipation of a hybridized global culture? If we decide to do justice to history, what history should we reconstruct and privilege as the authentic representation of our past? Lu Zhenghui, in an article published in 1992, remarks approvingly of Zhu's recent writing which has "invested her characters with psychological complexity and giving people a fresh look at old themes" (91). Zhu, Lu believes, has outgrown her earlier phase as a "guixiu zuojia" [lady writer], for in her recent writing Zhu has adopted a method of narration that is characteristic of "postmodern" fiction. This method of narration accords with "a postmodern sensibility in the stories' content"; that is to say, "the stories are pervaded by doubt and a postmodern sense of emptiness" (91). This pervasive postmodern gloom, however, is so much reduced by "Zhu's excellent depiction of women's lives" that Lu claims that "we can't help but wonder if the empty postmodern mentality isn't a bit more complicated under the surface" (92). Lu's suspicion of that complicated subtext that hides under the surface of the postmodern emptiness is rather acute; unfortunately he does not dwell on this point.

Lukuang, whose review I have discussed above, characterizes Zhu's novel as the disturbing "white noise" released at the margin of the "black box," a metaphoric term for the authoritarian society of Taiwan. This reviewer considers the postmodern noise that Zhu releases is not disturbing enough to yield a "neutral voice" which forgets as it remembers. To expect the postmodern fiction to yield a

voice of radical alterity is to posit a theoretical fiction and a utopian expectation. Theoretically, an effect of "white noise" is hopefully engendered through the proliferation of narrative positions and the self-canceling effects of the contradictory narrative voices. This effect is to cancel out any illusion about the function of the text to signify a fixed meaning. Instead, the text says so much that it ends up saying nothing, thereby returning the text to silence or death. French philosophers are overwhelmed by such a utopian possibility and the fictional experiments of the philosopher writer, Maurice Blanchot, have been acclaimed for hovering over the in-between space of remembrance and forgetting. Yet, even so, his fiction is still criticized by Hélène Cixous for not being able to forget the presence of law.[8] The temporality of narratives disallows the simultaneous presentation of remembering and forgetting, presence and absence. Accordingly, forgetting and remembering need each other to achieve a process of continual mutual displacement, if not erasure. As long as forgetting and remembering is mediated through language and, in Zhu's case, narratives, the neutral space can only be a fictive possibility to be approached, but not to be arrived at. Instead, it is the dangling in between memory and amnesia that constitutes the space of literature. The silent space of the white noise is countered by the narrative's insistence upon signification because of its "rootedness" in a specific historical and cultural context. The writer's ethical responsibility does not accommodate the forced resurrection of history or a deliberate repression of memory; instead, it demands the writer to imagine history as twisted and memory as fractured and then represent the unresolved contradiction between history as both presence and absence. Only then can the writer truly let memory speak.

Walking in the City: Caught in Between "Spaces" and "Places"

Zhu's writing, after the publication of *Thinking of My Brothers in the Military Dependents' Village* in 1992, becomes increasingly divided between a narrative world that is fractured, repressed, ridi-

culed, multiplied, and a mode of narration that disseminates the narrator in the text and embraces the carnivalesque proliferation of points of views. But this schizophrenic dialogism between content and form, narrative and narration needs not be taken negatively as Zhu's efforts to recuperate repressed histories through the act of de-centered narration. I would rather agree with David Der-wei Wang in speculating that Zhu's efforts at proliferating subject positions and alternative histories may have been a much more ambitious act of cultural reconfiguration.[9] In her most recent collection of short stories, *Gudu* [Ancient Capitals],[10] Zhu consciously manipulates the self-questioning mode of first person dialogic narration, further depriving the stories any quotation marks that would help to mark the narrator's interior monologue from that of the narratee's or the character's. The blurring of the voices of the narrator's and the character's further intensifies the ambivalence of who is the subject of this narratorial gaze and who is the object, rendering the narrator both diagnosis and symptom of his/her narrative of social dis-ease. Instead, the narrator and the character (or the implied narratee as character) endlessly displaces each other in a carnivalnesque duet. This brings us to re-think the narrator not as a linguistic site with realized identity but as "effects" dispersed in the text. Hence, though all five stories in this collection deploy a first person narrator addressing a narratee "you," the relation between the narrator and the narratee becomes increasingly complex and ambivalent, so is the relation between narrator and author increasingly ironic. The dialogic relation between the two is antagonistic and specular, with the narrator always anticipating an expected response from the narratee and then repudiating the legitimacy of such a response. It becomes increasingly clear that this schism between the self and the others is an imaginary schism, with its root in the identity debates in contemporary Taiwan.

The Generation X narrator in "Difannei zaocan" [Breakfast at Tiffany], in interviewing an older and more conservative woman writer, knows that the older woman only consents to the interview because she is writing a cultural analysis of the narrator's generation and takes the narrator as the representative of Generation X for her

case study. Accordingly the narrator self-consciously plays along with the woman writer's mimetic assumption, but she does wonder for a brief moment what persona she is to adopt and what subject position she is to perform on that day of their interview so as to satisfy or to shock the other woman's curious gaze. In insisting that she is more than what the other woman has imagined her to be, the narrator plays with and then undermines the other woman's blind trust in the mimetic power of words. She is both the other to be gazed at and the gaze of the other-as-subject. She verbally exhibits herself while gazing back at the older woman and making the older woman to look around and reflect upon herself. The narrator, unlike the other woman, is also "playing" with words and does not believe that words can represent the social or the psychological "Real." Language is not itself transparent; rather, language performs, mediates and intervenes. Through this performative power of language, the narrator makes visible her "identity" as exceeding the other's imagination of her as well as her own comprehension. This antagonistic dialogue between the narrator and the older woman transforms the narrative into a "site" of contestation where a multiplicity of subject positions and discourses interact with one another (Generation X, diamond tidbits, Valentine trivia, identity politics, Marxist materialism). Zhu's text almost always requires us to imagine this "not quite . . . but almost . . ." of her narrator's dialogic monologues. Language becomes not a means of mimetic reproduction; instead, it blurs the boundary between the inside and the outside, rendering it a potent site for contention. The narrator's strategic mimesis of Generation X behavior—the compulsion for consumption—reveals herself to be an ambivalent agent of a consumer-oriented culture who is struggling to negotiate with the coercive mechanisms of commodity culture. Addressing and criticizing "the commodity aesthetic of global capitalism" (108) from the perspective of a consumer obsessed with the commodity of all commodities—diamond, she consciously and bravely presents herself as the most acute critic of a cultural phenomenon of which she is the most notable symptom.

The dialogues between the narrator "I" and the character "A" in

"Xiongyali zhi shui" [The water of Hungary] help both to construct memories from the scents that are associated with them; but the memories thus constructed do not constitute a return to the past; instead, such remembering opens up an empty space in the subject and allows the re-imagined past to invade into the present self, leading to the simultaneous co-existence of the past and the present. The disturbing force of belated memories is disturbing because memories release the subject from the past by bringing up repressed desires and by displacing the remembering subject into a different time and space, constructing multiple homes that he can simultaneously inhabit. For the nostalgic subject who is living at the crossroads of different times—past, present, future, real or imagined, remembering does not warrant a return but gives recognition to the strangeness or the uncanniness of that which is remembered. It is this uncanniness that allows the subject to confront and reconfigure the past so as to better deal with the burden of the past. And in this story which tends towards magic realism, the two men who are obsessed with remembering through scents enter into a homosocial intimacy—an illegitimate joining[11]—that allows the two with two ethnic backgrounds to construct a shared future, as suggested by the refrain from the old popular song they have remembered: "May [the evening breeze] lend [*jie*] a bridge to us so that we can contact each other / In this borrowed bridge,/ the "I" of tomorrow, the "you" of tomorrow,/ can we still embrace each other like today?" (150).

Histories are multiple in Zhu's stories; remembering is a burden and it is also a release. In the narrative level, the story reconfigures memories into a prelude of a "joining" that paralyses the dichotomized differences between Taiwanese (the character "A") on the one hand and second-generation mainlanders (the narrator) on the other. In terms of narration, the dialogues between the narrator "I" and the character "A" are not marked off with quotation marks, thereby effecting a constant crossing-over of voices. In other words, the language of the text reinforces the joining of perspectives and refashioning of subject positions that are thematized in the narrated world of the text. In the last story of the collection, "Gudu," Zhu fur-

ther experiments with the referential ambiguities of the second person pronoun as both a generic "you" (everyone) and a specific "you" that the reader needs not identify with, a "you" who is perhaps the persona of the author/narrator. What is the significance of Zhu's manipulation of the second-person form? Analyzing the prevalence of second-person narrative among contemporary writing, Monika Fludernik finds out that writers choose to appropriate and radicalize the second person pronoun not merely because it can be used as a formal option for the sake of variety. "Second-person writing," argues Fludernik, "is a technique that *sticks out* and therefore attracts to itself an interest in its very form and in its possible significance" (470). In other words, the deployment of the second person "you" is dictated by political or ideological motivations.

"You" assumes the dual position of being simultaneously the narratee and protagonist of the text, but "you" is also a pronoun that involves the reader. The use of the second person pronoun to refer to three different narrative positions creates confusion in identification. Brian McHale has suggested that the use of second person pronoun, with constant switching between a singular "you" and a "plural you," is a narrative mode that violates traditional ontological boundaries. And such a violation, McHale concludes, is the model and the basis of the postmodern thematization of love, which "characterizes not the fictional interactions *in* the text's world, but rather the interactions *between* the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other" (227). This violation of ontological boundaries is accompanied with a splitting of the subject, of time and space.

In "Ancient Capitals," the "you" is simultaneously singular and plural, the author and the reader. The temporality of the story is complex, referring to a number of pasts and a number of geographical locations, Kyoto and Taipei. As Michel de Certeau suggests, a place only becomes a space when it is invested with desires and becomes infused with memories and histories.[12] The duplicity between the many "you's," between pasts and presents, between Kyoto and Taipei, is the frame through which Zhu contemplates the intricate relations

between historicity and spatiality, especially the insistence of the past in the present not as something to be repossessed but to be worked through. In wandering around the city of Kyoto as a tourist, the narrator "you" shifts smoothly from a generic tourist , to a specific "you" as the narrator's girl friend whom she is to meet in Kyoto, and eventually to a protagonist reminiscent of the author herself. Kyoto is so familiar to the narrator that she can construct stories to every spot she has visited and is visiting to the degree that she can claim this ancient city "hers," not in the sense of literal proprietorship but in the sense of her owning the "imagined cityscape" which she has configured for herself. As a tourist, she now claims herself "almost" a local resident at a city in which she has invested her desires for historicity. As a tourist, her nostalgia compels her to remember another city, Taipei, yet finding her hometown getting uncannily foreign. And when she does come back to Taipei, she continues to play the role of tourist, masquerading herself as a Japanese tourist roaming through the streets of Taipei with the tour book she has obtained in Kyoto. Pretending herself a tourist and trying to look at the city from the eyes of Japanese, the ex-colonizers of Taiwan, she sees the city through a fractured lens with the contradictory gaze of the colonizers and the no-less ambivalent gaze of a local resident. Between Taipei and Kyoto, the past and the present, she is caught in the border of different geographical spaces, temporalities and identities. With this blurring of borders, geography becomes so invested with desires that it becomes metonymically reconfigured as history; a local resident becomes so alienated from her disfigured cityscape which denies her access to her past that she becomes a semi-tourist. As this force of spatial and temporal duplicity increases its weigh of assault on Zhu's narrator, she is opened up to a vertigo of identity confusion in which something foreign begins to inhabit her, despite her reluctance to receive it. The story puts emphatic stress on the imperative of letting memories speak, but can Zhu's narrator remember and map out the city's alternative histories without memorializing the past? [13]

Historicity, according to Jacques Derrida, is a construction, rather than the "history" of real events: historicity is "a series of tem-

poral differences without any central present, without a present of which the past and the future would be but modifications" (210). The past, that is to say, exists through the act of narration, as a "repetition." The ancient cities are only ancient because they are remembered as old and ancient. This ancient-ness of the ancient cities is something added to the city through the metonymic operations of narration as remembering. Kyoto is as much remembered from her previous tours to the city as it is conjured up from her reading of the various literatures on the city. Taipei, as well, is both remembered as the city in which she has spent her "good old days" and the city remembered in the writings on the city. In other words, in remembering the ancientness of the city, the narrator forgets the city as it exists in the present time and space. Remembering is not necessarily to free oneself from the bondage of time; it is also to engrave the forgotten events in our memory as stories. In Kyoto the narrator is not nostalgic for a lost Kyoto because she finds the city in accord with the literary and historical representations of it. She can even follow the fictional itinerary of Chieko in Yasunari Kawabata's *Koto* [Old capital] (1962). She is comforted with this agreement between the literal and the figurative and the continuity between the past and the present. In Taipei, however, the relation between the past and the present, the literal and the figurative is marked by an absolute disruption that she feels overwhelmed by the question of her political responsibility for a disappearing past.

But with the deployment of an ambivalent second person "you," Zhu gives a private act of remembering a collective significance, making her nostalgic romance with a disappearing past a poignant love affair for the author, the narrator, the character and the implied reader. Nostalgia becomes a form of inspection upon the problematic of home, one that is activated by the disruption of the postmodern temporality into the modern space and the resulting dissociation between the place which one inherits and the space of home which one must endlessly invent. What the novel invites us to think is the question of why one does not feel at home when one is physically home and what this experience of psychic homelessness signify?

Nostalgia as an Alternative Home Sickness

"To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper," so writes Michel de Certeau. Certeau's idea about walking as a multi-directional remapping of the city into "a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places" (103) may help us better understand the rhetoric of walking and its constant flirtation with the contingent, the questionable, and the forbidden. "Walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (99). As an everyday practice, walking reconfigures and reconstitutes the cosmopolitan space by superimposing on it alternative routes, links, circuits and therefore stories. The physical mobility of walking transforms the city's fixed spatial text into a writerly practice and disrupts the spatial stagnation of the city with the fluidity of physical movement. In de Certeau's account, walking becomes an overlooked cultural strategy which allows the everyday pedestrians the limited freedom to deviate from the orderly structure of the city road map. However, de Certeau here seems to have exaggerated the role of walking as a subversive strategy of social transformation. Obviously, the metropolitan city as a political-economic system can not be undermined simply by its pedestrians' walking by the city. Such an argument is to conflate the cultural practices of resistance with the materialistic processes of political transformation. Walking as a strategy of cultural negotiation is not and cannot be a revolutionary force in bringing about social and political reformation. To celebrate walking as a subversive force is perhaps too earnest an attempt to embrace cultural studies; it is, however, time for critical discourse to examine walking as a spatial practice and an interpretative figure to determine how the idiom of travelling has given rise to the theories of symbolic resistance. For de Certeau, what gives walking or travelling the political dimension is the stories and legends that are added to the seemingly seamless "univocity of the system." The stories open up cracks and "allow a certain play within a system of defined places" (106). De Certeau writes:

> What this walking exile produces is precisely the body of legends that is currently lacking in one's own vicinity; it is a fiction, which moreover has the double characteristic, like dreams or pedestrian rhetoric, of being the effect of displacements and condensations. As a corollary, one can measure the importance of these signifying practices (to tell oneself legends) as practices that invent spaces. (107)

To walk by places itself is not a political practice of social transformation, but the adding of stories and legends to places displaces them into habitable or readable spaces, making the places foreign and other to themselves. To practice this displacement of place into space is then what Zhu Tianxin is doing in "Ancient Capitals." The nostalgic narrator/protagonist as both the subject and object of this nostalgic narration implicates the author, narrator, character, and even reader into her nostalgic critique of the city machine in its attempt to suppress, erase, forget to remember these local legends and memories. Instead of excavating old memories, nostalgia generates private, local, concrete, elliptical and makeshift memories. So the desperate outcry of the narrator/protagonist's "Where is it?" at the end of the story needs not be interpreted simply as an exclamation of defeat; rather, it also signals the pedestrian's uncompromising refusal to take the assigned route, live in the allocated habitat, and believe the official story. In not finding the beautiful island of her memory, she finds a fictional landscape that takes her into other landscapes. And it is this passage from the real to the imaginary landscapes—an aesthetic passage which takes her to homes unthought of and perhaps unwanted—that constitutes the space of fiction.

Politically, however, the narrative, by choosing to embrace an imaginary home over the place she is born into, necessarily poses the question of disloyalty and fidelity. At an age when localization as a counter hegemonic strategy has been vulgarized into a political slogan and the homebound gesture taken as the only politically valid option, how can the imaginative ventures into homes *elsewhere*, displaced both in time and space, not constitute a political betrayal, on the part

of the author/narrator, of her motherland? Thus, the narrative is fraught with anticipated accusations of betrayal from her imaginary critics and, in defense, it constructs an alternative romance with the land by aesthetically displacing the space of the "home" unto other places that the narrator invents for herself. So doing, the novel seems to contrive a "novel" way of working out its continual obsession with the land—its almost too earnest attempt to "treat it right" by nostalgically inventing alternative homes—despite its professed anxiety over accusations of betrayal and infidelity. Zhu manipulates this rhetoric of betrayal through a strategic reversal of the subject/object opposition to give an emphatic twist to the complicity between the deserter and the deserted, the betrayer and the betrayed until by the end of the story she can justify her alienation from her "home" by claiming that her homeland is so changed and deprived of aesthetic beauty that she can find no way back. This thematic anxiety, however, involves the narrator into a hysterical process of self-justification, citing indiscriminately from personal memories, historical documents, rumors, maps, literary allusions, and triggering instead an impossible search for the "proper" path to take her home. The wandering narrator, after first disclosing her suppressed desire to "leave and fly away" (169), writes of the necessity of suppressing such an outlaw passion for alternative homes since "you don't dare to tell anyone this feeling [of unhomeliness], especially when there are always people who are questioning your love for this land and even calling for you to leave if you don't prove your love for it" (169). The rhetoric of a strident critique of "home," which structures Zhu's "Ancient Capitals," is intimately tied up with an equally intense desire for a home to return to and the unease the narrator feels for having to imagine alternative spaces to claim as "homes." Together, this conflictual love affair with the "home" builds up the irresolvable tension within Zhu's narrative and then reveals the eros of home to be informed of the same energy that shapes the phobia of home. This tension makes it futile for the narrator to narrate a coherent story with a recognizable plot line; rather, the intensity of this conflictual nostalgia necessarily fractures the narrator's subjectivity, fragments her access to memories, splitting the

spatial locales of her migrant desire into two different capitals. As a structural principle, such relish with multiple focuses supplements interestingly the narrative's insistent nostalgia for a home to return to and the inevitable displacement of the locales of homeland by the yet-to-be-imagined "elsewhere."

The story begins with the narrator's arrival at Kyoto to meet her best friend at college whom she hasn't seen for years. The meeting initiates in her a nostalgic gaze at the good old days, but the intensity of her nostalgia is nevertheless toned down by her anxiety over the disappointment each is sure to experience at their long-awaited encounter. She is thus much relieved when she learns that her friend is not to show up. The failure of her girlfriend to keep their appointment and her relief at the news indicate that not only is her nostalgia predicated, dangerously, upon an imaginary construction of the past but the desired return of the past in the figure of her girlfriend can only undermine the force of the past as the fetishized object of her desire. The mechanism of nostalgia demands the absence of the past so that the nostalgic subject can repeatedly construct it. Each repetition produces a home to be displaced until the next assault of the nostalgic malaise and each construction is dominated by an aesthetic impetus that displaces the actual past with an imaginary past. The linguistic artifact, which is the "Ancient Capitals," needless to say, becomes one of the many homes the author/narrator invents to anchor her nostalgic desire for home. In generating a concatenation of arrivals and departures, nostalgia seeks to remember an imagined past as a way of either criticizing the present (as in satire) or inventing a possible future (as in utopia).

The irresolvable contradiction between the romanticism which informs the constructions of imaginary homelands, and the realism that makes the homeland the place the nostalgic subject has to leave behind so as to survive, gives the uncannily meditative tone of Zhu's story an ambivalent desperation. While it is easy for us to condemn hastily the author/narrator for her failure to embrace her "real" homeland, which is the politically correct decision, or for her flirtation with imaginary homelands, which is the aesthetically fashionable

gesture, Zhu gives us a narrative which refuses to stay home, any home, a narrative that follows an arbitrary and roundabout route in (not) coming home. It is as if that the narrative is struggling with the two opposing impulses at war within the parameters of its structure: a desperate need to believe in the values of modernity—stability, confidence, progress and the motherland—and a contrary love affair with indeterminate walking, wandering, and the "elsewhere." When her girlfriend fails to meet her in Tokyo so that "they can sleep side by side in the same room just like when they were in high school" (172), the narrator comes to the belated awareness that she has been forgotten and betrayed by her past—by her best friend whom she has once thought was "closer to me than my own parents" (210). After that aborted attempt to continue a past romance, the narrator "I" returns to Taipei, replacing her earlier tone of sentimental longing with a jarring tone of guilt and indignation.[14] Her reading of Taipei in the second half of the text reveals an anxiety at the heart of her nostalgic rhetoric for she has as much betrayed her home as been betrayed by it.

Zhu's discontent with Taipei and her love for Kyoto is undeniable. Her reading of Taipei expresses the elitist disillusionment with and cynicism about the cultural prices Taipei has to pay for economic modernization. Accordingly, Taipei, as a spatial text, signifies for her a lost past and an inaccessible present, with a cityscape disfigured by the modernization project. As a cultural text, Taipei is made "thin" by its reckless destruction of old buildings and memories, making the city new in every sense of the word. Her reading of Kyoto, on the other hand, articulates less the "colonial nostalgia" for the colonialist world than a utopian desire for imaginary pasts. Kyoto reminds her of Changan—the capital city of the Tang dynasty—which has exerted a determining influence on the formation of Japanese culture during the Fujiwara era of the 8th and 9th centuries, but Kyoto also reminds her of Taipei, which has been colonized by Japan and influenced by Japanese culture as well. Kyoto represents for Zhu a text of cultural migrancy, a hybrid site which opens up cultural exchanges between the personal and the collective, western and oriental, Chinese and Japanese, contemporary and ancient. In contrast with Taipei, Kyoto is

a city with "thick" descriptions, the metropolis with a hybrid past. More importantly, it is a text with China written all over it.

Ironically, her reading of Kyoto as the authentic city of cultural hybridity betrays an implicit contradiction. If hybridity is that which defies any claim to authenticity, how can hybridity itself constitute a sign of what it dismantles? Since Zhu's reading constructs Taipei as a metropolis whose purchase of modernization is at the cost of cultural amnesia, she is impelled then to construct Taipei as a monologic text with a disruptive relation with its past. On the other hand, to go to Kyoto is almost to go back in time to Changan, and metonymically to a mythic China. In this sense, her reading of Kyoto does not connote a colonial nostalgia for the culture of the colonizer because the city of Kyoto is but the displaced term for a mythic China. Her theory of cultural migrancy acknowledges cross-cultural transactions but curiously sidesteps the materialistic differences among different moments of cultural exchange. When she tours around Kyoto, her connection to the city is mediated by the discursive system of elitist literary representation, a network of intertextuality that situates her in the realm of the aesthetics. Such an aesthetic celebration of cultural negotiations, when narrated in the nostalgic mode, requires a temporal and spatial dislocation and the mediated construction of imagined pasts as displacements for the actual past. The nostalgic narrative, which invests its ambivalent desire on the loss of the past and then insists on the constructions of imaginary pasts, however, is troubled by the encounter with the "here and now." Whereas Zhu's encounter with Kyoto, a city thick with personal and collective cultural signification, ignites her imagination in plotting a pastiche narrative with intertuextual and cross-cultural resonance, her encounter with Taipei puts her in a moment of political panic. In her bus drive, she insistently reads the bus driver as the greedy and threatening other. Stumbling into a village at the fringe of Taipei, she also reads in the faces of the elders nothing but difference and resistance. The "here and now" is not admissible into the temporal and spatial trajectories of her nostalgic narrative; instead, the nostalgic engagement with the here and now demands the mediation of a rhetoric structure of displacement.

Utopian and imaginary homes are constructed as ironic contrasts to the lack of such utopian space in the present. Despite its backward gaze, nostalgia is satirical of the present and desirous for a possible future. In this sense, the idiom of nostalgia is not at all the obsolete narrative that we can dispose of for the semiotics of nostalgia, marked by its irretrievable loss and displacement, is de-finitive and constitutive of the ambivalent structure of human desire for the impossible. In articulating and displacing the past/the home, the nostalgic text identifies the nostalgic as both obsolete and necessary.

As an undeniably nostalgic text, Zhu's *Ancient Capitals* nevertheless gives the nostalgic impulse an ironic twist by disrupting the temporal and spatial stability of "home" with an anxious narrator that is constantly going astray and finding other imaginary homelands as temporary abodes. So doing, Zhu's nostalgic gaze ends provocatively with "where is this?" not to dismiss home as a valid spatial marker of identification but to proffer a different logic of nostalgia to render the very question of "where is this" an impossible question to answer and the impossibility of homecoming a productive failure.

NOTES

[1] For a synopsis of the *xiangtu wenxue* debates and their cultural repercussions, see Lin Yaofu's "Language as Politics: The Metamorphosis of Nativism in Recent Taiwan Literature," *Modern Chinese Literature* 6 (1992): 7-22. For a detailed account, see Sung-sheng Chang, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993). Relevant articles in Chinese are too many to be listed here.

[2] In a recent conference that examined the literary development in Taiwan in the last fifty years, Chen Fangming divided the literary history of Taiwan into three successive periods: colonial era (1920-45), neo-colonial era (1945-87) and postcolonial era (1987 to the present). And in Chen's neat historical narrative, the neo-colonial era, which unsurprisingly also coincides with the rule of the Chiang family in Taiwan, is again broken down into four successive and non-

overlapping sub-periods with the 60s as the era of literary modernism and the 70s and early 80s (1970-87) as the era of literary nativism. Similar constructions of the literary history of Taiwan as a linear and continuous narrative with shifting thematic concerns but unchanging canon can be found everywhere. See Chen Fangming, "Taiwan wenxue shi fenqi de yige jiantao" [A criticism of the periodization of the literary history of Taiwan], *Wushi nian lai Taiwan wenxue yantao hui* [Symposium on fifty years of literarure in Taiwan]. Recently critics have begun to voice their discontents with the exclusiveness of a linear literary history and propose instead to construct alternative literary histories as supplements and critiques of the linearity of literary history in the ordinary sense. See Meng Fan and Lin Yaode, "Yi dandai shiye shuxie bashi niandai Taiwan wenxue shi" [Writing the literary history of the 80s from a contemporary perspective], ed. Meng Fan and Lin Yaode, *Shiji mo bianhan pianhang* [The literary side-tracks of the *fin de siecle*: on literature of Taiwan in the 1980s] (Taipei: Shibao chuban she, 1990) 7-12.

[3] On the issue of the "repressed modernities," see David Der-wei Wang, "Bainian lai Zhongguo wenxue de jubian yu bubian: bei yayi de xiandaixing [The great change and nonchange over the last hundred years of Chinese literature: The oppressed modernity]" *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue lilun* [Theories of contemporary Chinese literature] 9 (March 1998): 97-105.

[4] *Xiang wo juancun de xiongdi men* [Thinking of my brothers of the military dependents' village] (Taipei: Maitian, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

[5] Ng Kim Chew, in a perceptively written article, lists three misreadings of Zhu's nostalgic writing: Qiu Guifen, He Chunrui, Zhan kailing (Yang Zhao). Ng points out that all three attempt to straitjacket Zhu into a politically correct ideology, confusing thereby politics (reality) with literature (fiction). See Ng Kim Chew, "Cong daiguan yuan dao kafei guan: yuedu/shuxie Zhu Tianxin" [From the garden of the great spectacle to the coffee house: reading/writing Zhu Tianxin]," in *Gudu* [Ancient capitals] by Zhu Tianxin, ed. David Der-wei Wang (Taipei: Maitian, 1997) 267-68.

[6] For a lucid and provocative elucidation of the ambiguities implicit in the "neuter," see Eberhard Gruber, "Regarding the Neuter," *On the Feminine* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities, 1996) 26-37.

[7] See note 5.

[8] Cixous's critique of Blanchot can be found in the first chapter of her *Readings, The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Lispector Tsvetaeva.* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

[9] See Wang Der-wei, Preface, "Xulun—lao linghun gianshi jinsheng: Zhu Tianxin de xiaoshuo" [The previous and the present life of the old soul: Zhu Tianxin's fiction] in *Gudu* [Ancient Capitals] by Zhu Tianxin, ed. Wang Derwei Wang (Taipei: Maitian, 1997) 9-32.

[10] *Gudu* [Ancient Capitals] (Taipei: Maitian, 1997). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

[11] I owe this term to Homi Bhabha who in *The Location of Culture* calls the utopian desire for social solidarity out of discursive ambivalences and ambiguities as looking for the "join" (18).

[12] See his "Spatial Stories," *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 115-30.

[13] According to Peter Nicholls, at the heart of Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of postmodern historicity is the subtle distinction between "memory as anamnesis" and memory as "memorialization." Memorial history remembers history so as to draw a definitive lesson from it and then to dispose of it once and for all. Memory as anamnesis, in contrast, disallows this memorialization of history, and allows remembering to open up the repressed trauma within the subject. See Peter Nicholls, "The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms and Toni Morrison," in *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) 50-63.

[14] On the disappearance of the narrator's lyrical tone in the second half of Zhu's novella, see Luo Yijun's preface to Zhu's *Ancient Capitals* 42.

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