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Traversing the Sublime - A Žižekian Reading of Lu Xun's "Regrets for the Past"

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The history of the May Fourth movement has been written in a grand narrative dominated by the aesthetics of the sublime. Lu Xun was one of the prominent actors who pursued the sublime figure vigorously and has been endowed with the sublime qualities.¹ He devoted his life to the process of cultural elevation and nation-building, as well as personal perfection. As the pioneer of modern Chinese literature, his heroic figure keeps inspiring and empowering people posthumously.²

However, one cannot separate the *low* whisperings of disillusionment and despair from the "Sturm und Drang" of the May Fourth. Lu Xun had been struggling against the spectral image of despair which nefariously haunts the grand discourse of revolution and modernization. The grim image of despair and nothingness became an unexorcisable specter in Lu Xun's writings ever

since the mid 1920s; it circumvented, menaced, and encroached upon the sublime figure which was largely cherished by the May Fourth iconoclasts. Lu Xun confessed in the preface of his *Self-selected Collection* (*zixuan ji*, 1932) that he was rather “disappointed and dispirited” after witnessing the ups and downs of the successive revolutions in China. (QJ V5, 177) In the same preface he quoted a line of the famous Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi: “Despair is like hope, in that both are vanity.”³ While it is understandable that despair means the vacuum of hope, why is hope vanity? What does vanity (nothingness) mean to Lu Xun?

In a letter to Xu Guangping, his student lover, on March 18th, 1925, Lu Xun confessed that sometimes he felt “only the darkness and nothingness is ‘substantial.’”(Lu 1980, 7) Wang Xiaoming comments on the above statement that Lu Xun’s feeling of nothingness differs from the mere pessimism of a revolutionary: “[The feeling of nothingness] contains the pessimism in fighting the darkness, but at the same time it questions if there are other values beyond the darkness.” (Wang 1993, 83) The substantial nothingness, and the elusive sublime, together pose a question more complicated than simply finger pointing to Lu Xun’s often castigated skepticism of Chinese revolution. The stake lies in the question that to what extent and in which way, this dialectic of the sublime and nothingness can be sufficiently addressed, deciphered and translated into the discourse of Revolution.

In this paper I set out to question the dichotomy between the two aesthetic concepts – the aesthetics of despair and the aesthetics of the sublime. Slavoj Žižek’s critique on the Kantian sublime, which combines Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis, will help to shed light on this theoretical conundrum. I will use the Žižekian critique of the sublime as a hermeneutic tool to read Lu Xun’s fiction “Regrets for the Past” (*shangshi*, 1925)⁴ as an allegorical work which bears the representation of the aesthetics of the sublime and the aesthetics of despair, in order to re-examine their relationship against the backdrop of Chinese revolution.

Revisiting the Kantian Sublime

The sublime is an anomaly in aesthetic categories. According to Kant, the sublime both prolongs and problematizes the project of generating a self-subsistent, whole, and harmonious subject. While the beautiful always pleases, the sublime marks the point of the breakdown of the beautiful by presupposing a displeasure. The pleasure of the sublime feeling actually comes from the totalitarian success of reason - for the realization that it can now represent even the unrepresentable. The uplifting experience involved in the sublime, therefore, is the great rational power that the subject convenes in order to cope with the failure of the representation of the real object.

Slavoj Žižek challenges the Kantian notion of the sublime using Hegelian dialectics. He argues that Kant's presupposition that there is a positively given entity beyond phenomenal representation is untenable. By contrast, Hegel's position is that "there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality." Kant thinks he is still dealing with a negative presentation of the Thing, while he is already "in the midst of the Thing-in-itself." (Žižek 1989, 205) What appears to be the Kantian sublime, thereby, is precisely the eclipse of the real sublime object. The Kantian sublime, which suggests the approach of the positive Thing in its negative representation, should be replaced with the Thing in its radical negativity - the no-thing, the lack, the void of representation, since the very void, the very blank, the very absence of the representation of the Thing is in fact the Thing in its real existence. The real Thing can be approached only "through purely negative presentation – that the very inadequacy of the phenomenality to the Thing is the only appropriate way to present it." (Žižek 1989, 205) The unrepresentable Kantian sublime object is precisely the Thing-in-itself in its radical negativity which is immanent to the subject's experience. Therefore, the sublime is the face-to-face encounter with, instead of a bypass, of the Real. The sublime object, instead of being one indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing, is an object which occupies the position of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity.

This new definition of the sublime has the potential to reshape the aesthetic of the sublime fundamentally. Žižek uses the Lacanian psychoanalysis to anatomize the nothingness inherent in the sublime. He points out that Nothing as the embodiment of the Thing “is not simply nothing but a determinate nothing.” (Žižek 1989, 195) Although “nothing” is unrepresentable in the field of phenomenology, it can produce certain affective effects and series of properties. The content of nothing, Žižek believes, is the notorious *jouissance*, enjoyment-in-sense. *Jouissance* is nothing, because it “does not exist,” but it can produce certain traumatic effects that affect the formation of symbolic order. (Žižek 1989, 164) *Jouissance* as extreme enjoyment is the hard core of being which “simultaneously attracts and repels us” (Žižek 1989, 180), a certain excess or remainder which inevitably resists all signifying operation.

If the aesthetic of the sublime is ultimately the aesthetic of *jouissance*, then it is questionable whether the sublime can be elevating without corrupting, perfecting without undermining, defending without subverting, heroizing without belittling. The representation of the sublime, therefore, should be a contested field by itself.

It is in this sense that aesthetic discourse in modern China appears to be pathological. From Wang Guowei in the early twentieth century, to Zhu Guangqian and Liang Zongdai in the 1930s, the aesthetic of the sublime in modern China retained, if not reinforced, the self-assuring tone of the Kantian aesthetics. For example, Wang Guowei attempted to promote the “sublime personality” (*zhuangmei renga*) as “a cure for an emotionally depressed and morally degenerate society.” (Wang 1997, 24) Zhu Guangqian’s aesthetic theory, in turn, favors “action, power, grandeur, and adventure.” (Wang 1997, 118) As a discursive practice, the aesthetics of the sublime in modern China had one of its aims to *sublimate the sublime*. Since the calls for sublimation was egged on by the revolutionary discourses of self-strengthening and national salvation, what had been touted as sublime were overwhelmingly revolutionary passion, spiritual striving or heroic sacrifice, which served as ideals for political and individual striving.

Lu Xun himself also contributed to the aesthetics of the sublime in modern China by writing

the essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (*moluo shili shuo*)⁵, in which he eulogized the satanic and robust power of romantic literature. How did Lu Xun incorporate the sublime power in his own literary works? Was Lu Xun’s sublime a mere repetition of the Kantian pattern or was he sympathetic to a different formulation, as implied by the haunting image of despair and nothingness? I will turn to the most “romantic” literary work of Lu Xun, the sole love story in his oeuvre, “Regrets for the Past”, to explore the aesthetics of the sublime following the Žižekian reformulation.

The Metamorphosis of Zijun’s Body

“Regrets for the Past” was collected in *Wandering* (*panghuang*, 1926), Lu Xun’s second short story collection. It relates a failed love story of a young couple. Zijun, the tragic female protagonist, is galvanized by Juansheng’s love as much as she is mesmerized by the modern ideas advocated by him, leading her to leave her old-fashioned family and cohabit with Juansheng. After a brief moment of ecstasy, however, Juansheng’s love wears out in the trivialities of daily life; and she ceases to appear as charming and sublime as she used to be. He tells her that he no longer loves her, she leaves and soon dies.

Leo Ou-fan Lee sees Juansheng as a “typical May Fourth romantic intellectual” and the text as “typical May Fourth romantic story.” (Lee 1987, 63) Undoubtedly, “Regrets for the Past” can be read as an aesthetic representation from the perspective of a May Fourth new youth. Subtly yet faithfully, the vicissitudes of the aesthetic representation index the ongoing subjective formation. Throughout the story, Juansheng undergoes drastic emotional fluctuations which revolve around the two palpable literary images: the sublime and nothingness.

The most sublime moment in the fiction is attained when Zijun decides to break apart from her family to live with Juansheng by claiming “I’m my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me.” (QJ V2, 278) It is noteworthy that Juansheng has been spontaneously

playing the role of the enlightener who bombards her with modern ideas and romantic figures. Ironically, when Juansheng's preaching takes effect, he himself is somehow taken aback. The words and tone of Zijun sound like a deafening thunder in his soul. The female body looms large in front of his eyes and becomes a promising harbinger, through which Juansheng sees "resplendent dawn" of the future. (QJ V2, 279) At that very moment, their roles are reversed. Zijun, who now embraces the sublime ideal with her own body, transcends the conceptual ideal that Juansheng breathes into her; she is the loftier one. By contrast, Juansheng is outshined and loses the superiority as an enlightener. Witnessing the woman elevated to such sublime height is almost traumatic experience for him. Overwhelmed by ecstasy, he is left dumbfounded. Juansheng's traumatic experience extends to the subsequent moment in the fiction, when he asks for Zijun's consent to have a sexual relationship:

I cannot remember clearly how I expressed my true and fiery love to her at that time. Not only now, but soon after it happened, the memory became blurry. When I tried to recall it at night, there were only fragments. Even the fragments dissipated like a dream without a trace after a couple of months living together. I only remember that I spent a dozen of days to study carefully the manner of confession and the order of phrases, and the solution to handle a possible rejection. But at the moment they seemed all useless. In bewilderment, I could not help myself adopting the means that I learned from a film. I feel ashamed whenever I think of it. However, it is the only thing that forever hangs in my memory, like a solitary lamp in a dark room, lighting me up - I was clasping her hand in tears, and knelt down on one of my legs... (QJ V2, 279)

In contrast to the preceding moment of the sublime, the latter marks a moment of shame in Juansheng's experience. When Juansheng is so close to Zijun, the newly-crowned sublime object, he is not only undermined in linguistic ability, but also suffers a loss of memory, and eventually, a loss of self. He cannot remember, cannot speak or act as he plans, and he ends up borrowing the other's means to communicate with his loved one. This sense of loss of self has been intensified in the ensuing days. No sooner than he starts to live with Zijun, he develops a different feeling for her. The body which was endowed with sublime beauty rapidly transforms into an aversive bundle of life. When Zijun diligently plays the role of housewife, she

ceases to be the attractive woman in Juansheng's eyes. Her once innocent beauty is marred by the effects of labor: "Her face was sweat-soaked all day, short hair sticking to the forehead. Her hands grew rough." (QJ V2, 284) He detests the way she "went on munching away quite unconcerned." (QJ V2, 288) Her existence now represents nothing more than what he disdains and fears. His hope for the splendid future is in jeopardy. He realizes that "the happiness and peace" is freezing him; (QJ V2, 283) he feels himself like a bird with paralyzed wings.

"Regrets for the Past" therefore registers the metamorphosis of Zijun's body. Starting with the pleasing feminine beauty, the body is enlightened and elevated as a sublime object; it then falls from that height and becomes a vulgar body. This drastic transformation of the body, or rather the drastic change in Juansheng's aesthetic experience, tallies with Žižek's assertion on the sublime object:

The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object. – it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all. (Žižek 1989, 170)

Since the sublime object is the embodiment of the pure negativity or emptiness, the aesthetic experience of the sublime is nothing but a mirage created by the subject. Out of the desire to assure the self, a desire associated with the ego libido, the aesthetic subject is propelled to the Kantian misrecognition, that is, the subject insists to "perceive" a positive sublime object, one existing beyond his range of perception, when he finds that there is nothing in the field of phenomena. Out of this compulsive desire to represent the positive thing even through the negative means, the subject unavoidably misrecognizes the nothing as something, the meaningless as meaningful, and the ordinary as great. In fact, the so-called sublime object has no intrinsic sublime quality, nor does it exist in any extra-phenomenal field. The sublime object, using Lacan's definition, is "an object raised to the level of the (impossible-real) Thing." (Žižek 1989, 202-203)

Similarly, Juansheng compulsively misreads Zijun's words and action as a modern woman's manifesto, a revolutionary gesture guided by a rational scheme, while he turns a blind eye to the truth which is overtly lying there – Zijun breaks away from her family out of the fervent love for him. When Juansheng is able to read through Zijun's body and mind, he finds himself on the verge of his accustomed symbolic universe. Juansheng is forced to attest the scandal of the sublime and to realize that "the humanist dream of fullness is itself a libidinal fantasy." (Eagleton, 263) It is in this phase that Juansheng traverses the sublime and suffers great disillusionment. What awaits him is a void, a hole, the devastating nothingness. Painfully he comes to the desperate realization: "all the ideas and the intelligent, fearless phrases she has learned are empty in the end." (QJ 2, 293) With the fading of the sublime quality, Zijun's body resumes an ordinary, if not vulgar, modality.

Apparently, Juansheng symbolic universe is grounded on empowering reason and a progressive trajectory that he unfalteringly believes in. However the traumatic encounter with the sublime has cast him in a world where the temporal progress has been suspended. In this world, *nothing* really happens and he is forced to repeatedly live out *the* moment, in which, in tears, he knelt down on one leg. The moment is no longer sublime; it now represents the fatuous and obscene nature of love – and the startling secretive nature of enlightenment and revolution.

Zijun's body soon becomes the materialization of impossible *jouissance*. According to Juansheng, ever since they live together Zijun has become "more lively", yet she has dismissed the revolutionary ideas that he imparts to her and drifted to the world of nothingness. For Juansheng, life is constructed through meaning and the hope to a splendid future; a life without purpose is a life of emptiness. Zijun, nonetheless, becomes the living exhibition of the life of emptiness. Instead of loving flowers, which is romantic in Juansheng's view, Zijun "has a liking for animals" and she begins to raise four chicks and one dog. Juansheng does not like the fact that Zijun spends plenty of time cooking and feeding the chicks and the dog; he tells her that he does not care about eating at all – he'd rather starve than to see her busying herself like this.

(QJ 2, 284) Zijun's enthusiasm in everyday trivialities is meaningless in Juansheng's eyes. He cannot understand why her body is getting plumper and her cheeks are becoming rosier (QJ 2, 282-283) at the same time when he himself languishes in the struggle for the position in the symbolic world. Nevertheless, Juansheng can plainly perceive the unrepresentable enjoyment of Zijun, the *jouissance* that circulates in her vulgar body and boosts her material existence.

For Juansheng, the most excruciating reality is that enjoyment repetitively beckons him. Zijun loves the little games of reviewing the past, in which she would question and examine, or request Juansheng to retell every detail in his moment of shame with a contented smile on her face and blazing sparkles in her eyes. Juansheng abhors the enjoyment that Zijun harbors precisely because it is unavoidable – as the enjoyment is originally and eventually his own. The exhibition of Zijun's enjoyment is nothing less than a torture for Juansheng, because it reminds him that his sublime ideal, which he cherished heart and soul, is far from perfection.

Juansheng realizes that the courage of the revolutionary Zijun comes from love, instead of ideas; and he regrets to have lost sight of “the essential meaning of life” because of “blind love.” (QJ 2, 292) What Juansheng does not realize is that the lack of meaning is the very representation of the sublime; and the shameful nothingness is the very object that he laboriously pursues. In this sense, there is no way that Juansheng, as a modern revolutionary youth, can redeem himself from this fundamental regret. The truth of Juansheng's dilemma is cogently contained in Lacan's famous statement: “Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh.” (Lacan, 322) The metamorphic body of Zijun, herein, is the pound of flesh that needs to be weighed by its owner, Juansheng. It mocks his self-sublimation with an abhorrent surge of *jouissance*, reminding him of the obscene force which undercuts the aesthetics of the sublime. Since the pound of flesh originally belongs to Juansheng, the repetitive impacts of the unconscious *jouissance* would not die out even after Zijun's death. The dog Asui, who is raised by Zijun but later dumped by Juansheng, comes back in the end of the fiction like a phantom. Asui's return is startling; although the dog looks “thin, covered with dust,

more dead than alive,” (QJ V2, 302) it continues to unsettle Juansheng, to bewilder him and drive him out of place.

For Juansheng, to start a new life means that he has to overcome the memory of Zijun, who has come to represent the traumatic nothingness. Even the narrative of “Regrets for the Past” itself, in the form of his handwritten notes, is therapeutically “devoted to erasing and exorcising Zijun and casting her into the empty space between words.” (Liu, 165) Yet the contradictions and despairing notes contained in the narrative furthermore subverts the possibility of restoring an eloquent and rational subject. Behind the broken memory is a volatile subject who struggles to collect himself through writing. The regret Juansheng feels toward the end of the story is more for the loss of his selfhood than for the death of Zijun.

The Aesthetics of Despair

Ching-kiu Stephen Chan points out in his article “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the ‘New Women’ by May Fourth Writers” how the representation of woman’s despair actually reflected the male intellectuals’ despair – their crisis of consciousness in the post May Fourth period. The crisis of consciousness of dominant masculine discourse consisted in their lack of means to represent a new mode of reality with their habitual set of discourse. The representation of new woman, therefore, appeared to be paradoxical from the outset, since it carried the seemingly impossible mission to subvert the dominant mode of discourse in which it is represented in the first place. While the modern intellectual “wanted desperately to re-present *himself* via a mutation in the crisis of the ‘other’,” (Chan, 20) the other, namely the new woman, was destined to be objectified as anamorphic and hopeless in such representation.

Zijun, as a Chinese Nora who is “openly betrayed by her share of the revolution” (Chan, 25), joined in the images of new women emerged in specific cultural and historical “formations

of despair". According to Chan, Zijun was unfairly allocated the liability for Juansheng's loss of selfhood, while in fact her position "is nothing but emptiness, the empty existence the man is allowed to objectify and exchange for 'truth.'" (Chan, 26) Woman's despair in dominant literary discourse was actually anchored in man's crisis of representation, while the true despair of woman was rendered as less important. In the narrative dominated by the male, "no authentic discourse of the 'other' is represented," the real woman is silenced and ostracized into "the empty space between words" (Liu, 165). The representation of woman's despair, therefore, is the aestheticization of woman as well as the despair. The "aesthetics of despair", Chan argues, displayed "the realist obsession with despair" which is itself "an attempt at mediating the contradictions of form." (Chan, 20)

In Chan's formulation of the operation of the aesthetics of despair, despair is both instrumental – the representation of other's despair served as a detour through which the masculine subject could find a way to transcend his own crisis of consciousness and achieve self integrity, and existential despair can be understood as "the specific tendency in literary discourse to deal with the extinction of hope, the utter loss of the will to discourse, and the disbelief in actions and ideas of any positive value" (Chan, 36) which pertains to the masculine subject who still speaks in a patriarchal voice. Despair, therefore, becomes "a specific form of the modern emotion" (Chan, 29) which exists in the intersubjective space. It functions both as the representation and the disruption of such representation, exhibiting a tension between the self and a radical otherness, which ultimately results in the so-called crisis of consciousness. "Regrets for the Past," in Chan's point of view, precisely reflects the crisis of consciousness through "the self's symbiotic containment of the other. (Chan, 30)

It is at this point that the Žižekian formulation of the aesthetics of the sublime can step in, as the mystical operation of despair functions exactly in the same way as the mystical operation of sublimation. Despair is the very "pound of flesh" that the subject has to pay in order to reach the misrecognition of any sublime ideal; yet at the same time, despair, now as the lack of the pound

of flesh, must be taken into the subjective formation negatively, to be experienced as a lack, a hole, a nothingness. In the post-May Fourth literary representations, this radical otherness of despair often existed, or more accurately *non-existed*, in the form of the other, the new woman.

With the Žižekian formulation of the aesthetics of the sublime, however, one can achieve two new insights which are actually interrelated. First of all, the Žižekian perspective tends to redefine the relationship between the subject, the other, and despair. A Žižekian reading, by looking into the empty position of woman as the other, would finally relocate despair from the subjective representation of woman to the very empty position that woman occupies in the representation. That is to say, what best characterizes despair is not the transference of the masculine despair to the female body; the despair that causes the masculine anxiety lies in the very fact that he is unable to achieve any symbolic representation of woman as Real. It is the crisis of the representation that leads to the crisis of consciousness. The dilemma which man faces is that the more subjective integrity he achieves, the emptier the representation of woman becomes, which in turn retroactively questions his subjective validity.

Despair manifests itself precisely in the performative act of repeatedly failed representation. One can say that there would not be a subject of despair if there was not a subject of representation in the first place. While the ability of representation is a doubtlessly a demonstration of subjective agency, the very agency faces a breakdown vis-à-vis the fissure of representation. Therefore, the act of remembering or writing cannot redeem Juansheng from his despair, because the more he writes, the more he tends to forget or distort the past, the emptier the image of Zijun becomes. His trauma, disillusionment, and regret all stem from his encounter with the unrepresentable other – the sublime object. The crisis of consciousness thus arises from the aesthetics of the sublime, and woman's body becomes the sublime object, which lies in the impossible domain of representation.

Secondly, the Žižekian formulation would deny the possibility of constructing any transcendental subject. In this sense, the aesthetics of despair cannot be instrumental, because

it does not serve any purpose for the subject. If representation can be the exhibition window of subjective agency, the representation of woman's despair raises question as to the consistency of the representing subject. When the subjective representation stops short at the despair of woman, it is apparent that the masculine subject cannot achieve a transcendental and integral self through transference of his own crisis. Chan notices that the masculine subject's "own ethical consistency is often undermined by an aesthetic tendency in his language to mitigate, if not vulgarize, the articulation of any alternative voice of the woman." (Chan, 32) Yet is there a way to represent the alternative voice of woman in a rational discourse? At several points of his article, Chan also pauses to ponder if there is any "alternative rationality" (Chan, 30) when the subject is at the end of his wit. After quoting Herbert Marcuse's theory of "negative totality" (Marcuse, 159), Chan comes to the conclusion that "any possible transcendence of self is to be achieved in its very negativity." (Chan, 23)

This notion of a transcendental self in its negativity, which presupposes the existence of a positive, unifying subject, is quite Kantian; thus it bears the same Kantian "error." One needs to challenge the very notion of a transcendental subject in the first place with the Hegelian dialectic: why does one look for a transcendental subject when he already faces the truth of the subject? When Chan talks about the self in its negativity, he is already "in the midst of" the formation of self and individuality. The truth of the subject lies in its non-transcendental nature – it has to embrace the unrepresentable despair, because it is this very negativity that constructs its own existence. In other words, the crisis of consciousness, or the existential dilemma, is not something that the (masculine) modern subject can overcome or transcend, but something he has to live with, something defines him as he is. For the May Fourth iconoclasts at that particular juncture in history, "where contradictions were lived as part of everyday reality", (Chan, 23) their subjectivity had to be formed in radical negativity, if they were to implement the "impossible" mission to subvert the same ground that they stood on. It was a mission that required so much passion and momentum, that it was impossible to gather them from any integral realm of being or established hierarchy of consciousness. Therefore, as much as the

past and Zijun fetters Juansheng's progressive move, he cannot move on if he does not have a past to regret for and a woman to forsake. Zijun is not an object for the "justification of one's own assertion of self-integrity, one's own transcendence of a painful crisis of identity;" (Chan, 25) nor is she the cause of Juansheng's despair. His despair, ironically, is caused by his own relentless pursuit for a revolutionary subjectivity.

Negative as it is in regard to subjective representation, despair can become a positive condition for the course of revolution. One can certainly find the phantom of *jouissance* in Chan's expression of the power of despair:

Once repressed, the language of despair – despair as the root of existence, despair as the cause of life –now erupted through layers of institutional and ideological dominance to appear in the formation of a new ethic and a new culture. It gave rise to an alternative discourse that might have contributed to women's new entry into history. Yet despite its revolutionary momentum, the eruption, in effect, also became the very sign of continual disruption. (Chan, 22)

Despair, as *jouissance*, is the radical other which both empowers and frightens a revolutionary. In its fathomless precipice of hopelessness, despair confers the self the most formidable power, the power of death, which, ironically, is the biggest crisis for the subject. Only when caught in despair can the self meet the traumatic nothingness which lies in the starting point of any subjective formation; there the self conjures for itself again the devastating power between death and birth. Chan extols despair "as the only remaining powerhouse in the twilight of history." (Chan, 22) Indeed, one is too feeble to fight for revolution if one has not fought the fierce battle against despair, a sublime battle over his own existence.

The Sublime Women

In December, 1923, Lu Xun gave a talk "What Happens after Nora Leaves Home" (*nala zouhou zenyang*)⁶ at the Peking Women's Normal College, in which he tried to enlist the realistic scenarios that would happen to Nora after she leaves her husband and family. In all of the scenarios Nora is doomed: she could become a prostitute, starve to death, or simply give up her

new acquired identity by returning to her family. Therefore he called Nora's action of leaving the family a gesture of sacrifice, and only meaningful as a sacrifice. As a subject of sacrifice, the fate of new woman is objectified as a spectacle for the dominant subject of discourse. The vicissitudes of her fate are to be viewed, judged, and represented by the masculine subject, who in turn tries to speak in her behalf.

In "Regrets for the Past," the only time Zijun becomes a subject of enunciation is when she speaks in the language of Juansheng: "I'm my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me." Apart from this borrowed discourse, she seems to have no means to express herself. On the other hand, Juansheng's effort to define Zijun as what she says proves to be a mistake; and his own language and memory falls short on her representation. In the end, it is as if the narrator has to sentence the woman to death, thus to dispatch her into the bottomless hole in the discourse that seeks to represent her.

Therefore, behind the jubilation over the woman's liberation in the May Fourth era, there lies the insuppressible doubt: where is she to be found? The anxiety has a reasonable basis, as Shuei-may Chang asserts, "if women remain silent, they will forever be outside the process of history." (Chang, 191) Many other new women, like Zijun, were the unrepresentable objects in the particular historical and cultural circumstance. Lu Xun himself was a cynical spectator of this process of his-story, as opposed to her-story. In "Gendered Spectacles: Lu Xun on Gazing at Women," Eileen Cheng sets out to examine "the intimate link between women and spectacles" (Cheng 2006, 4) in Lu Xun's writings. The gendered spectacles she discovers include Qiu Jin (1875-1907), Zijun, Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935), Liu Hezhen (1904-1926)⁷, other than the Chinese Nora Zijun. Although Lu Xun himself was critical about turning women into spectacles which he believed cater to the baser instincts of human nature (Cheng 2006, 4), he was apparently mesmerized by the spectacles of these women, or to be more accurate, the spectacles of dead women. For instance, as Cheng discovers, Qiu Jin represents "everything he is not and refuses to become" and was an object for his criticism when she was alive. Yet, after her voluntary sacrifice in 1907, Lu Xun suddenly became sympatric about her as he participated in several

memorials commemorating Qin Jin and paid tribute to her in his short story "Medicine" (yao, 1919). (Cheng 2006, 7) In other writings, Lu Xun continued to focus on the spectacles of dead women: he expressed his sympathy and indignation over the death of his student, Liu Hezhen, in 1926; he defended the death of the actress Ruan Lingyu because he thought her choice of committing suicide is "not so easy." (Lu 1995, 901)

One may wonder if the only way for women to have a symbolic life is to embrace death. Qiu Jin's choice of death had made her the first sublime female figure in modern Chinese history; Ruan Lingyu's suicide absolved her any moral sin and saved her a position in the symbolic world. These spectacles of dead women were sublime for their viewers precisely because their special structural position in respect to life and death. Žižek says: "In a way, everybody must die twice." One is "the natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of nature's continual transformation;" and the other is "absolute death – the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*." (Žižek 1989, 134)⁸ In other words, the difference between the two deaths is the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization. (Žižek 1989, 135) The sublime object, he asserts, locates precisely in the interspace between the two deaths.

The women who sacrifice their physical body to trade for symbolic life, therefore, are always imbued with sublime beauty. In Zijun's case, however, her symbolic death precedes her biological death. In Juansheng's eyes, her life is devoid of meaning long before she really dies; the vulgar body of Zijun, which becomes the embodiment of emptiness, exists completely on biological drives. However, it is precisely the symbolic death of Zijun, the ceasing of her meaningful, progressive, revolutionary life that cast her into the interspace between the two deaths and transforms her into the unrepresentable sublime object.

Zijun loses her symbolic life as thousands of new women who believed in free love and marriage. As reflected in "Regrets for the Past," the common understanding in the post May

Fourth sentiment was that the new woman, over time, would soon lose their newly-acquired subjectivity, “bound and exhausted,” they would continue to lose “their understanding of the world, their identity, and their ability to reason.”⁹ Therefore, women’s enthusiastic response to the calls of new ideas was out of touch with the reality; her Nora-like act could not be justified in a rational base.

The motive behind her choice, then, became inexplicable. What might be equally inexplicable is the masculine interest in this half-seen, unrepresentable spectacle. Lu Xun wrote in his correspondence that Qiu Jin is “clapped to death;” thereby he must be aware of the intersubjective exchange between the gendered spectacle and thought Qiu Jin’s sacrifice more or less as a concerted performance between her and the viewers. Eileen Cheng has noted that in “Regrets for the Past,” Juansheng is apparently attracted to performative gestures, particularly “Zijun’s Nora-like words and gestures.” (Cheng 2004, 13)

The drastic change in Juansheng’s aesthetic experience seems to suggest the chasm between discourse and action. As the mentor and enlightener of Zijun, Juansheng is the one who knows and talks better; he is also the one who is more agile with rhetorical expressions. However, in the real moment of realization – the moment to act out the modern ideas and to fully embrace the revolutionary zeal body and soul, Juansheng’s absolute rhetorical advantage pales in front of Zijun’s real action. Zijun, the woman who comes from a reactionary family and always listens silently to Juansheng, is better prepared for the realization of revolutionary ideas. In Juansheng’s understanding, the moment of revolution would naturally come when ideas are ripe. He does not realize that revolution must also be propelled by bodily actions. Zijun’s action, which is largely motivated by sexual love, deviates from Juansheng’s rational scheme from the outset. She carries out the revolutionary moment without reality check and concern for future; her sacrifice is something Juansheng is incapable of. Therefore, this moment excites the masculine subject as much as it dwarfs him, since it is her who has the power to consummate the promises in the abstract ideas he delivers. However, her “new life” borders with her symbolic death, because when the performance is over, bare sexual love and the routine of everyday life

are only the nothingness in man's eyes.

In *Emerging from the Horizon of History*, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua assert that the only moment the dominant ideology of May Fourth culture retains for (new) women like Zijun, in which she is visible, is the moment of Nora. (Meng & Dai, 37) Can it be said that the only moment for men is the moment of Don Juan? Zijun, like other Chinese Noras, answers man's idea of revolution through her bodily dispositions and action, yet man who gives her the promise of future betrays her right away. Man is unable to carve out a future for woman as he promises, nor is he ready to take her as a subject tantamount to himself. Consequently, the new woman is caught forever in the moment of sacrifice, without the ability to move on with the man, without the will to live up to his new promises. Therefore, just like Qiu Jin who is clapped to (biological) death, Zijun is wooed to her (symbolic) death. Between the two deaths they both become the sublime object which is actually a fissure of representation in history which is written in masculine discourse. The lacuna of woman cannot be assimilated into history, although it is retroactively produced by symbolization of his-story itself.

However, one need to redefine history as the symbiosis of a rational, teleological discourse and *jouissance* embodied in the performative bodies of woman. As Chan points out, "the introjection of otherness onto selfhood also makes it possible for the alterity of a non-being – woman – to intrude into the integral realm of being and disturb the established hierarchy of consciousness." (Chan, 30) History, as well as the masculine subject, cannot transcend from its negativity. This is why Lacan actually identifies the pleasure principle with the symbolic order in his late seminars. Woman is able to insert into history as the sublime object, or nothingness, due to her innate connection to the mystical *jouissance*. Lacan calls woman as the symptom of man, a symptom as "a particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship toward enjoyment (*jouissance*).” Žižek explains that as a symptom, woman

...does *not* exist, she *insists* which is why she does not come to be through man only. There is something in her that escapes the relation to man, the reference to the phallic

signifier, and, as is well known, Lacan attempted to capture this excess by the notion of a “*not-all*,” feminine *jouissance*. [...] Woman is therefore no longer conceived as fundamentally “passive” in contrast to male activity: the act as such, in its most fundamental dimension, becomes “feminine.” (Žižek 1990: 21)

The May Fourth new culture never stopped to search for a strong, violent, crude force; this force was looked upon as a general rule which has a fixed form – the masculine, positive sublime. However, *jouissance* as the unrepresentable thing is beyond any principle or fixed form, so even the masculine sublime, as the biggest fantasy of May Fourth culture, needs to derive its force from the feminine sublime, which embodies the irrational, disruptive, and anamorphic nothingness that it is afraid to confront.

***Jouissance* in May Fourth Culture**

It is an often-quoted statement by Yu Dafu that “the greatest success of the May Fourth movement should be considered the discovery of the ‘individual’ (*geren*).”(Yu, 1963) In the eyes of the May Fourth iconoclasts, the modern subject embodies the ideal of a rounded individual. Chen Duxiu called for “the awakening of the full selfhood” (*quan renga de juexing*) by arguing that the national and societal interests are in fact based on the consolidation of individual interests. The liberal, equalitarian, romantic tones in the slogans of the May Fourth iconoclasts presupposes a positive subjectivity that is both wholesome and enlightened body and soul.

In 1917, the young Mao Zedong, under the influence of western ideas of democracy and science, completed an important transition in his life. His earlier thoughts can be concluded as “no-self theory” (*wu wo lun*) which aimed at the effacement of the selfhood”; “I proposed *no-self theory* in the past, believing there is only the universe and not me.” By suggesting the abnegation of a concrete self, he incorporated the unconscious power, which was considered as the opposite to the self, into the cause of revolution. Mao’s no-self is a sublime self – a self, through its symbolic suicide, embraces the sublime; it contains in itself the shadow of

nothingness that resists any discourse. In psychoanalysis, such a self would be the pre-oedipal bundle of life that is characterized by a narcissistic drive. The pre-oedipal self recognizes no boundary between I and the world, because for it, the self is the world. Mao accepted a disposition to “endear the self” (*gui wo lun*); and with this he exclaimed, “I am the universe”. (Li 1989, 65) The self endeared by Mao was not merely a psychic being, but the psycho-somatic integrity. The purpose of endearing the self is to “exert people’s capacity of body and mind to the highest point.” It is evidently that Mao believed that the civilization of the mind and the barbarization of the body can be accomplished simultaneously.

In Guo Moruo’s poetic works, the no-self transformed into the giant *I*. In his poem “Celestial Dog” (*tiangou*, 1920), the poet bursts out in passionate outcries: “I am the sum of the universe’s energy.” (Guo, 43) His ideal self was one that “burns like the flame,” “roars like the sea,” “runs like the electricity.” (Guo, 44) While the imageries of flame, sea, and electricity exhibit the power of vehemence, vastness and speed, they are also objects without a definite form. The self that is like flame, sea and electricity thus is one that constantly exceeds the limit of itself and faces the danger of explosion. Guo’s superman self, which convenes the energy of the universe, goes hand in hand with Mao’s no-self.

While Mao’s no-self and Guo’s giant *I* touted the aesthetics of the sublime, they both summoned the devastating force, which is beyond any representation, as the sine qua non of the individualization. It is paradoxical that the discovery of the individual lies on the force that tends to undo the individual self. Therefore, one can find the shadow of despair, which threatens the existence of the self, in the very self-building force that Mao and Guo evoked.

Lu Xun was also an ardent advocator for an inflated self. In 1918 he wrote in an essay which was collected in *Hot Wind* (*refeng*): “The Chinese has been arrogant – regrettably there is no ‘arrogance of the individual,’ but the ‘arrogance of group and patriotism.’ This is the reason why [China] cannot wake up and improve after the failure of cultural competition.” (QJ V2, 30) The ego-mania Lu Xun promoted conjures the kind of individual who exists beyond the confines

of social order and norms. Lu Xun believes that through his irrepressible “arrogant” demands, which bring about more vigor, vitality, and aggressiveness, the individual would eventually benefit the progress and welfare of the whole society. Lu Xun’s “Diary of Madman” (*kuangren riji*, 1918) is cheered by critics as the manifesto of the birth of modern subjectivity.¹⁰ The strength of the madman consists precisely in his symptom of madness. Xiaobing Tang points out that the madman’s ecstatic madness “indicates a return of that which has been suppressed or erased from the horizon of allowed or conceivable experience.” (Tang, 59) Madness is the dark abyss for the “normal” people, the vanity in the light of reason. In the figure of madness, one can identify the intense, rapturous, destructive *jouissance*. If sublimation, as Lacan points out, means the loss of the pound of flesh, the madman seems to have undergone the reverse of sublimation, as the madman is reduced to the pound of edible flesh. However, desublimation is also a form of sublime (Wang 1997, 11); the desublimed object, which is ultimately the subject in its most objectified form – the erasure of itself, reveals precisely “the cause of the subject.” (Žižek 2005, 27)

Bearing on its shoulders the painful task to overthrow the traditional past which served as its foothold, the May Fourth revolutionary subject can not solely rely on conscious agency to carry out the revolution. Under such circumstances, any notion of an enclosed and stable self becomes questionable. In order to revamp the position of the subject, the subject has to vacate himself first. Therefore, the revolutionary subject can not think or act on any conceivable trajectory that make sense to him, because “making sense” means a compromise with the preexisting conditions, the past. The revolutionary subject, in fact, has to act on a non-subjective position, a position where he simultaneously sees his birth and his destruction. The position of the revolutionary subjective, therefore, is the interspace between two deaths, between the aesthetics of the sublime and the aesthetics of despair.

The significance of the May Fourth culture movement, in this sense, lies in its inclusion of the unrepresentable *jouissance* as agency. It is what Žižek calls “repressive desublimation”, in

which “the triumphant archaic urges, the victory of the Id over the Ego, live in harmony with the triumph of the society over the individual.” (Žižek 2005, 16) The demands of society invoke the unconscious agency of the individual, which otherwise would be classified as madness or illegitimate, subsequently building a short circuit between the society and the individual’s enjoyment. In this formulation, the subjectivity of the individual, located in the dark abyss between the excruciating demands of the society and the nonsensical *jouissance*, can only be grasped in its negative existence. Therefore, for the May Fourth generation, the sublime is not only a spectacle to worship. The sublime was both the uplifting clarion and the downward undercurrent, both the masculine and the feminine, both the spectacle and the subject looking at it.

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¹ Ban Wang's *The Sublime Figure of History* is a monograph on the dynamics of aesthetics and politics in modern Chinese history. In his book Wang devoted one chapter "Writing China: The Imaginary Body and Allegorical Wilderness" (pp.17-54) to Lu Xun, in which he offers detailed research of the sublime in Lu Xun's writings.

² Lu Xun has been accorded the status of national hero posthumously and thus became a sublime figure in the CCP's propaganda.

³ Lu Xun quoted the same line in "Hope" (*xiwang*, 1925) in *Wild Grass*.

⁴ *Lu Xun QuANJI (The Complete Works of Lu Xun)* Vol.2. pp.276-304.

⁵ "On the Power of Mara Poetry" was written in 1907 when Lu Xun was in Japan.

⁶ See *Lu Xun QuANJI (The Complete Works of Lu Xun)*, V1, pp.143-151.

⁷ After Liu Hezhen's death in March 18 Incident, Lu Xun eulogized Liu Hezhen in "Jinian Liu Hezhen jun" (In memory of Liu Hezhen, 1926).

⁸ Slavoj Žižek. "You Only Die Twice." In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. pp.131-149.

⁹ See Hua and Fong, *Women in Republican China*, 154, 156.

¹⁰ Xiaobing Tang suggests reading "Diary of a Madman" as a "manifesto of the birth of modern subjectivity as well of a modernist politics." *Chinese Modern*, p.57.