

# 創傷與欲望的救贖：

## 留學生文學作為自造像——以郭松棻及李永平為例

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### 摘要

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台灣的留學生文學長久以來被視作現代主義文學的一部份，而書寫此類文學的作家們常被批評為太過關注個人瑣事。對此類文學的發展之研究因此仍顯不足。然而，在於梨華和白先勇分別在其作品中成功地型塑了失根的留學生形象後，此類文學歷經不少衍變，展現了豐富多樣的風貌。本論文檢閱「留學生文學」產生的意涵，勘正前人對留學生文學的自我耽溺及流離失所之觀點。

文章首先對留學生文學的產生及發展作一概述，然後以郭松棻和李永平兩位作家為主闡明其作品中對個人情事的關注如何可被視為作家們的自造像。本文論述在此自造像中，社會政治課題並非被漠視，而是以抒情的方式含蓄表現，且被高度美學化。

正因如此，兩位作家將先前以感傷為基調的留學生文學提升到新的高度，並藉此書寫為手段，表述其對文學作為一提供歷史創傷和個人欲望的救贖的藝術形式之理念。回過來說，郭松棻和李永平作品題材的多元與風格的繁複敦促我們重新思索留學生文學作為文學史上的一個斷代術語的侷限。

關鍵詞：留學生文學、郭松棻、李永平

# Redemption from Trauma and Desire:

Literature by Overseas Students as Self-Portraiture Exemplified by Guo Songfen and Li Yongping

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## Abstract

Taiwan's *liuxuesheng wenxue* (literature by overseas students) has long been regarded as an integral part of modernist literature and its practitioners are often criticized for being too self-absorbed in their own personal matters. Consequently, the evolution of this type of literature is little studied. However, after authors like Yu Lihua and Bai Xi-an Yong coined the image of rootless Chinese students through their fictional works, this genre of literature has undergone great change and exhibited a rich diversity. This paper reviews the implications of the term “liuxuesheng wenxue”, redressing the reception of this body of texts as self-indulgent and rootless. The paper first provides an overview of the emergence and development of this type of literature. It then focuses on the works by Guo Songfen and Li Yongping, demonstrating how the concerns for personal matters in their writing can be seen as self-portraiture in which sociopolitical issues are not excluded but lyrically understated and highly aestheticized. By so doing, both authors elevate the earlier sappy literature by overseas students to a new level, appropriating it as a means to illustrate their notions of literature as an art form offering redemption from historical trauma and personal desire. In return, the thematic diversity and stylistic richness of Guo's and Li's works urge us to rethink the limits of literature by overseas students as a period term.

Keywords: Liuxuesheng Wenxue, Guo Songfen, Li Yongping

## Redemption from Trauma and Desire:

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*Liuxuesheng wenxue* 留學生文學, or literature by overseas students, is one of the distinct branches of modern Chinese-language literature. In China, the genealogy can be traced back to the late Qing period, at which time Chinese students began to travel abroad for advanced learning. The list of authors can then be traced through to the Republican period that includes certain works of well-known authors such as Lu Xun 魯迅, Lao She 老舍, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書. In the case of Taiwan, works written by overseas students have a similarly rich history. Although scholars usually hail Yu Lihua 於梨華 as the “pioneer of literature by overseas students from Taiwan”,<sup>1</sup> depictions about student life abroad already existed in several short stories produced during Taiwan’s Japanese period. Zhang Wojun’s 張我軍 “Mai caipiao” 買彩票 (Buying Lottery) and Yang Kui’s 楊逵 “Shimbun haitatsufu” 新聞配達夫 (Newspaper Boy) provide clear examples.<sup>2</sup> The former describes the poverty-stricken student’s distress in Beijing, whereas the latter highlights the misery of a Taiwanese student who joins the proletariat protest to fight against his exploitative employer. Writers like Wu Yongfu 巫永福 and

1 For instance, Chen Fangming 陳芳明 not only identifies the popularity of Yu Lihua’s novels as the starting point of literature by overseas students in Taiwan’s literary field in the 1960s, but also regards this type of writing as a significant branch of modernist literature. See Chen’s *Taiwan xin wenxueshi* 台灣新文學史 (A History of Modern Taiwanese Literature), p. 405. Zhao Shuxia 趙淑俠 also states: “If ‘modernist literature’ is the mainstream of the 1960s, then ‘*liuxuesheng wenyi*’ should be considered a strong tributary.” See Zhao’s “Cong liuxuesheng wenyi tan haiwai de zhishifenzi” (Overseas Intellectuals as Seen through Literature by Overseas Students), *Wenxue yuekan* 文訊月刊 (Wenxun Monthly) 13 (August, 1984): 148.

2 Wu Yongfu’s 巫永福 “Shou yu ti 首與體” (Head and Body, 1933), and Weng Nao’s 翁鬧 “Canxue 殘雪” (Remaining Snow, 1935) are two salient examples.

Weng Nao 翁鬧 portray an alternative image of Taiwanese overseas students, specifically of those who identify closely with the cosmopolitan culture represented by Tokyo. As this trend of literature revived in full swing in the 1960s, a decade in which studying abroad (in the United States in particular) was a common desire among university students, the term “literature by overseas students” was traditionally used to refer to the body of works by those studying in America at that time. With the publication of Bai Xianyong’s 白先勇 *New Yorker series*<sup>3</sup> and Yu Lihua’s *Youjian zonglü, youjian zonglü* 又見棕櫚 又見棕櫚 (Again the Palm Trees), literature by overseas students gradually emerged as a distinct genre in Taiwan’s literary field in the 1960s. The works were typically (though not exclusively) written with tangible sentiments of homesickness deriving from difficulties in integrating into the host localities, and the practitioners of this type of literature were primarily middle-class intellectuals.

Entering the 1970s and 1980s, this type of writing continued to grow and the topics explored by the writers became more varied.<sup>4</sup> This change ushered in a re-definition of this type of literature. In one of her articles, Zhao Shuxia 趙淑俠,<sup>5</sup> a pioneering practitioner of this genre, traced the evolution

3 Bai Xianyong began to compose his “New Yorker series” in the 1960s. Two stories - “Zhexian ji 謫仙記” (The tale of a fallen angel) and “Zhexian yuan 謫仙怨” (Lamentation on a Fallen Angel) - were completed in that decade. Other famous stories about overseas students written by Bai include “*Zhijie zhi si* 芝加哥之死” (Death in Chicago), and “*Anlexiang de yiri* 安樂鄉的一日” (A Day in Pleasantville). However, as Bai dedicated his time to *Taipei ren* 台北人 (Taipei People), the “New Yorker series” was left unfinished. Thus, in the epilogue of *Niuyue ke* 紐約客 (New Yorker), which consisted of a total of six short stories, published in 2007, Bai acknowledged that it had already been such a long time span since he started this series, that he and his publisher had decided to publish the series even though it was incomplete.

4 Examples include Zhang Xiguo’s 張系國 *Di di* (Earth), Nie Hualing’s 聶華苓 *Sangqing yu taohong* 桑青與桃紅 (Mulberry and Peach), as well as works by Liu Daren 劉大任. Entering the 1980s, Guo Songfen 郭松棻 published several works touching upon the diasporic feelings of Taiwanese people in the United States.

5 Unlike most overseas students who went to the United States, Zhao chose to go to Switzerland, and spent more than three decades in Europe. She eventually moved to the United States.

of overseas students' writing since the 1960s. According to her, literature by overseas students began with overseas students' random writings expressing their homesickness, and initially it was called *liuxuesheng wenyi* (留學生文藝). The naming of "wenyi 文藝", she explained, is because the contents were not "serious" (*houzhong* 厚重) enough to be regarded as literature at a time when political matters dominated. Zhao believed that the term 'literature by overseas students' was inadequate to fully refer to the writing by authors living and composing for many years in foreign lands and places, arguing the term "overseas Chinese literature" (*haiwai huawen wenxue* 海外華文文學) emerging in China in the mid 1980s<sup>6</sup> can better describe the situation of Chinese writing by writers living abroad and their thematic diversity. Despite the richness of literature by overseas students, it has principally been perceived as a genre concerning individual sentiments without much depth or innovation. When revisiting this type of writing in the early 1990s, Chi Pangyuan 齊邦媛, for instance, stated that the themes of wandering, distress, and hesitation had become a cliché, urging authors to walk out of this narrow frame to depict larger issues and greater concerns for the general human destiny.<sup>7</sup> Even Bai Xianyong, one of the core writers of this literature, admitted that he and

6 One example mentioned by Zhao Shuxia is the establishment of "Research Center for Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Overseas Chinese Literature at Shantou University in 1985. See Zhao's article "Pijing zhanji, congwu daoyou – Xitan banshiji lai ouzhou huawen wenxue de fazhan 披荊斬棘，從無到有——析談半世紀來歐洲華文文學的發展" (Hacking through Difficulties and Starting from Scratch: On the Development of Chinese Literature in Europe in the Past Half a Century). <http://my.backchina.com/chineseblog/201105/user-275064-message-110755-page-1.html> While "overseas Chinese literature" remains widely-used, scholars recently proposed "new migrant literature" (*xin yimin wenxue* 新移民文學) to refer to the popular writing by Cao Guilin 曹桂林 and Zhou Li 周勵, and also Yan Geling 嚴歌苓 and others. Some of those writers maintain an active relationship with the literary arena in China, and publish in both Chinese and English (such as Yan Geling), offering interesting case studies of increasingly globalized Chinese literature. In a similar vein, "Sinophone" as a theory is gaining stronger currency in academia.

7 See Chi Pangyuan's "Liuxue 'sheng' wenxue – you feichang xin dao pingchang xin 留學生'文學——由非常心到平常心" (Literature of 'Students' Studying Abroad – From a Special Outlook to a Normal Outlook). *Qiannian zhi lei* 千年之淚 (Tears of One Thousand Years). Taipei: Erya, 1990, pp. 149-77.

others “avoided frontal attacks on burning social and political issues” by “turning to the study of the individual psyche”.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the 1990s, Sheng-mei Ma 馬聖美 introduced a social class-sensitive reading to literature by overseas students. He pointed out the middle-class status enjoyed by several major writers of this type of literature such as Bai himself, encouraging them to “step out of the intricate web of their own ‘overseas’ ‘nationalist bourgeois’ condition”<sup>9</sup> so that their writing can more critically engage with postcolonial studies and minority discourse.

The viewpoints of these critics capture the two parameters by which literature by overseas students is often valorized – a preference for socially-engaged literature, and an expectation of the practitioners’ cultural identity. For the former, writers such as Chen Ruoxi 陳若曦 and Zhang Xiguo 張系國 have gradually moved away from the blinkered scope and self-indulgent style usually associated with literature by overseas students. However, those authors’ West-leaning attitude and continued lamentation on their “rootlessness” remained controversial.<sup>10</sup> This paper challenges the two aforementioned preassumed parameters by arguing that the value of some of literature by overseas students lies exactly in its treatment of private matters and resistance against a fixed identity. The texts selected to illustrate that

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8 Bai Xianyong, “The Wandering Chinese: The Theme of Exile in Taiwan Fiction,” *The Iowa Review* 7. 2-3 (Spring/Summer 1974): 205-12.

9 Sheng-mei Ma, “Immigrant Subjectivities and Desires in Overseas Student Literature: Chinese, Postcolonial, or Minority Text?,” in *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*, p. 129.

10 As many of those earlier practitioners of literature by overseas students were involved with the journal *Xiandai wenxue* 現代文學 (Modern Literature), one of the major publication channels for modernist works, the perception of modernist works can generally be applied to literature by overseas students. Ye Shitao 葉石濤, for example, argued that authors surrounding Modern Literature were unable to inherit the legacy of Chinese literature in the 1930s and 1940s. Nor can they associate themselves with Taiwan. They therefore can only absorb modernist ideas from Europe and America. See his *Taiwan wenxue shigang* 台灣文學史綱 (A Historical Outline of Taiwan Literature), pp. 114-15. Sheng-mei Ma’s class-focused reading mentioned in note 9 further questioned those authors’ cultural compradorism.



literature by overseas students can be not only notable aesthetically but also ambitious thematically are works by Guo Songfen 郭松棻 (1938-2005) and Li Yongping 李永平 (b. 1947). Before explaining why these two authors are chosen as the focus of this paper, it is wise to define Taiwan's literature by overseas students first. In this paper, the term is used broadly to refer to works written by authors who were born in Taiwan, or have lived in Taiwan, left Taiwan for further studies abroad, and tackled intercultural encounters (either between Taiwan and their host localities or between Taiwan and their hometowns<sup>11</sup>). As those authors were only overseas students for a short period, and many became the key diasporic Chinese-language writers,<sup>12</sup> I would add other criteria – that the authors must live away from the countries they were born in (such as staying in their host localities) most of the time, and that their works can generally be seen as overseas Chinese literature. The rationale behind focusing on these two authors is threefold. Firstly, both writers have hardly been studied under this category of literature by overseas students,<sup>13</sup> yet they make great cases to argue that not all overseas student literature is self-indulgent, concerned with Chinese roots and the American experience. Secondly, studying both authors together not only enables us to compare their similarities and differences, but also reminds us of Taiwan's dual positions as

11 This is particularly applicable to the case of Li Yongping, as it is in Taiwan that he composed many tales relating to his hometown in Borneo. Some of Li's earlier works written before his arrival in Taipei will be included in this paper. Although they should not be seen as literature by overseas students, they are briefly discussed to elaborate on certain recurrent themes in Li's oeuvre.

12 Due to the word limit of this paper and that most of the practitioners of this literature compose in Chinese, this paper will concentrate on the Chinese-language works only. However, the genre in principle should include works written in non-Chinese languages (such as Japanese and English) too.

13 The limited research on Guo Songfen is largely due to his long absence from Taiwan, whereas Li Yongping is usually studied under the label of *mahua* literature from Taiwan. Recently, researchers have begun to broaden the spectrum of *liuxuesheng wenxue* by including the works of relatively understudied writers such as Cong Su 叢甦, Zhang Xiguo, Li Yongping. Although scholarly attention now covers a much larger number of authors, most discussions still rotate around the themes of wandering (*liulang* 流浪) or exile (*fangzhu* 放逐) in the works.

a place one departs from, as well as a locale to which one sojourns. Thirdly, rather than depicting personal diasporic experience per se, their works display unique historical lyricism in which the authors' common concerns on sociohistorical circumstances are highly aestheticized. Guo Songfen's works contain recollections of Taiwan and China-inspired leftist idealism, whereas Li Yongping's combine his Borneo motifs and cultural longing for an origin. Through textual analysis, I wish to ask the following questions: How did the two writers express their larger sociohistorical concerns in a modernist mode, with which literature by overseas students is often associated? How exactly is memory re-membered and their exilic experience articulated? What are the main features of their writing? What are the limits of literature by overseas students as a period term, and how do the works by these two writers overcome such limits. In what follows, I shall regard Guo's and Li's writing as self-portraiture, through which both authors strive to carve a reliable self-identity and renegotiate their own past.

### The Alienation of an Artist

Though he was absent from Taiwan for a long time, Guo Songfen's works are often related to his childhood memories of growing up in early postwar Taiwan. In real life, he gave up his doctoral studies to become involved with student protests defending Diaoyutai Island in 1971. It was not until 1983 that he began to publish fictional works in newspapers and journals in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Quite a few of his works written in the 1980s touch upon the tragic February 28th Incident of 1947. However, rather than composing emotionally-charged accusative works, or narrating the reality plainly, Guo internalizes the trauma, and then re-tells it with sharp insight into the complex human psyche. His works dealing with issues surrounding history and memory are mostly full of philosophical lyricism in which the



protagonist's mental change is exhaustively recorded. Two common self-projections in Guo's works are the image of an alienated artist and that of a reclusive intellectual. Guo's "Lun Xiezu 論寫作" (On Writing) provides a good basis on which to gain insight into his thematic preference (spiritual estrangement) and literary style (political/historical lyricism). Starting with two short quotes from Nietzsche 尼采 and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke 芥川龍之介, "On Writing" prepares the reader for a glimpse of the artist/writer protagonist's mental struggle. The protagonist Lin Zhixiong 林之雄 is a US-residing writer haunted by his past memory as a painter's apprentice in Taipei. Through the narrator's recollections, we learn that Lin strives to write a story about a woman at a window whom he saw accidentally about a decade earlier, while in Taipei on his way back from work. Yet, although Lin starts writing about this mysterious woman, the piece remains unfinished as he leaves for New York before finishing it. This encounter with the nameless woman haunts Lin. He tries to escape, but in so doing finds himself keener to find a pure form for his literary articulation. As his imagination grows more dominant, Lin fails to strike a balance between his aesthetic ideals and reality, and is taken to a mental hospital. He suffers from aphasia, falling into an illusionary world in which he sees "many reborn selves" (460).<sup>14</sup> It is only when he embraces his mother when she comes to visit that he regains his language abilities and "memories again become connected and his tender feelings [about the woman] thus awakens" (509). It is also in the embrace that "mother, the rented attic, small of picture mounting, the image of Buddistava, the woman by the window, poverty, happiness, motive for writing ... collide and coalesce" (505). Ironically, seen from the eyes of a Korean War veteran who is also a

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14 *Guo Songfen ji* 郭松棻集 [Collected Works of Guo Songfen] (Taipei: Qianwei, 1993). All quotations are from this book unless otherwise stated. The English translation is mostly based on *Running Mother and Other Stories* edited by John Balcom.

patient in the hospital, Lin's embracing his mother reminds him of the U.S. soldiers' Iwo Jima landing during World War II, a memory that he would rather not remember. This adds a sense of historical irony to this otherwise fairly personal story.

As the title suggests, "On Writing" can be read as a story exhibiting Guo's view on literary creation. In other words, the face that Lin Zhixiong strikes to capture is not necessarily the face of the mysterious woman or his mother's. Rather, it can be interpreted as a subjective self-portrait of an artist, be it that of the fictional character Lin Zhixiong or of the author Guo Songfen himself. This mental state is an extremely isolated one, as no one around Lin seems to understand his artistic pursuit or his obsession with his past in Taiwan. The key for Lin to rekindle his lost memory is his mother. A similar thematic device is also seen in Guo's "Benpao de muqin 奔跑的母親" (Running Mother), a story that Guo rewrote a few times like "On Writing". In the 1984 version, the narrator gives his mother a tight hug, and the whole story is filled with homesickness. However, in the 1993 version, the narrator's affectionate recollection of his deceased mother is tinted with a sense of guilt for spending little time with her while she was alive. The yearning for motherly love is a symbol of the narrator's spiritual vitality as he feels "as one's body and heart become exhausted, the years one enjoys being with one's mother seem remote" (24). Through the conversation with his psychiatrist friend Liao 廖, the narrator is able to confront his ambivalence toward his mother. On the one hand, he very much wishes to escape from his mother, and his life in Taiwan. Yet on the other hand, he is constantly worried that his mother "will run away again" (19), a dream he used to have when growing up. Unable to cope with his mother's remarriage, the narrator treats her coldly. He even "has to rely on recollecting beautiful things from childhood in order to compensate for his disaffection with his mother" (14). However, Liao reminds the narrator

that the person who runs away is the narrator himself, claiming “because of the tangled mother-son relationship that the world is full of brilliance” (22). Hearing Liao’s “diagnosis”, the narrator suspects that the orphaned Liao is referring to his own feelings. The narrator then tries to make sense as to why Liao would have such a profound yearning for a mother’s love. As Liao is the person who remains in Taiwan to take care of the narrator’s aging mother, Liao somewhat represents the ideal son’s role that the narrator fails to play in a mother-son relationship. Consequently, the narrator has to keep confronting the haunting sense of guilt, hoping eventually his recollections of his mother can be without “the slightest remorse or regret” (27). In the rest of the story, the narrator indulges himself further in his recollection of his growing up in postwar Taiwan. Gradually he no longer dreams of the B-29 bombers, but more frequently of his mother, implying that he finally is able to reach a reconciliatory relationship with his mother, and with his past.

Another of Guo’s stories sharing the recurrent theme of self-searching and self-reconciliation is “Xuemang 雪盲” (Snow Blind). In this work the protagonist Xingluan 幸巒 embarks on an odyssey spiritual journey, but the source of inspiration is no longer the mother’s role, but that of the Chinese author Lu Xun 鲁迅. The story opens with a poetic depiction about how a school master pushes a little boat into the sea at dusk. As it unfolds, we learn that this school master was an old friend of Xingluan’s mother during wartime, and it is through him that Xingluan got to know Lu Xun’s works. Unrequited young love and suffocating atmosphere made Xingluan want to escape from Taiwan. He later becomes a university professor teaching Lu Xun in a desert state in America. The scenery of the desert often made him fall into a dazzling state in which his youth in Taiwan, student life in America, and Lu Xun’s fictional world all merge together. For instance, looking at his lover Yongyue 咏月 reminds Xingluan of the image of the young soft-hearted

widow Wu Ma 吳媽 in Lu Xun's *Ah Q Zhengzhuan* 阿Q 正傳 (The True Story of Ah Q). When bidding goodbye to Yongyue in Arizona, Xingluan recalls his tender feelings for his mother, and also his adoration for the neighbour's orphaned daughter Miniang 米娘. Through Xingluan's jumpy memories, the school master's affair (with Miniang) and his reminiscences of his deceased elder brother, as well as Xingluan's reactions to his mother and his secret love for Miniang, we are fragmentedly shown the melancholic and illusionary state of Xingluan's mind.

### A Socialist Loner

The artist Lin Zhixiong's sense of solitude can be traced back to Guo's earlier work. "Qiuyu 秋雨" (Autumn Rains), a short piece detailing his relationship with the liberalist intellectual Yin Haiguang 殷海光 (1919-1969) provides an excellent example of this view. In this work, Guo recollects the time when he studied under Yin, who urged the young people (including Guo) not to take action imprudently and without any substantial ideological backup. Through mourning the loss of Yin as a spiritual mentor, Guo expresses his sense of helplessness and solitude as a progressive thinker during a period marred by Nationalist control. The lonely idealist later serves as an archetype from which the protagonists in many of Guo's later works derive. The artist in "On Writing", as well as the school master and his deceased elder brother in "Snow Blind" are all such cases illustrating the spiritual isolation that the liberal and reform-oriented intellectuals felt in the colonial or early postwar Taiwan. For the schoolmaster, even though he makes great efforts to adjust to the changed political context - from speaking elegant Japanese to reciting Dr Sun Yat-sen's will without "unpleasant retroflex (Mandarin) pronunciation" (139) - he remains disillusioned. Estranged from his marriage and repressed sexually by choosing to stay with his wife instead of his beloved

Miniang, he turns to alcohol for comfort. At one point, when bumping into Xingluan, he simply looks “terrified and ashamed” (171). Xingluan’s Japanese colleague in America seems equally discontented. Lacking the courage to pursue his dream of opening an icecream shop, he leads a dispirited and alcohol-addicted life. He is even somewhat sarcastic, telling Xingluan that it is perhaps more sensible to stay in the U.S. as Xingluan can never teach Lu Xun in his own country. In addition to these two characters who represent the loss of idealism, the theme of disillusionment and spiritual paralysis in “Snow Blind” is conveyed through Xingluan’s self-identification with Lu Xun’s anomaly and pathetic fictional character Kong Yiji 孔乙己. Everytime Xingluan finishes teaching the story of Kong Yiji, his legs would become numb “as if he suffers from a physical disorder” (181). He would imagine himself as Kong Yiji, bracing the expanding sands with his “deformed heroic posture” (182).

Lu Xun’s satiric depiction of Kong Yiji evidently resonates with Xingluan’s self-mockery of his ambition as a teacher and as a socialist follower. He comes to realize that his students “do not need Lu Xun after all. They in fact cannot even speak a simple sentence in Chinese well” (182). As for his youthful ambition – to put a national flag on top of Nanjing’s city wall – it is simply a “lingering promise” (185) that is too late to be materialized. Xingluan’s leftist idealism and this story’s intertextuality, drawn as it is from Lu Xun and Zhang Ailing’s 張愛玲 socially-engaged essay “Zhongguo de riye 中國的日夜” (The Days and Nights of China), easily make “Snow Blind” a work expressing affinity with China. However, such an interpretation is an over-simplification and neglects to consider the lyricism that is abundant in Guo’s writing. I would argue that the desolate secularism in Zhang’s essay, in which the narrator silently wishes that her fellow Chinese countrymen would “sink all the way to the bottom” (174), deserves attention because it serves as

an effective device to contrast Xingluan's degraded ideals and aforementioned self-mockery. In short, the references to Zhang Ailing and Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji", as well as other characters in this story (such as the schoolmaster and his elder brother Chen Kunnan 陳昆南 who commits suicide, and Xingluan's Japanese colleague) all commonly point to Xingluan's degraded mentality. The cause of this inability to act is related to his experience of growing up in early postwar Taiwan. On the one hand, Xingluan wishes to escape the suffocating atmosphere and has no intention to return to Taiwan. On the other hand, he cannot help revisiting his past and missing his mother. In this regard, "Snow Blind" is a self-dialectical work dissecting the intellectual's mental isolation. It is thematically similar to "On Writing", but perhaps more autobiographical.<sup>15</sup>

The spiritual plight encountered by Xingluan is also found in Guo's 1986 work "Cao 草" (Clover), a story about the encounters between the protagonist (a philosophy student) referred by the second person pronoun "you" and his friend (a male theology school student) addressed by the third person pronoun "he". This work is an extended version of Guo's shorter piece "Hanxiucao 含羞草" (Minosa), published in 1983. Comparing the two versions, we will find that "Clover" is much more detached in tone and more poetic stylistically. By way of example, consider that in the earlier version, the encounter between the two young men is narrated straightforwardly as "The first time I saw him is by the Mississippi River" (545). Yet in the later version, the opening sentence "When you saw him [the theology student], your memory was stirred – you seemed to have met before" (187) is much more expressive. It also foreshadows the spiritual bond between the protagonist and his friend. This theology school student can in fact be taken as the protagonist's alter self,

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15 For more details about Guo Songfen's spiritual pursuit and interest in socialism, see Jian Yiming's 簡義明 interview in Guo Songfen's *Jinghun* 驚婚 (A Marriage Phobic). Taipei: Ink, 2012, pp. 175-245.



because it is through him that the protagonist's memories are evoked. That is, "Clover" can be interpreted as the second person's ("you") soliloquy with his alter self - the more alienated, fragile, yet idealistic "he". Through the dialectical relationship between "you" and "he", "Clover" creates a montage in which the protagonist ("you") can freely switch between his tender affection for Taiwan and his overseas student's experience in America. The protagonist's past and present experience abroad thus become connected.

Seen from the perspective of "you", the calmness of his friend reminds him of a young intern doctor he encountered earlier in Taiwan, as both have attractive yet melancholic eyes, pale and long fingers. In addition, they are commonly more at ease with being alone than interacting with people or the outside world. And the theology student's fondness of taking long walks in an empty field in the middle west of America is also almost identical to the young Taiwanese doctor's keenness to lean against the railings in the hospital's corridor and look down at the empty ground. It is through this unique friendship that the protagonist gradually starts to reconcile with his Taiwan-related past – his unsuccessful and alcoholic father, and the silent intern doctor whose "life exhausts in his pale body everytime a patient dies in the hospital" (210). Regardless of whether the narrator is recollecting his growing up in postwar Taiwan or reflecting on his life in America, words like "silence", "loneliness", "self-destruction", and "emptiness" appear several times, making this story a tale of the exilic mentality of overseas students. Toward the end of the story, the protagonist tries to look at the world from the perspective of his theology friend. While he is finally able to experience epiphanic joy when appreciating a bleak wintry landscape, he learns that his friend is incarcerated on suspicion of sedition. This treatment of the white terror of postwar Taiwan is remarkably understated. By placing a focus on dream and spirituality, and also on the vastness of America's desert landscape, "Clover" is a lyrical piece

in which political trauma is highly aestheticized, and bodily confinement transcended. Indeed, even though the theology student remains motionless, the narrator can sense that his friend “has already begun to travel” for his dream. In this regard, the theology student’s imprisonment is not necessarily a pessimistic finale, but an ultimate fulfillment of his metaphysical pursuit that transforms the otherwise humdrum life into something glorious and meaningful.

### Toward an Individual and Gendered History

In addition to carving a spiritual image of the intellectual/artist’s mental state, Guo’s writing is often intertwined with Taiwan’s early postwar years, a tendency already detectable in “Clover”. “Snow Blind” is no exception. In this work, Taiwan’s Japanese period and early postwar period are connected through the protagonist reading Lu Xun, a book belonging to the schoolmaster’s elder brother who is part of an intellectual elite in colonial Taiwan. However, it is in works such as “Yueyin 月印” (Moon Seal)<sup>16</sup> that Guo’s local concerns for Taiwan become most obvious. Set against the February 28th Incident, “Moon Seal” depicts the love between the Taiwanese couple Tiemin 鐵敏 and Wenhui 文惠. Injured in the war, Tiemin gradually recovers with the care of his new wife Wenhui. The story is mainly narrated with a focus on Wenhui, and the sociopolitical context is pushed to the background. Rather than describing the repressive postwar period, Guo details how Wenhui’s passion for life gradually cools and how she comes to realize the loneliness of human life. Caught between the February 28th Incident and taking care of Tiemin domestically, Wenhui’s dream of leading a simple married life becomes a luxury. Worried about Tiemin’s health, she even

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16 Collected in *Benpao de muqin* 奔跑的母親 [Running Mother] (Taipei: Maitian, 2002), pp.15-112.

declines physical intimacy with Tiemin. Once Tiemin gets better, he devotes himself to leftwing activities and keeps this part of his life to himself. This further enhances Wenhui's sense of solitude.

Rather than keeping an eye on Tiemin's secret box of banned books as requested, she reports them at a police station; this leads to Tiemin being detained and later executed. As a kind-hearted and innocent young woman, Wenhui never understands Tiemin's death, and only wonders what difference it would make if she were pregnant with Tiemin's child. Wenhui's losing the opportunity to become a mother implies Tiemin's socialist-inspired yearning for a nation is after all an unfeasible Utopia. It is interesting that Guo eschews narrating the general political discontent in early postwar Taiwan directly, partly by depicting Tiemin's interest in socialism and the couple's tender feelings for their Japanese teacher, and partly by emphasizing Wenhui's female viewpoint which rotates mostly around personal love and "small" happiness. The ending in which Wenhui ponders about becoming a mother is ingenious, as it not only indicates the high cost of political ideals at that time, but also highlights the gentleness of a woman's inner world. Similar to Xingluan in "Snow Blind" who continuously revisits his past memory about Taiwan, Wenhui keeps on recollecting her sweet teenage years in order to distract herself from a lonely existence. But no matter how hard they try, memories are too slippery for them to cling on to. Consequently, they either suffer spiritual paralysis or continue weaving an empty dream into their mundane daily existence.

In several of Guo's fictional works, males symbolize Taiwan's traumatic early postwar history. Lin Zhixiong's inability to speak in "On Writing", and the sudden disappearance of the narrator's father in "Running Mother" both imply Taiwan's repressed past during the White Terror period. Quite opposite to this, the females and especially the mother's love are often endowed with

a redemptive capability, adding a gendered perspective to Guo's writing.<sup>17</sup> If "Moon Seal" is a gendered "history from below", then "Jinye xingguang canlan 今夜星光燦爛" (Brightly Shine the Stars Tonight), which accentuates the personal feelings of the characters, marks an attempt to shy away from the grand narrative and revisit the historical trauma with compassion. The tendency of downplaying national history and accentuating personal feelings is already seen in Guo's earlier works such as "Xiangyang 向陽" (Facing the Sun). Centering on an intellectual couple Nanhui 楠輝 and Yanglan 仰蘭, the book describes the lovers' frequent verbal fighting and encodes the political message. For instance, the lovers "stick firmly to their own camps without making the slightest compromise", they wish to "live in tyranny", and they each "follow their fascisti" (38). Nanhui's hot temper is referred to as "without democratic will" (47). The political implications lurking behind the story makes the personality conflicts between Nanhui and Yanglan an allegory of the ideological conflicts between the Communist and KMT parties, as well as that between native Taiwanese and the mainlanders.<sup>18</sup> Yet what is truly dominant is not the different "isms", but chances in life. Only when Yanglan realizes that thinking offers no solution does she begin to feel freer. She gives Nanhui a bird,<sup>19</sup> but Nanhui is puzzled by what he should do with it. Yet the

17 Guo's "Luo jiu hua 落九花" (The Fall of Nine Flowers) published in *Yinke 印刻* (Ink) 1:11 (July, 2005) is an effective example of Guo's gendered historical perspective. See Huang Qifeng 黃啟峰's *Heliu li de yueyin – Guo Songfen yu Li Yu xiaoshuo zonglun 河流裡的月印——郭松棻與李渝小說綜論* (Moon Seal in a River – A General Analysis of the Works by Guo Songfen and Li Yu), pp. 169-77, and Wei Weili 魏偉莉's *Yixiang yu mengtu – Guo Songfen sixiang yu wenxue yanjiu 異鄉與夢土——郭松棻思想與文學研究* (Foreign Country and Dream Land – A Study of Guo Songfen's Thoughts and Writing), pp. 275-80.

18 In the story, the male protagonist Nanhui is a son of a high-ranking general, whereas the female protagonist Yanglan seems to be from a Taiwanese family as her mother is extremely upset when learning of Nanhui's background.

19 Birds are sometimes associated with emotions in Guo's stories. In "Running Mother", a myna symbolizes the protagonist's bereavement of his grandfather. In "Yuehao 月暎" (Wailing Moon), canaries represent a comforting strength for the widowed woman to deal with her husband's death and betrayal. But in "Facing the Sun", the bird is used as a sign of self-representation. The bird in the cage resembles Nanhui's self-imprisonment in his thoughts.

bird's unexpected presence mysteriously releases Nanhui from being a prisoner of his mind, as if all the beliefs filling his mind "flap wings and fly away" (51). Overwhelmed by the power of "chances" in life, Nanhui no longer cares much about his political beliefs. Instead, he forgets to argue with Yanglan and starts to enjoy the simple pleasures in life such as appreciating the warmth of the winter sun while with his child. Their bright house, which is in stark contrast to their previous damp and moldy residences, further reinforces the couple's inner change. In the end, the narrative switches to the first person, as if Guo, through the couple, comments on the futility of political struggle. It concludes "Since the Republican period, the republican ideals boasted by each party do not surpass the winter warmth we enjoy. The wars over half of the century do not create a true republic in China, but only waste people's blood because all parties look down on the third power" (53-54). By using the plural pronoun "we", the story makes a collective pacifist appeal, rendering the political promise as merely an empty fight in which the essence of life is distorted and forgotten.

This subversion of hyperbolic political discourses is even more evidently shown in "Brightly Shine the Stars Tonight". Under Guo's pen, the controversial high-profile political figure Chen Yi 陳儀 (1883-1950) is brought to life with a humanistic touch. He is no longer an influential military leader, but an ordinary person who feels trapped amid the swirl of history. He in fact is not much different from those killed during the February 28th Incident, as he is also a victim of political dispute. The story opens with Chen's recollections of his time under detention. His political ups and downs are seen as the results of the tangled power plays, while the hyperbolic discourse that claims the KMT's retreat to Taiwan was a fulfillment of the people's desire is seen to be ludicrous. By deliberately leaving Chen's merits and faults out of the story, Guo reduces historical truth to a humanistic level

emphasizing individual self-reflection. In the small room where Chen is kept, there is a long mirror which constantly shows his haggard reflection and his useless life. Looking at himself in front of the mirror gradually becomes an important activity for Chen, turning the story into a psychological portrait of one's search for an identity. Oscillating between his glorious past and the current disgraceful situation, Chen struggles to know who he is really. Over the past three decades, Chen "has never felt he owns his life for a moment". Rather, he feels he is "swirled into the situation and chained to his work" (235).<sup>20</sup> It is only in detention that he has the opportunity to review his life. He is more ambitious than this, as he strives to "sculpt an ideal outline for himself in the mirror", and "patiently awaits for his own birth in the seclusion room in Taipei" (245-6). He is more interested in the brand new self-image in the mirror of which he has full control than recollecting his past. It is only in this state that he can free himself from reality and reach an inner peace. With the date of his execution getting closer and closer, Chen Yi's dream of a new self grows wilder. He indulges himself in dreaming and thinking of his wife; this is totally against his previous belief that soldiers should never dream or feel attached to personal feelings. He leaves no will, as if to resist against the ephemeral and nightmarish nature of history. Before his body falls to the ground, his reflection walks out of the mirror, symbolizing a triumph of individuality over the grand narrative and an unperturbed transcendence over the mortal physical body. At that very moment before his death, he recalls the year when his wife just gave birth to their baby girl. It is through the emphasis on this extremely intimate, warm, and joyous moment in his life that historical violence is subverted and is endowed with a potential for catharsis.

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20 The story is collected in *Running Mother*, pp. 219-76.



## Representing the Other

Similar to Guo Songfen's dual geographical foci (Taiwan and America), Li Yongping's writing is largely concerned with two locales – Borneo and Taiwan. Li first arrived in Taiwan in 1967 to study for a bachelors degree, and then left for the U. S. to undertake graduate studies before finally settling down in Taiwan after his graduation. While working as an assistant in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the National Taiwan University, Li caught the attention of critics with his short story “Lazi fu 拉子婦” (A Dayak Woman), which deals with the fate of aboriginal women in Malaysia. In the 1980s, he generated fame for his mastery of the Chinese language as exemplified by *Jiling chunqiu* 吉陵春秋 (The Jiling Chronicles) and later surprised the literary field with his lengthy and obscure *Haidong qing* 海東青 (The Eagle Haidong Qing). Following this, Li embarked upon a series of writings based on the encounters between an adult male narrator and a girl named Zhu Ling 朱鶯. After publishing a few Taipei tales, Li returned to write about Borneo. Both his personal experience and literary works show a trajectory of diaspora, or in his own term *qitou* 迢迢,<sup>21</sup> meaning drifting or wandering. The two closely interwoven themes – drifting and yearning for a reliable origin/selfhood – play a pivotal part in Li's literary oeuvre. This pursuit takes several different forms, from the attention to racial difference in Li's earlier works, to his obsession with Chinese language, and to his recent re-engagement with his childhood memories in Borneo.

Before composing “A Dayak Woman”, Li already shows sensitivity to racial situations in Malaysia. His *Poluozhou zhi zi* 婆羅洲之子 (Son of Borneo), though not a text belonging to literature by overseas students, helps understand Li's racial concerns. “Son of Borneo”, which celebrates racial

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21 It is the title of the collection of Li's selected works.

harmony, has been criticized for disregarding the British colonial context, risking “manifesting the racial consciousness constructed by the British colonisers”, and echoing the official racial discourse of the post-colonial government.<sup>22</sup> It is true that Li’s depiction of the indigenous population and the Chinese are fairly stereotypical, yet taking the ending simply as seconding the communalism promoted by the British would exclude the possibility for an idealized answer Li might give to questions surrounding racial difference. We should note that Borneo at that time was relatively marginalized as opposed to the more dominant Malaya Peninsula. Li Yongping’s writing about racial co-existence from a regional perspective demonstrates that the native Borneo culture/identity is prior to any specific racial background. By characterizing the protagonist Da Lu Shi 大祿士 as half Chinese and half Dayak, this work suggests the possibility for racial hybridity. Yet Da Lu Shi’s exclusion from taking part in aboriginal rituals makes such a hybrid identity difficult as inhabitants in Sarawak were not allowed to have both identities by law. Hence, the multiracial integration celebrated in this work, though in line with the official propaganda, ironically signifies racial difference and the identity crisis of people of mixed descent.

Li’s humanism and optimism concerning race evolve to insightful contemplations upon racial difference and cultural survival in “A Dayak Woman”. *Lazi* is a name used by Chinese people in East Malaysia to refer to indigenous Dayak women - the term itself contains a negative connotation in which the aborigines are considered uncultivated. Through the teenage Chinese boy narrator, the tragic story of Lazi (the narrator’s aunt) is brought

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22 Lim Khay-Thiong 林開忠, “‘Yizu’ de zaixian? Cong Li Yongping de ‘Poluozhou zhi zi’ yu ‘laizi fu’ tanqi 「異族」的再現? 從李永平的《婆羅洲之子》與《拉子婦》談起” (Representation of ‘the Other Race’?), *Chongxie mahua wenxue shi lunwen ji* 重寫馬華文學史論文集 (Rewriting *mahua* Literary History: A Collection of Essays on Chinese Malaysian Literature), pp. 99-100 (Puli: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, National Chi Nan University, 2004).

to life. The Dayak woman's aboriginal background makes her the object of insults and contempt from the boy's family even though she can speak the Chinese language. The boy's uncle later marries a Chinese woman and mercilessly sends the Dayak woman and the children back to the forest. The Dayak woman later dies in a desperate state. Without a proper name, the Dayak woman can be read as a monolithic collective for aboriginal women. She is underprivileged in terms of gender and race. As a woman, she suffers from the patriarchal system of the Chinese society into which she marries. As an aborigine, she is faced with discrimination from the more dominant Chinese people. Most of the female relatives in the boy's family are pleased when learning that the boy's uncle is going to marry a young Chinese woman. The Dayak woman's misery indicates the hostility of cross-racial interaction in Malaysian society. In this story, both aboriginal men and women are portrayed prejudicially. The Chinese believe the aborigines are physically strange, and still lead a savage life. Through the amicability the boy and his sister show to their aunt, Li explores how two racial groups gradually come to know each other. As such, this story is about how the "noble" Chinese finally accept the aborigines, in addition to the more obvious reading of a Dayak woman's suffering.

In this story, Li also explores the possibility of maintaining one's ethnic pureness and cultural features without condemning the weaker race as "the despicable other". The encounter between the Dayak woman and her Chinese father-in-law highlights the racial tension and the anxiety caused by the inter-racial encounters. Despite the Dayak woman graciously serving her parents-in-law tea, her father-in-law remains unimpressed because she does not kneel down. Even after her unfortunate death, her Chinese family withhold their emotions because mourning for aborigines is considered undignified for Chinese people. The ending suggests that there is still a long way to go before

a mutual cross-racial respect and understanding can be reached. Li however hints that there is some hope, as the narrator and his sister seem remorseful for not expressing their love toward their aunt while she was alive. The Dayak woman in this story can also be considered an emblem of energetic maternal culture or the origin of life or a motherland. Her eventual death demonstrates the loss of the nurturing (Borneo) mother. With the narrator's uncle returning to the Chinese family clan, the ending of this story signifies that only by returning to one's origins can one avoid the danger of being assimilated and maintain an identity. Superficially, the Dayak woman's married life is a struggle for cultural survival. However, her marginalized existence indicates the overseas Chinese difficulty of maintaining their cultural heritage. Li's background inevitably creates a dilemma for him – the geographical China is too distant to return to, and the maternal culture represented by the Dayak woman is too fragile to embrace.

This predicament of yearning for a mother(land) is also evident in Li's other two early works - "Weicheng de muqin 圍城的母親" (Mother in a Besieged City, 1970) and "Heiya yu taiyang 黑鴉與太陽" (Crows and Sun, 1973). Set in a Chinese migrant society, "Mother in a Besieged Town" describes how a Chinese mother gets on a boat with her child to escape their hometown which is beleaguered by the rebellious aborigines. The mother and son are clueless about where they are heading, speculating they would end up in China (Tangshan 唐山) if they continue moving toward the north. Yet, eventually the mother decides to return to the besieged town instead of heading north. This hints that the mother (overseas Chinese) comes to identify the town where they have been living as their home, although heading back brings with it the potential danger of being assimilated. In the text, the endangered culture is that of the Malaysian aborigines, as ultimately the aborigines' riot is quelled. At the same time, this suggests that the option

for the (overseas) Chinese (mother and son) to return to China is closed. In “Crows and Sun”, the racial circumstances are overturned. The Chinese boy’s mother is raped by local guerrilla soldiers, and the boy’s paternal tablet destroyed. These symbolize not only the danger but also the loss of an ideal Chinese mother. The boy’s personal story can be regarded as an indication of the Malaysian Chinese’ collective loss of their cultural purity. The three texts together point to the racial relationship between the Chinese and the aborigines, demonstrating Li’s constant pursuit of a (Chinese) cultural origin and the recognition of the inevitable loss of the Chinese mother culture.

### Spiritual Degeneration and Battling with Time

Li’s meditation upon cultural origins persists in “Wanfu xiang li 萬福巷裡” (In the Wanfu Alley), the first story in *The Jiling Chronicles*. Similar to “Crows and Sun”, this work accounts the fall of a (Chinese) woman. In this story, Li’s yearning for China is more abstractly shown, as the locale Jiling refers more to the motif of longing for a fostering mother than to a specific place.<sup>23</sup> The embodiment of this longing is Changsheng 長笙, the story’s nearly perfect female protagonist. Unfortunately, her beauty is not a blessing but a curse costing her her life and bringing misfortune to people around her. Not long after she is born, her whole family die of cholera. Adopted by Liu Laoniang 劉老娘, Changsheng later marries Liu’s son Liu Laoshi 劉老實, who owns a coffin shop. Changsheng’s innocence is under threat as Liu’s shop is located amidst brothels. On a sacred evening of Buddhist worshiping, a holligan (Sun Sifang 孫四房) sexually abuses Changsheng, creating dramatic tension between holiness and moral degradation. This incident leads to Changsheng’s

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23 It can refer to Gujin, a small town in Sarawak where Li Yongping came from, or somewhere in Taiwan. Critic such as Yu Guangzhong 余光中 suggested the setting might be in the southeast area of China.

suicide and Liu Laoshi's insanity. Changsheng's death is not surprising, Li seems to have established a pattern of the degeneration of the motherly characters in his earlier works. In this work, the fall of women is shown not only through Changsheng but also via Liu Laoniang who is left to drift alone. Li admitted that this character is inspired by his childhood memory about a mysterious hunched-back elderly woman he encountered in the boisterous market of Gujin in Borneo,<sup>24</sup> illustrating a close link between Li's personal experience and his fictional writing.

If we take Li's account – that Jiling is a symbol, and “chunqiu” a fable.<sup>25</sup> – into consideration, then *The Jiling Chronicles* can be seen as a story about searching for an origin, or a nurturing mother(land). However, the tragedies of Liu Laoniang, Changsheng, and the Dayak woman imply the paradox of Li's mother(land) yearning. The more eagerly he attempts to fulfill such a pursuit, the more disappointed he feels as the motherly figures are frequently hurt or insulted. Li's subsequent novels about Taiwan, especially the degeneration of Taiwanese society after its economic success, further demonstrate this irony. In *The Eagle Haidong Qing*, which exposes the grotesque scenes of Taipei in the late 1980s, Li consigns his cultural longing to an eight-year old Taiwanese girl Zhu Ling 朱鶯.<sup>26</sup> The whole novel centers on an overseas Chinese male academic (Jin Wu 靳五) and his wandering in Quanjing (a fictive representation of Taipei) with Zhu Ling. Wandering is a crucial theme in this novel. Jin Wu strolls all night long in Taipei rather than going home. Similarly, his Taiwanese

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24 *Qitou: Li Yongping zixuan ji* 1968-2002 迺迺：李永平自選集1968-2002 (Drifting: Self Selected Works of Li Yongping 1968-2002), p. 32.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

26 *The Eagle Haidong Qing* is the first book of the “Zhu Ling trilogy”, followed by *Zhu Ling manyou xianjing* 朱鶯漫遊仙境 (Zhu Ling in Wonderland) and *Yuxue feifei* 雨雪霏霏 (The Falling of Rain and Snow).



friend An Lexin 安樂新 claims he is “homeless”,<sup>27</sup> and enjoys singing songs in the Taiwanese dialect to express his yearning for a/his mother.<sup>28</sup> However, walking in Taipei is both unpleasant and dangerous, as Taipei is depicted as a decadent, sinful place where the female characters (such as Zhu Ling and other teenage girls like Yaxing 亞星, Zhu Li 朱鸞, and Zhang Tong 張滂) are the object of men’s lustful desires. All the schoolgirls are portrayed without distinct individuality. Their physical look is analogous - clean and naïve faces with short hair. Their fates are not dissimilar - Zhu Li was badly treated by two Japanese men, and Yaxing merely disappears.

Likewise, men are reprinted as commonly licentious. For instance, in the chapter “Yilu chunhuo 一爐春火” (A Stove of Lustful Fire), a group of a middle-aged university professors, including even Jin Wu, gather together to share lascivious jokes such as about the old Japanese men’s paedophilia (741). Interestingly, both American and Japanese men are portrayed negatively either as womanizers or as libidinous brothel frequenters, creating an extra layer for the novel as an indirect critique of American and Japanese economic exploitation and cultural imperialism. The image of innocent girls is also found in *Zhu Ling in Wonderland*, although the pace of *Zhu Ling in Wonderland* is lighter (for instance, the girls are usually with flying hair, and they would make a flip flop sound when walking). Nevertheless, their degeneration remains inevitable. Compared to Li’s earlier female protagonists, Li seems to regress more and more with time, with his main female character turning younger and younger. However, the more Li reverts, the further he departs from his imagined origin, as he can never stop the passing of time. As a Malaysian-born Chinese searching for symbols of China in post-1949 Taipei,

27 *The Eagle Haidong Qing*, pp. 167-82. All the quotations are from the 1992 version published by *Lianhe wenxue* (Unitas).

28 This motif of mother searching re-appears in the text several times.

Jin Wu's yearning is never easy. When understanding that the signs of cultural origin would eventually be contaminated, he can only wish at least it will not happen too quickly. Hence, unlike his lewd colleagues, Jin Wu looks at his girl companions with patronizing feelings and tenderness, as if to try to stop them from stepping into the corrupted adult world. Similar to *The Jiling Chronicles*, the setting of this novel is ambiguous although the subtitle specifies Taipei. As Li mentions in the preface: "the city described in the work is very likely to appear in every single corner and town of the ancient Chinese mainland...", *The Eagle Haidong Qing* therefore can be interpreted as a prediction foreseeing the decline of a pure cultural imagination. Zhu Ling's potential degeneration and becoming worldly further epitomize this situation.

The sense of anxiety about Zhu Ling's growing old and worldly is shown through several mentions of the time. For example, one day when Jin Wu and his girl companion Yaxing are caught in a traffic jam near the National Assembly Hall, Jin Wu compares the time shown on Yaxing's watch and that shown on the big clock hung outside the Hall (486). Yaxing informs Jin Wu that the Assembly Hall's clock has been stopped at 4:05pm for several years, which not only signifies the stagnancy and lack of efficiency of the KMT government but also Jin Wu's race against time hoping Zhu Ling or Yaxing would not enter adulthood rapidly. Throughout the novel, especially from the third part of the work, there are several scenarios in which Jin Wu is peeping at the time using other people's watches. He can not help but show his uneasiness regarding the passing of time. Once, while wandering on the street, Jin Wu encounters one of his female students, who is surprised to discover Jin Wu does not wear a watch. Jin Wu's not wearing a watch once again suggests a passive resistance to the fleeting of time. From these scenarios related to the passing of time, the link between Jin Wu's longing for an origin and the innocence of young girls becomes clear. Jin Wu more than once

checks the time from Zhu Ling's (and sometimes Yaxing's) watch, whereas Zhu Ling is more interested in space than time, as she enjoys testing Jin Wu's geographical knowledge. The temporal anxiety and spatial inquiry both infer Jin Wu's nostalgia in both time and space. They also indicate Jin Wu's wish to go against time is highly related to his experience of displacement.

*The Eagle Haidong Qing* foretells the impossibility for young girls to “grow up properly”,<sup>29</sup> which then suggests pursuing a reliable cultural origin in corrupted Taiwanese society can barely be materialized. It covers three seasons (autumn, winter, and spring) of Taipei, while *Zhu Ling in Wonderland* is only about summer, usually the happy season for young schoolgirls like Zhu Ling to enjoy their carefree vacation. Yet in *Zhu Ling in Wonderland*, summer becomes the season that young girls would lose their innocence. While wandering around in the boisterous red-light district of Taipei, Zhu Ling and her playmates encounter various weird scenarios. For instance, they are told obscene adult jokes by An Lexin, a young male wanderer who also appears in *The Eagle Haidong Qing*. According to him, having one's ears pierced becomes a metaphor of losing one's virginity, and unfortunately Zhu Ling is caught by An Lexin and forced to go through the ear piercing. In Zhu Ling's crying due to the pain, she vaguely hears the bystanders' cheer her for entering adulthood. This symbolizes that Zhu Ling eventually become a victim in the morally degrading Taipei. The “sacrifice” of Zhu Ling perhaps helps explain why in Li's *Yuxue feifei* 雨雪霏霏 (The Falling of Rain and Snow), a work consisting of nine stories about his Borneo childhood, Zhu Ling is no longer a protagonist but an occasional listener (similar to Li's intended readers) appearing only in the narrator's monologue.

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29 In the preface to *The Eagle Haidong Qing*, Li Yongping already foreshadows his concerns for the moral degradation of a society, as the last sentence of the preface states: “Zhu Ling, may you grow up properly.”

## Tangled Memories and Linguistic Alchemy

Li's journey of self-discovery and origin searching eventually take him back to Borneo through recollecting of his childhood memories. At the beginning of *The Falling of Rain and Snow*, the first book of his Borneo trilogy,<sup>30</sup> Li once again calls upon the help of his nymph, Zhu Ling, by dedicating the novel to her regardless of where she is and whether she is real or illusionary. In the first chapter, the narrator regards Zhu Ling as a drifting little red sparrow in his legend, suggesting that Zhu Ling is no longer a fictional character, but a symbolic muse for the narrator's cultural craving.<sup>31</sup> The whole book unfolds with the narrator's reminiscence about his first encounter with Zhu Ling in Taipei. While physically searching for Zhu Ling and asking her to listen to him, the narrator embarks upon a spiritual journey during which several regrettable episodes of his early days in Sarawak emerge. Despite the fact that Zhu Ling "appears" only occasionally in the story, the narrator seems fairly honest about himself. This confession-like and self-therapeutic recollection can be taken as Li's reaching an equilibrium between Taipei and Borneo. It can also imply an acceptance of the loss of a cultural origin, and the very act of writing in this case becomes a default means to lament such a loss. The former interpretation can be supported by "Wangxiang 望鄉" (Looking toward my Hometown), the last story compiled in *The Falling of Rain and Snow*, whereas the latter can be considered together with Li's conscientious refinement of Chinese language in his works. "Looking toward my Hometown" depicts

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30 The other two are the two-volume *Dahe jintou* 大河盡頭 (The End of the River). The first one has a subtitle "Suliu 溯流" (Travelling Upstream), while the subtitle for the second one is "Shan 山" (The Mountain).

31 Li Yongping stated that the character Zhu Ling was modeled on a girl he encountered in Taipei while working as a department assistant at the National Taiwan University. See *Wenhuibao's* interview "Li Yongping tan *Dahe jintou*: Ren zhongjiu yao huijia 李永平談《大河盡頭》：人終究要回家" (Li Yongping Discussing *The End of the River*: People After All Must Return Home), <http://paper.wenweipo.com/2011/05/09/OT1105090019.htm>

three Taiwanese females who are abducted to become prostitutes in Borneo during the Pacific War period. Through the imagined listener Zhu Ling, the middle-aged narrator is able to redress his sense of guilt from reporting the prostitutes and causing their imprisonment. Interestingly, it is through the recollection of the Taiwanese prostitutes (who are unable to return to Taiwan) that the Borneo-born Chinese narrator is capable of articulating his diasporic sentiments and symbolically returning to his home in Borneo. Spanning over three decades, Li's writing displays different faces of diaspora. His Odyssean search for an idealistic origin, embodied often by his female characters, departs from Borneo, via Taipei, and eventually returns to Borneo.

If we afford a more sarcastic second reading as mentioned above, then Li's use of language should be taken into consideration. In earlier works such as "Children of Borneo" and "A Dayak Woman", Li's Chinese language is mixed with some local expressions. Along with his pursuit of a nurturing mother as the archetype for his cultural imagination, he became increasingly sensitive to Chinese words. In *The Jiling Chronicles*, his Chinese expression is so pure that it reads like a poetic classical Chinese novel. In *The Eagle Haidong Qing*, Li continues with his stylistic experiment. The language is elegant and lyrical, and sometimes antique with bizarre and difficult wording that Li invents. This style not only re-creates a sense of antiquity in modern times, but also implies Jin Wu's wandering. In other words, an ideal cultural origin is lost, so that one compensates for the loss through refining the Chinese language. Even though there are occasionally some Taiwanese expressions to highlight the setting of Taipei, Li's Chinese in general remains fairly pure. It is as if by polishing his Chinese to such an extreme, a purer Chinese identity can potentially be acquired. In an interview, Li expressed that he wished to wander around the

Yellow River valley to fully absorb the richness of the Chinese language.<sup>32</sup> About a decade later, in the preface to *Drifting: Self Selected Works of Li Yongping*, Li admits his long-term obsession with Chinese words, which for him are like totems containing mysterious codes decipherable only by Chinese people.<sup>33</sup> This statement well explains Li's attempt to construct a cultural origin through linguistic aesthetics. Li's effort demonstrates language can be an effective means to represent historical and social reality and to enunciate one's identity. Through Li's skillful use of Chinese which refers to the vanity of Taipei to the Exodus, *The Eagle Haidong Qing* logically turns into a poignant political allegory. The pure language may be powerful, yet it is still insufficient to prevent Taipei's moral degeneration. Neither can it offer a satisfying solution to Li's sense of displacement. This explicates why drifting remains a dominant theme in Li's writing, pointing to an imagined, conceptual hometown that is beyond geographical borders and ideological controls.

The leitmotif of self-searching is brought to a new height in Li's least epic magna opus – the two-volume *Dahe jintou* 大河盡頭 (The End of the River). The novel depicts a mysterious sailing journey through the Borneo rainforest on the Kapuas River embarked upon by a fifteen-year-old Yong and his Dutch-descendant aunt Christine. Setting off in lunar July and aiming to climb the sacred mountain Gunung Batu Tiban on the full-moon night, the journey is filled with a spooky atmosphere and mystery. Sir Simpson, one of the passengers, points out that the origin of life is “nothing but a pile of

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32 See Qiu Miaojin's 邱妙津 interview with Li Yongping - “Li Yongping: wodei ba ziji wuhuadabang zhihou cailai xie zhengzhi 李永平：我得把自己五花大綁之後才來寫政治” (Li Yongping: I have to tie myself before writing about politics), *Xin xinwen* 新新聞 (The Journalist) (1992, April 12-18): 66.

33 See *Drifting: Self Selected Works of Li Yongping*, p. 39. In fact, in the interview mentioned in footnote 16, Li Yongping already declared the importance of writing to (Chinese) root searching. He said: “... writing *Fable of Haidong* is to search for China, yet what I really want to write is ‘genesis’, that is, to look for a root, a root of Chinese people.”



rocks, sexual intercourse, and death”.<sup>34</sup> In the first volume, Yong encounters several scenarios in which human beings’ primitive desires are revealed, while in the second volume, Yong is left alone with Christine and strives to come to terms with his complex quasi-lover yet quasi mother and son relationship with Christine. Christine’s barrenness and her interactions with Yong reverse the previous colonizer and colonized relationship. Yet such a post-colonial interpretation misses the aesthetic and personal dimensions of Li’s writing. This novel can be seen as a continuity of Li’s drifting, with the replacement of the innocent muse Zhu Ling by the mature and attractive woman Christine. Indeed, through Yong who is guided by Christine but shares his travel story with Zhu Ling, the two female characters become connected. It also makes the main theme (of the search for self) in Li’s works quite consistent. Li confesses that *The End of the River* is heavily autobiographical, and it is a novel written in a format of memoir.<sup>35</sup> If we take Yong (it bears the same character as the first word of Li’s given name) as the fictional alterego of Li, then Li through Yong seems to be able to identify a concrete destination for his drifting mentality. In the novel, the goal of the sailing journey is not climbing the sacred mountain per se, or to claim a specific origin. It is also for the inspirations of writing. That is, writing as an aesthetic vehicle not only allows Li to review his childhood memories that are still haunting him, but also brings him home, even if only symbolically.

## Conclusion

The thematic preferences and aesthetic styles of Guo’s and Li’s writing invite us to revisit the existing definition of the period term “literature by

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34 *The End of the River*, vol. 1, p.126.

35 Same as footnote 31.

overseas students”. Similar to many other period literary terms such as the May Fourth literature, combat literature, or native soil literature, it emerged within a specific sociohistorical context. The appellation serves more the mainstream political discourse and literary taste (such as the claim of “Chineseness” which automatically renders the authors as a rootless generation, or the emphasis on Taiwanese consciousness that makes some literature by overseas students authors politically incorrect) than the diversities and aesthetic merits of the actual works. As the authors may choose to stay in the foreign country voluntarily or involuntarily, or return to where they came from, their status as overseas students is volatile. This makes the narrow definition of the term as a literary mode derived from the America-bound cultural tendency in the 1960s somewhat limited if not problematic. The genealogy of literature by overseas students indeed can be extended both vertically (to earlier or later periods) and horizontally (to compare experiences in different locals simultaneously and to include multiple directions of travel).

In this paper, I employ the term literature by overseas students broadly with a focus more on the authors’ background (whether they have studied in a place different from where they were born) than on the artificially assumed thematic homogeneity such as the loss of Chineseness in America. Guo Songfen’s case shows a rather interesting path – a combination of politically incorrect leftist ideals and concerns for Taiwan, whereas Li Yongping’s example demonstrates a divious self-searching journey from identifying one as “the son of Borneo” to paying homage to Chinese culture via linguistic refinement, then finally heading back to Borneo. Both authors’ writing exhibits a distinct feature of self-portriature, and their narrators more often than not either strive to negotiate a balance between one’s inner world and outward reality, or yearn for an origin of his (drifting) life. This approach does not intend to ignore the sociopolitical sentiments embedded in their creative writing. Neither do

I wish to privilege the label “overseas students literature” when analyzing their works. Rather, I contend that the mental alienation or physical displacement in their novels is not because of the authors’ inability to identify with a specific culture/country, but because of their notions of literature as well as their aesthetic style. In short, it is important to remain “rootless” as it allows them to continue revisiting their past and shaping a reliable selfhood.

Rather different from his passionate political involvements in real life, Guo’s stories are often told in a remarkably calm and self-reflexive tone. Some of his fictional characters suffer from profound loss (either losing their beloved or departing further away from their youthful dreams) or mental degeneration (like the fore-mentioned Lin Zhixiong), while others struggle to subvert the power of a political whirlpool through personal recollections. As for Li, his sense of selfhood continues to be reshaped with his protagonists’ experience of wandering all the way from Sarawak to Taiwan, and also from Taiwan to (look back to) Borneo, through forging an awareness of racial differences, building an aesthetic hometown, to going upstream to explore the origin of his life. For both Guo and Li, literature is a powerful means for reconciling with one’s haunting past (be it the image of a running mother or young girls doomed to degenerate), and for offering redemption for the isolated minds and for the inevitable loss. Although Sheng-mei Ma is insightful in discussing literature by overseas students within a global context and suggesting the relevant authors to engage with the western theories put forward by critics such as Fredric Jameson, and Arjun Appadurai, I would maintain it is the autobiographic characteristics in at least the works of Guo and Li that make literature by overseas students particularly fascinating and no less serious than works exposing social problems or advocating nationalism. This tendency of turning inward and aestheticizing sociohistorical context commonly evident in Guo’s and Li’s works opens up new possibilities for

literature by overseas students. I wish to stress that “literature by overseas students” is merely one of the many ways from which one can approach the works of Guo Songfen and Li Yongping. The richness of their writing surpasses our biased perception of literature by overseas students, attesting its redemptive ability for trauma and desire as well as unleashing its potential to challenge the grand narrative in which Chineseness is not only taken for granted but also monotonously articulated.



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