

RECONSTRUCTING THE SELF THROUGH *HER*STORY

On Yan Lianke's *Tamen* (*Shes*)

Sabrina Ardizzoni

Introduction

For the translation of the title of Yan Lianke's *Tamen* 她們 'They (feminine)', I will use here an invented term, *Shes*, just like the gender-marked Chinese character *ta* 她 'she' is an invention of modern times.¹ While reading this book, so far untranslated in English, three points of enquiry came to my mind: (1) What is the main aim of this work, so peculiar and different compared to other writings by the same author? (2) Can we consider this a gap-filler in the writing of a *her*-story, complementary to *history*? and (3) What, if any, is the political value of this book? To answer these questions, I will go through the book, searching for the main topics and ideas expressed by the author, and cross-examining the text. In doing so, I will keep in mind not only the gender-study framework suggested by the author himself but also Gayatri Spivak's categories of subaltern studies. In fact, her categories, starting from the question "Can the subaltern speak?" help me to explain the male voice that speaks out in place of the women so brilliantly depicted in this literary work.

Upheld by many linguistic theories, the gender analysis here must take into account the fact that due to typological structure and discursive practice, the Chinese language tends to

1 The character *ta* 她 is recorded in the *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字 [Explanation of graphs and analysis of characters] and *Kangxi* [康熙] Dictionary, but with a different pronunciation and meaning. In the 20th century, the feminine orthographic variation 她 was promoted by Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1891–1943), who used it in a poem in 1920: "Slim clouds floating in the sky,/Gentle wind blowing on the ground./Ah!/Light breeze ruffling my hair,/Tell me, how can I not think of her?" (天上飄着些微雲,/地上吹着些微風。/啊!/微風吹動了我的頭髮,/教我如何不想她?). Its usage was very welcome by the intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement, like Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), who used it extensively in their vernacular (*baihua* 白話) production. It was widespread among the writers in the Written Vernacular Movement (*baihuawen yundong* 白話文運動) and it became official after the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949. See Chris Shei, *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge), 2019, 148; also Sabrina Ardizzoni, "Revising the Chinese Translation of Verdi's Opera *La Traviata*: Linguistic and Methodological Issues," in *Diverse Voices in Chinese Translation and Interpreting*, ed. Riccardo Moratto and Martin Woesler (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 331.

under-represent women.² Chinese words do not recognize gender unless it is intentionally expressed, and the radical character for “woman,” *nü* 女, when used as a semantic marker in word formation, often denotes a derogative meaning.³ Moreover, proper names do not express gender, unless otherwise specified by intertextual discourse markers. These linguistic features have played a part in connoting China’s history, history of thought, literature, culture as generally “male.” As widely accepted by historians and gender studies researchers, in traditional society, women occupied a well-delimited space or, more precisely, gender distinction was based on a rigid division of space: “women operate on the inside (*nei* 内), men on the outside (*wai* 外).”⁴ Scope for action and its relevant functions were rigidly defined: women did not concern themselves of the *wai*, the public, political sphere, while men did not concern themselves of the *nei*, the domestic realm, the preservation of hearth-and-home and all that it contains. This Confucian tradition-derived separation, of which one finds traces in texts dating back to the pre-Qin Era,⁵ merges with the division between *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, and the division between the sexes in social ethics that derives from it. Thus, within the dominating system, women were kept away from positions of power (deemed *wai* or “external”), wherefore their increasingly inevitable position of subordination, especially after the fourteenth century (i.e., the Ming-Qing period).

Indeed, as Spivak in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?” states the concept of subalternity is closely linked to a lack of access to hegemonic power.⁶ The intellectual and political events of the modern age, from the mid-nineteenth century to the “Great Divide” marked by the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, brought about an evolution of language and script, and a re-writing of female history, and this is also reflected in Yan’s text.⁷

The twentieth- and twenty-first-century women depicted in Yan’s three generations of *Shes* occupy a well-defined space: the author’s home province, Henan, in the rural Central Plain. They are not victims or heroines who exhibit a revolutionary spirit of resistance against injustice as embodied in a phallographic society, like in Lu Xun and the 1919 May Fourth Movement literature; they do not seek to achieve a personal subjectivity within a system which is, or is not, providing them with a space to position themselves, as shown in the literature of women writers like Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–86) or Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (1911–42) during

2 Dali Tan, “Sexism in the Chinese Language,” in *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 4 (1990): 635–39, defines the Chinese language, not different from the English language, as sexist in “defining, deprecating and ignoring women.” Moreover, she states: “Women are commonly left out in the Chinese language.”

3 Lan Li, “Gender Representation in Chinese Language,” in *Analysing Chinese Language and Discourse across Layers and Genres*, ed. Wang Wei (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2020), 102–18, explores with a lexicographer’s approach, the usage of the character *nü* 女 in the morphology of words and its implications in reflecting women’s representation in social ideology.

4 On the *nei/wai* space division in classical gender study literature, see Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, “*Neiwai*, Civility, and Gender Distinctions,” *Asian Philosophy* 14, no.1 (2004): 41–58; and Sabrina Ardizzoni, “Women on the Threshold in the First Chapter of Liu Xiang’s *Lienü zhuan*,” *Asian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2020): 281–302.

5 It is referred to in “*Neize*” 內則 [“Family conduct”], the 12th chapter of the *Liji* 禮記, trans. James Legge, *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, 1:449–79 (New York: University Books, 1967). The “*Neize*” establishes the norm for man/woman differentiation (*nan nü zhi bie* 男女之別), as it emerges in the separation of spaces and spheres of action, of *inside* and *outside* (*nei/wai*), of studies, of ceremonial performance, and even of clothing, as well as of family relationships.

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

7 The original title of the book uses the character marked by the feminine *nü* 女 radical, which came into common use in the written language in the 1950s.

the Republican era (1911–49); they do not display rosy-red cheeks, long braids, and enthusiastic smiles in a vivid attempt to encourage the revolution, as does the “Iron Girls” narrative of the Mao era (1949–76); they are not skillful or naïve young urban workers, displaced from their rural hometown to explore muzzled topics like love, sex, loneliness, and become prey to heartless men who exploit them for money or leisure; nor are they charismatic community leaders, like in Yan’s novel *Lenin’s Kisses* (*Shouhuo* 受活, 2004) or *The Four Books* (*Si shu* 四書, 2011), or other fictional characters. They are actually all these things together. They display the complexity of women’s world in contemporary China, from the author’s personal point of view.

With this essay collection, *Tamen*, Yan has gone beyond the “spiritual” (*shen* 神) and “realistic” (*shi* 實), “mythorealistic” literary production that previously constituted the founding principle of his literature.⁸ Here, he has found a space where, for once, the author, as a man, depicts his own positioning in History, and finds out it is actually a Herstory, like in a prismatic mirror. Yan himself has said of his book: “It’s a tale about all the women in my family. ... it is certainly an interesting cross-section of Chinese life, as well as a window on women’s customs and social changes in the Chinese countryside over the last hundred years.”⁹ By rethinking his family history in a feminine way, he attempts to fill the gaps in official historiography and at the same time creates a gendered “We and You, together.”

Chronologically, *Shes* is complementary to his *Three Brothers: Memories of My Family* (*Wo yu fubei* 我與父輩, 2009); spatially, it moves between the author’s two spheres: the countryside and the city. Unlike in his 2009 work, the narrative line he draws here is not unidirectional but rather multidirectional. Yan spent ten years in reconstructing his family women’s history and felt the need to address many women of European feminism, such as Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1953) and Antoinette Fouque (*Il y a deux sexes*, 1995), and American women anthropologists and gender scholars like Susan Bordo (*Unbearable Weight*, 1993; *The Male Body*, 1999) and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990; *Undoing Gender*, 2004), whose works were translated in the years straddling the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; finally, prominent intellectuals in the history of Chinese thought like Mao Zedong and the feminist intellectual Dai Jinhua 戴錦華 (*Zuori zhi dao* 昨日之島, 2015).

His writing, experiential and historically “reconstructionist,” is *liminal* in that it is contained within the spatial borders of the author’s village in the rural area around Luoyang, Henan Province, and within the temporal borders of the author’s own lifespan; it is a deed of reminiscence, in search of erased narratives in order to shed light on the dark parts of history, a salvage of memories endangered by oblivion, a recomposition of divided memories.

8 On Yan’s mythorealism, please refer to Part I in this book. I also relate to Carlos Rojas, “Speaking of the Margins: Yan Lianke,” in *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ed. Kirk Denton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 431–35; and Melinda Pirazzoli, “From Franz Kafka to Franz Kafka Award Winner, Yan Lianke: Biopolitics and the Human Dilemma of *shenshizhuayi* in *Liven* and *Dream of Ding Village*,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3437>.

9 Riccardo Moratto and Sabrina Ardizzoni, *Voci letterarie dal Levante—Dialoghi con autori cinesi in tempo di pandemia* [*Literary voices from the East: Conversations with Chinese authors in pandemic time*] (Bologna: Bonomo Editore, 2021), 18; also Riccardo Moratto, “Zai yiqing liuxing de dangxia xunzhao ziwo he wenxue: Zhuanfang Yan Lianke” 在疫情流行的當下尋找自我和文學——專訪閻連科 [“Looking for oneself and for literature during an epidemic: An Interview with Yan Lianke”], *Waiguo yuyan yu wenhua* 外國語言與文化 [*Foreign Languages and Culture*] 1 (20 Mar. 2020), https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_1FeqVY2_tjMxshZNcxA8g (last accessed 31 May 2021); Riccardo Moratto, “Intervista a Yan Lianke” [“Interview with Yan Lianke”], *Il Manifesto*, 27 Feb. 2020, <https://ilmanifesto.it/yan-lianke-ansia-e-rabbia-da-virus-stanno-sfumando/> (last accessed 31 May 2021).

Gender and narrative structure

Tamen is a work of literary prose (*sanwen* 散文), a “non-fiction” (*feixugou* 非虛構) genre chosen by the author because it gives a wide berth to subjective expression. Its mainspring lies in the collection of oral testimony, as in the reflection on readings personally suggested by Liu Jianmei 劉劍梅, the feminist literary critic of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology who recommended to Yan gender studies classics from Western literature. The outcome is the fruit of a long and pondered meditation that led Yan to rethink the condition of women in “his” contemporary China; and the fact that it took ten years of writing proves that the process of textual production was subsequent to a long and meticulous period of data collection, not only objective data (women’s histories) but also an introspection into one’s own past. The book has seven chapters:

1. Shes;
2. Older Sister, Second Sister, Sister-in-Law;
3. Aunts;
4. Second Aunts;
5. Mother;
6. Third Sex: Third Person Feminine;
7. Shes; and
8. Coda Voice.

The stories in *Shes* are neither fictional nor metaphorical. The histories and memories Yan collects and shares with the reader are those of the women of his family, his village, and neighboring villages. Rural women, as distinct from urban ones. In Spivak’s terms, “true subaltern groups, whose identity is their difference.”¹⁰

The narrative form of the first part may be compared to a family book (*jiapu* 家譜) in the feminine. Usually, in traditional family books, only the male figures were recorded; in the few cases in which women’s histories were annotated, the stories told were inevitably exceptional and, above all, exemplary. In the past, before the practice of keeping family and genealogy books (*zupu* 族譜) was deplored in Communist China as an ideological tool in the hands of the old patriarchal society, one would find narratives of virtuous women whose conduct was seen as especially adherent to Confucian ethics. When the compilation of family and genealogy books began again in the 1990s, in some cases, women were included. More specifically, this came about with women who expressed their support for a shared family or national project, or who could display their success in business, science, sports, media, or politics. But the women in *Shes* are common people who, in their common, rural lives, follow and construct *herstory* with their very ordinariness:

My mother’s experience is only one of the most common and widespread among thousands of women during the period of socialist construction from the founding of new China in 1949 to the new era of Reform and Opening Up—it cannot even be considered a case.¹¹

母親的經歷，只是一九四九年新中國成立至新時期改革開放前的社會主義大建設時期成千上萬的女性中最为通、普遍的一個或一列，連稱為一個案例都不算。

¹⁰ Spivak, 285.

¹¹ Yan, *Tamen* (Zhengzhou: Henan wenyi chubanshe, 2020), 213. All Chinese citations were translated by the author unless otherwise specified.

In chapter 7, *Shes* displays a shift in narrative choice. The author here has gathered up a series of “mini-tales” of acquaintances or relatives—people he is familiar with, either personally or by hearsay. These are local chronicles of events known to village people: some are public stories, as they have been covered by local or national media; some are private, that is to say, they are not known outside of limited local groups. The literary form is reminiscent of the *zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小說 of classical Chinese literature, which were closely related to the writing of history. Considered “strange tales” or “anomaly accounts,” they related supernatural phenomena and local oddities.

The last chapter, “Coda Voice,” is dedicated to the author’s young granddaughter, to the innocence and tenderness of a little girl in a Beijing park under a blue sky with white clouds, representing hope in a future full of sweet-scented air and rainbow-colored flowers. The time structure of the text therefore connects past, present, and future, but holds fast to its temporal and spatial liminality, at the center of which the author’s experience persists, directed or projected onto the female voices surrounding him. Narration is expressed in the first person to indicate that the center of the prism is the author himself.

The story-telling is interrupted by personal digressions, which the author calls *liaoyan* 聊言 and defines as “unbridled conversations” or “gossips” (*xin ma you jiang de xianhua* 信馬由韁的閒話).¹² In these inserts, he makes personal comments and remarks on the topics that came to the fore in previous chapters. He allows himself these interludes to take on the reader directly, often in very informal language, in line with the *sanwen* genre, and establishes an intimate relationship with his readership.

Even if this *jiapu* is communicated via writing, the transmission of the narratives may be considered an oral history, and the instrument of transmission is not a woman but a man. In the telling of women’s tales, quasi-female autobiographies penned by a male hand, as well as in the “unbridled” sections, Yan always resorts to plain and simple language, to direct and transparent, albeit highly meaningful, metaphors. This kind of language characterizes his earlier works as well, but here it seems to be more straightforward, personal, colloquial: a learned conversation while sipping tea with his reader: “Hey—please don’t read this chapter as an essay.” (喂——請你千萬不要把這一章當成論文看。)¹³

Silenced subjects in herstory

Silence, oblivion, the disappearance of women in the stories is a recurring theme. Yan resorts to it often in the course of his narratives and musings. For Yan, memory, especially women’s memory in history, is an ethical one (*lunli huiyi* 倫理回憶), namely, a memory linked to the ethical system of the dominating culture. Whoever does not conform to this system will not be able to enter the memory circuit.

A fitting example of this aspect is expressed in the episode of his cousin, the daughter of his third paternal aunt. In an unspecified moment of her youth between 1958 and 1978, she is repudiated by the husband’s family (and not by her husband) because “she is a compulsive sleeper” (*shishui* 嗜睡) as she falls into deep sleep and cannot perform her production duties in her husband’s family. She is powerless against her narcolepsy, which keeps her from being a good wife, a good daughter-in-law, and this is enough for her husband’s relatives to ordain her divorce. This is the revolutionary age, but in the countryside, many aspects of the revolution

12 Ibid., 18.

13 Ibid., 204.

have been accepted only partially, and a woman divorced not by her or her husband's choice but by that of her husband's family—"She 'was driven away' by the mother-in-law's house" (是「被」婆婆家裡離去的)¹⁴—is forced to quietly return to her parents' home. Her mother says: "it was too humiliating, something too humiliating for people to know and understand." (說是太丟人的事, 丟人到無法讓人知道讓人解)¹⁵ A divorcee, like a widow, may certainly remarry, but she must keep herself to certain precautions: the wedding must take place discreetly, without following the ritual practices required by local customs, everything must be hidden, both her return to her mother's home after the divorce and the second wedding. The woman must accept unfavorable conditions as well, like marrying a man with physical disabilities,¹⁶ or not well-off, or with a low standard of living, perhaps a widower or a single man, with children and parents she will have to take care of. In her new marriage, the divorcee, or the widow, must show her intent to completely wipe out her personal desires, she must prove that she has completely submitted her power to the ethical system, thereby regaining the virtue which she lost in the infamy of divorce or widowhood. In this practice, the removal of the woman from the collective memory of family and village is paramount. When the cousin goes off with her new husband, her family imposes these terms on her: she must never return or have any contact with her hometown relatives. All the members of her family wipe her from their memory, nobody speaks about her anymore, they don't even know if she is dead or alive: "Whether in the city or in the countryside, in the family's ethical memory as molded by the patriarchal society, women are quickly erased from memory" (無論是城裡還是鄉下人, 在男權社會所左右的家族倫理記憶裡, 女性總是被記憶很快的遺忘抹去)¹⁷

The removal of this woman from memory is defined by the author "reasonably and emotionally erased" (*heqingheli de moqu* 合情合理的抹去), inasmuch as it is part of a rational and emotional system that provides for this kind of treatment. And the author remarks:

If I hadn't written *Shes*, would I have remembered my cousin? Would I remember that because of that kind of minor disease of—or penchant for—sleepiness, her destiny was to be pushed by men (masculine) into the darkest and deepest of the unknown? And we are forgetful of her, and indifferent; likewise, we never forget to go honor the graves of our parents and grandparents every year for Qingming, full of sadness and memories, but never go to the graves of our aunts.

尚若不是為了寫「她們」我還能記住我的表姐呢? 能想起因為嗜睡著小而又小之病症或嗜好, 就被男人(男性)將其命運推入未知的黑暗和淵深裡, 而我們對她的遺忘與冷漠, 又如我們每年清明從未忘記去自己的父母、爺奶的墳頭祭奠、傷感和回憶, 卻從未去過姑娘們的墳上樣。¹⁸

These common rural women are the subaltern group inasmuch as, he suggests, they lack the power to speak for themselves, even if the space for them to speak is achieved.

14 Ibid., 119.

15 Ibid.

16 On physical disability in Yan's work, see Shelly W. Chan 陳穎, "Narrating Cancer, Disabilities and AIDS: Yan Lianke's Trilogy of Disease," in *Discourse of Disease-Writing Illness, the Mind and the Body in Modern China*, ed. Howard Y. F. Choy 蔡元豐 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 177–99.

17 Yan, *Tamen*, 122.

18 Ibid., 123.

Let us consider his mother's example. Yan tells us that during the collectivization years, his mother was more than once honored with the prestigious title of "model worker" because she had successfully accomplished her duties outside (*wai*) the home. But the author-son as well as all the members of the production squads are perfectly aware that there is an undeclared chore, that of the domestic function of *nei*, historically inherited by the mother by the fact of being a woman, and never completely absorbed by the expanded function of the People's Commune. The mother, having been grown and educated in a rural environment, persistently sticks to her subaltern position and makes the commune's certificates of merit bestowed upon her disappear; she will not talk about it (silenced subject) and refuses to accept the merit conferred upon her in the public sphere. Quite the contrary, she wants to keep it hidden, because: "How embarrassing—I've always felt that women should not compete with men in this way." (多丟人——總覺得女人不該和男人一樣爭這些。)¹⁹ Therefore, from the narratives collected here, what emerges is a herstory, the voices thereof have long been silenced or "normalized" by official history.

The third sex: The otherness of women

According to the author, "Even before being a woman, a woman is a person." All of [chapter 6](#) is dedicated to the theorization of the "third sex," a concept developed starting from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Yan quotes: "Woman? Very simple! She is a womb, an ovary,"²⁰ and recalls her confrontation with Antoinette Fouque.

This is something that lies between and outside of the two natural sexes of man and woman. He calls it "the otherness of women" (*nüxing zhong de taxing* 女性中的他性). It is compared to an excrescence, something superfluous yet ineluctable:

In women, the third sex is a sort of excrescence. Whether born or acquired, an excrescence is a useless, meaningless and superfluous gall, but when you remove it, not only will you have persistent bleeding, but it will be such an unexpected evil that it will make you feel it would have been better to let it exist than to remove it.

女性中的他性是他們的一種疣贅物。

疣贅物無論是與生具來，還是後天生成，對人都是無用、無意義的多餘之癭瘤，但如果你將它割除時，你將流血不止，會有意外之惡，使你感覺讓疣贅存在要比割除好。²¹

The center of male power that in the male-oriented (*zhong nan qing nü* 重男輕女) society kept women tied down in the deepest of darkneses became the object of criticism during the revolution years and was rethought to the point that, in the name of equality, the differences were wiped out. Gender equality was the main goal of the political project, and this apparently was the same as a "genderless" society. But this gender-blind society was only apparent inasmuch as, both in the private and in the public realm the separation between sexes, as well as the biological, reproductive, and ethical duties were never completely challenged. At the same time, this

19 Ibid., 217.

20 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1952), 3.

21 Yan, *Tamen*, 207.

very political project transformed women in no-man/no-woman *persona*, what the author here defines a “third sex”: something in-between and out of the binary definition of man/woman.

When quoting the opening line of “Childhood,” the second chapter of *The Second Sex* (“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”), he points out that women are subjected to the limitations due to their biological sex, for instance, the cyclic nature of menstruation, menstrual pain, and childbirth pain; and, in addition, to those that are introduced by historical obligation and the dominant power, according to which women “must” make clothing, cook, and produce babies. To this, says the author, the women of his village add the task of being “workers in society,” as imposed by culture, history, and the rural environment—this for him is the main meaning of “third sex.”²² This line of reasoning cannot but call to mind the 1927 “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” (“Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao” 湖南農民運動考察報告) in which Mao Zedong, when dealing with gender relations and the limitations imposed by society, stated that while peasants were subject to the oppressions of state, family system, and the world of spirits and underworld demons, peasant women were sorely oppressed by the patriarchal system.²³

Besides common rural women, the author also mentions figures made public by the revolutionary narrative in 1958 (Yan’s year of birth) during the Great Leap Forward years. At the time, thousands of youths were involved in the construction of the Ming Tombs Reservoir. The official narrative presented them as heroes and heroines who became part of the collective imagination, and their memories are still alive in our days as key cultural elements of twentieth-century China. He quotes the Seven Girls of Shahe zheng Dongyi village (Liu Shumin 劉淑敏, Li Lianfang 李連芳, Wang Sumin 王素敏, Yan Shuqing 閻淑清, Li Guozhen 李國珍, Zhang Shuqing 張淑清, and Zhang Shuhua 張淑華), and the Nine Lan Girls Squad (Jiu Lanzu 九蘭組), all of whom teenagers between 15 and 19 years of age became part of the great narrative of History, reified because of their dedication and adherence to the nation’s project.

And yet, the author invites the reader not to consider his a theoretical essay on gender. His literary invention of the “third sex” is meant to remain such, a literary digression, and does not want to be a pitch invasion in the field of gender studies.

Work and labor

Labor is one of the focuses of the whole book, and lies at the center of all its narratives. For peasant families, work is *the* existential dimension:

My mother was always sitting there doing needlework, while my father was either peeling corn or packing up farming tools and broken bamboo baskets and willow baskets. It was a sin for them to sit there purely for rest. The most legitimate and solemn life and meaning of a farmer is to work constantly.

母親總是坐在那兒做著針線活，父親不是剝著玉米，就是收拾著農具和破了邊的竹籃柳筐子。坐在那兒純粹之歇息，在他們就是一種罪。不停地勞作才是農民最正當、莊嚴的人生和意義。²⁴

22 See also Guo Yijiao’s chapter in this book.

23 Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji* 毛澤東選集 [Selected works of Mao Zedong], 4 vols. (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1952), 12–42.

24 Yan, *Tamen*, 65.

The same existential value of labor is transferred to socialist China, where “working people didn’t view their jobs as merely a means of making a living. A job meant an honorable vocation, and workers were endowed with dignity.”²⁵

In the twentieth century, changes in labor organization did not utterly modify family organization (women did housework, men farmed), but had a significant impact on the quantity of work: the shift from the small-scale subsistence agriculture structure that regulated village economy before 1949 to the collective organization of rural communes was focused on mobilizing resources in order to achieve large-scale projects. This change in the scale of labor required that women take up a far greater active role in *wai-work* than was customary in the past, and also brought about a change in the pace of life, but it did not effect substantial changes in the dynamics of *nei*:

Before 1949, Chinese rural society was based on the individual family as a self-sustaining unit After 1949, ... while the internal structure of the family remained unchanged, the external sphere of the family was infinitely enlarged by the sphere of socialist construction.

一九四九年前，中國的鄉村社會是以個體家庭為自存自在的單元形式的。……而在一九四九年後，……在家庭的內部結構仍然不變時，而家庭的外場域，因社會主義建設的場域無限地擴大增多了。²⁶

As asserted by the feminist scholar Wang Zheng in her *Finding Women in the State*, during the revolutionary years, the positive representation of working women in the media had empowering effects on women who had previously been absent from cultural representations of China’s drive for modernity.²⁷ And yet, despite the wide circulation of the slogan attributed to Mao, “Women can hold up half the sky” (the attribution is unverified), one huge issue was left standing, and remains apparently unresolved to this day: that of equality of wages. The redistribution of work-points according to tasks accomplished—“to each according to one’s work” (按勞分配 *an lao fenpei*)—in taking into account age, strength, work attitude, and gender, in fact, left women constantly behind: “At the time, the strong laborers got ten work-points every day; the weak and cunning ones, just nine, which would then reduce their dignity. Women could get eight work-points per day, the weak and lazy ones, seven points.” (那時壯勞力每天是十分工，弱的奸猾的，那就減去你的尊嚴為九分。婦女每天八分工，弱的懶的是七分。)²⁸ This disparity has never really been reversed.

From the onset of Deng’s political and economic reforms, work began to be directed from the countryside to the city, and farmers all became peasant-workers (*nongmingong* 農民工), pouring into factories, construction sites, roadwork, restaurants, and urban services. In this new situation, women’s labor remained very much like farm work: tireless and ceaseless; and the separation between the male and the female world, both as far as cohabitation and as tasks were concerned, was still an extremely clear-cut one.

If, in the pre-revolutionary period, the dominating culture imposed a division of the sexes and put a sex-based pressure on work, even in the age of revolution labor has preserved a gendered connotation. When speaking about the collectivization years, the author points

25 Wang, “Dignity of Labor,” in Denton, 73.

26 Yan, *Tamen*, 214.

27 Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 228.

28 Yan, *Tamen*, 81.

out the linguistic difference between “workers” (*laodongzhe* 勞動者), the term used for men, and “laborers” (*laozuoze* 勞作者), referring to women unless they became a “model female worker” (*laodong mofan* 勞動模範).²⁹ Here we see a linguistic distinction that highlights a male-centered gender vision on work. Women have to achieve more in order to be equal to men.

In the current times, characterized by market liberalization, de-politicization, and economic neo-liberalism, women voluntarily “inject themselves” (to use Yan’s metaphor) with the obligation to comply with a male model of hyper-production and hyper-labor;³⁰ work thus wipes out all gender differences: women as well as men leave to go to “do temporary work” (*dagong* 打工), and engage in exacting seasonal jobs, because for each one of them: “This slave-like work was done today of her own free will and that of her sisters and their children.” (這種如奴人一樣幹的活, 今天完全是她和她的姐妹與兒女們自願的。)³¹ Thus, work, any kind of work, is celebrated both by the rural and the socialist traditions. Today, ex-farmhands are dislocated, in their frantic search for economic success, in an often hostile urban environment, tainted by a depravity that gobbles up even the countryside: in the author’s eye, and in that of the official narrative, it was supposed to remain a pure place, uncontaminated by immoral, unethical traits such as prostitution, drug abuse, and other deviations.

This condition is poignantly illustrated in the story of 24-year-old Zhao Yamin 趙雅敏, who has a fancy for watches.³² In order to complete her collection of them, she sells herself in one of the many hairdresser’s shops that in the 1980s harbored naïve girls in order to satisfy the appetites of successful businessmen. Her heart’s desire is to return to her village after a few short years of “honest work,” with her booty of one hundred watches acquired as a monetary exchange for her sex services in order to marry her fiancé and lead a normal life. What drives her is money, commodities, and the quest for a satisfaction of material desires (*wuwang* 物望).

This is what levels men and women today, and makes them equal in the face of society: men and women voluntarily take upon themselves the onus and obligations of the new forms of labor.

But Yan’s book is, first and foremost, a literary work, and the author’s lyricism in it is paramount. Work, the countryside, and childhood memories are well expressed in the “Coal” (“La mei” 拉煤) episode, in which he, still a child, and his slightly older sister, pull a cart on foot in order to go pick up coal at the quarry, traveling more than 40 km in one day.³³ The boy’s pride in having such an honorable as well as grueling job marks his entry into adulthood, his belonging to a society of peasant-*laodongzhe*. At the same time, it represents the birth of his project of getting himself out of that world, as the lad says: “I really do not want to pull the cart like an ox or a horse” (我實在不想如牛馬一樣拉車出力了).³⁴ And in a few years, he will join the Army, which will allow him to study and become the writer that he is today.

Marriage

In traditional society, marriage is virilocal. This is already a starting point of disadvantage for women: “Married-out woman: spilled water.” (嫁出去的人, 潑出去的水。)³⁵ In rural culture, this is a common saying. Marriage is a central moment in the life of the rural woman,

29 Ibid., 189.

30 Ibid., 218.

31 Ibid., 239.

32 Ibid., 230–34.

33 Ibid., 84–94.

34 Ibid., 92.

35 Ibid., 123.

inasmuch as it marks her passage from one family to another, of which she will become an integral part.³⁶ In a society that traditionally practices ancestor cult, a woman leaves her birth family's line of descent to enter into that of her husband, but only if she adapts to society's and to that family group's ethical rules. The penalty for deviating from shared values is oblivion.

The prerequisites for marriage are the matchmaker, usually a woman, of whom our author presents a historical and literary analysis, pointing out the nuances and changes of meaning throughout history and "blind date" (*xiangqin* 相親). The author's mother herself is a matchmaker: "In the countryside, the matchmaker is not a profession, but a moral role of society." (在鄉村, 媒人不是一種職業, 但卻是一種社會的道德角色。)³⁷ In the past, the task of matchmaker (*meiren* 媒人或 *meipo* 媒婆) was mostly performed by women, and it was held in great consideration, as it was a predictive one. A *meiren* had to be able to predict whether a union could be harmonious, whether the couple would be able to have children together and grow old together. Today, this is performed by "introducers" (*jieshaoren* 介紹人), men and women alike, who merely resort to well-tested patterns to which they attribute new meanings and new practices.

Yan defines the figure of the go-between, previously utterly vilified in communist political and social analysis, as actually necessary for the advancement of society: "If there is marriage, the chain of human reproduction, survival, sexual needs, or love, without the existence of a matchmaker, how can human beings extend, advance and function?" (如果婚姻這一人類繁衍、生存、性需乃或說愛的環鏈中, 沒有媒人之存在, 人類又怎樣可以延展、推進和運行?)³⁸ The practice of *xiangqin* is a ritual of many meanings that emerge in the narratives of the book's first chapters. Meetings organized by a family to favor the encounter between a son and his possible future wife are as much concentrated on the compatibility between daughter-in-law-to-be and mother-in-law-to-be, as on the entente between the two presumptive fiancés.

Yan invites his readers not to give a binary, black and white, reading of events and persons, but to consider their multifaceted aspects. At the end of the game, he concludes, today's *jieshaoren*, the introducer who makes the future possible married couple meet, is merely continuing a tradition of change of signifier that conveys a signified that evolves in the course of time.

Conclusion

Tamen is a book about the representation of Chinese rural women in the socialist and post-socialist period. What emerges from this encounter between the reader and Yan's women is that on the one hand, women are achievers according to male-oriented models, on the other hand, they become subalterns in a still male-oriented society that manipulates them according to ludicrous models. After the 1980s, the gender-equality and gender-blindness of the revolutionary age are displaced by a framework that while offering multiple possibilities for individual choice, still unifies men and women within a channel of a common quest for material success and commodities, thereby implying conformity and sacrifice within the great country model. Like in the past, however, this quest does not remove women from their subaltern state

36 The passage from the state of *nü* 'maiden' to that of *fu* 婦 'married woman' repositions a woman's dyadic relationship from a father-daughter relationship to that of husband and wife, and is sanctioned by Confucius's system of values and those of later tradition. We are always dealing with a relationship of submissivity, within which a woman finds little in terms of visible spaces of subjectivity.

37 Yan, *Tamen*, 171.

38 *Ibid.*, 167.

if they do not become “model female workers”; otherwise, they are forced to return to their traditional functions of child-bearing and domestic (*nei*) care.

Going back to the questions we posed at the beginning, we must remember that the women Yan speaks for are not representative of all of China, but are set in a well-defined space and time. For this reason, we can consider his work a *liminal* production. This is a book of many purposes. First of all, that of giving a voice to those who have not found one of their own yet. The women of this cross-section, according to Spivak’s viewpoint, are subaltern groups. Yan represents them here to fill a gap in the great narrative of his country. In Spivak’s terms, it is a “representation as speaking-for” not “re-presentation” as in art and philosophy.³⁹ Next, the author is also speaking about himself, his presence in the text is clearly declared, there is no intention of writing an objective text; as he himself often says, he does not want to hide behind the stratagems of a realistic work. His own personal history gets written through the polyphony of the women that surround him. So, the second purpose of the book would seem to be that of finding a memory of self-retrieval, of one’s own identity.

As to the relationship between these stories and Herstory, besides bringing to surface other versions, other points of view, these narratives dwell on taboo topics such as menstruation, female orgasm, homosexuality, prostitution, and a lavish repertoire of images linked to the body, as appurtenant to the author’s style. These are all subjects rural women do not wish to speak about, and we find no trace of them in literature. Those who do broach them are female writers, city-dwelling and educated, as well as inserted in a male-oriented value system. Yan’s women, even when they veer away from the dominant model, preserve a dimension of subjectivity within the narrative context, and the author’s mediation serves merely to enhance its worth. We can therefore consider this book a valued example, both for its writing on contemporary female society, and for breaking the silence to which common rural women are often confined to.

Lastly, on the political significance of *Shes*, though one cannot state that Yan’s work has any direct political purpose, and despite the fact that the author distances himself from the theorization of women’s history, his representation of women provides a focus on society that, as Gail Hershtatter recently stated, “is always political.”⁴⁰ His statements on muted identities, his efforts to shed light on the darker parts of society, his encouragement to rethink the categories of twentieth-century history not in black-and-white but keeping in mind their multifaceted aspects, finally, his considerations on language and on the institutions that are involved in the narratives collected here cannot but challenge the reader on the political level as well.

As a reprise of the lyricism that pervades the whole text, the image of the last chapter, dedicated to his granddaughter, sounds almost like a last will and testament: a final message of intergenerational love and faith in a future of white clouds and colored rainbows.

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³⁹ Spivak, 275.

⁴⁰ See Gail Hershtatter, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); also Hershtatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

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