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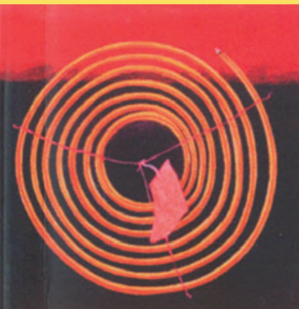

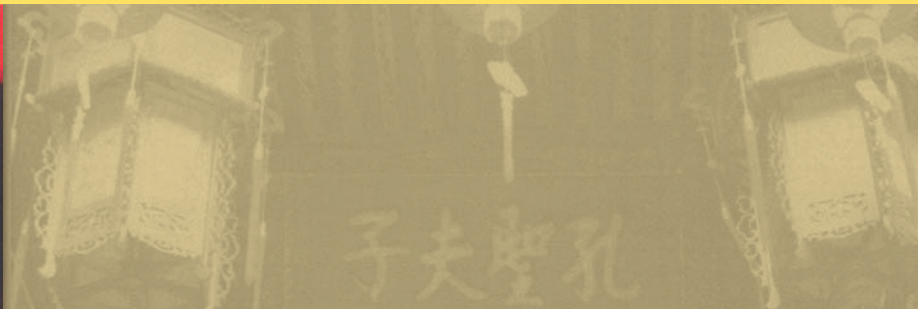

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Identidade macaense: que futuro?

Patrocínio

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A Daxiyangguo – Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Asiáticos é uma publicação anual que visa a divulgação das grandes temáticas dos Estudos Asiáticos junto de investigadores especializados, adotando uma abordagem abrangente no âmbito das Ciências Sociais e Políticas. A Daxiyangguo é uma publicação do Instituto do Oriente, unidade de investigação do Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas da Universidade de Lisboa, com o patrocínio da Fundação Jorge Álvares.

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The Fragility of Identity and the Imagination of Otherness in Bai Hua's novel *The Remote Country of Women* | A Fragilidade da Identidade e da Imaginação da diversidade no romance *O País Remoto das Mulheres* de Bai Hua

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Abstract:

Drawing on The Remote Kingdom of Women (1988), the novel written by Chinese author Bai Hua (1930-2019), this essay examines how post-Mao China articulated the notions of memory and identity, as well as of belonging and othering, as an attempt to overcome the state of fragility caused by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and the post-revolutionary growing influence of Western culture. It proposes to explore the way some of the literary works produced during this period were to promote an encounter between a fragmented yet hegemonic culture and the cultures of the internal ethnic Other, and how this encounter between majority and minority subjects was to highlight precisely the condition of fragility that underlies the very concept of identity.

Keywords: *China; Literature; Bai Hua; Identity; Majority; Minorities.*

Resumo:

A partir de "The Remote Kingdom of Women" (1988), romance do autor Chinês Bai Hua (1930-2019), este ensaio debruça-se sobre o modo como a China Pós-Maoista articulou noções de memória e de identidade, bem como de pertença e de produção da diferença, no sentido de ultrapassar o estado de fragilidade decorrente do trauma da Revolução Cultural e da crescente influência da cultura Ocidental no momento pós-revolucionário. Propõe-se explorar como alguma da literatura produzida neste período procurou promover o encontro entre uma cultura hegemónica fragmentada e as culturas do Outro étnico interno, e de como esse encontro entre maioria e minorias acentuou a condição de fragilidade subjacente à própria noção de identidade.

Palavras-chave: *China; Literatura; Bai Hua; Identidade; Maioria; Minorias.*

Introduction

The effects of many years of abrupt socio-cultural changes, as well as China's awakening to the deep influences of globalization and cultural commodification have been promoting, in the last few decades, a complex dialogue between tradition and modernity, helping to create what can be defined as a contemporaneity with 'Chinese characteristics'. As is the case with other national contexts, in China this process has also been repeatedly betaking the past to redefine its current contours. Anthony Giddens argued that tradition – as a cultural landmark of times past – is nothing but a "creation of modernity" (Giddens 2000: 47), a creation that, consciously or unconsciously, is recalled, transformed, invented and reinvented, ritualized and institutionalized in order to be used as a mechanism of legitimization of power (ibid.: 48) in a specific spatiotemporal milieu. However, tradition may as well be understood as a mechanism used for filling the void shaped by the countless identity fragilities and memory gaps that endue the existence of postmodern subjects and communities. However, in such a globalized era as the one we are experiencing, tradition can be perceived as much more than just an invention. It is not just a set of imagined or manipulated symbolic practices through which one seeks to establish "continuity with a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm, 1992: 1). Rather, tradition is a collective effort crucial for individuals, communities, and nations alike to situate themselves in the present and to project themselves into future times. This explains how it is that certain cultural institutions and certain groups embodying expressions of a traditional culture that were once forced to forgetting or induced silence, are currently undergoing a process of strategic recognition and reactivation.

Thus, we may argue that, since traditions and cultural practices, and the subjects or groups associated with them have come to be perceived as the very guardians of collective memory, their presence in a world increasingly influenced by global flows and the redefinition of local identities is somehow mandatory. Traditions indeed provide a fictionalized aura of authenticity that not only is a fundamental aspect of the contemporary consumer culture, but has also become an important element concerning the

reconfiguration of cultural spaces (Appadurai, 1996) and the reimagining of the notions of identity and alterity.

In China, following the disturbing period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the discussions over the acknowledgement of a situation of identity fragility and cultural trauma that left indelible marks upon the collective consciousness (Alexander: 2004: 1), along with the state of frustration that emerged from the post-Mao economic reforms (Liu 2009: 120), were essential aspects in the process of rethinking the role of tradition as a key element of a major strategy to reunite the nation with itself. This intellectual debate which had an extremely vivid expression during the 1980's was of a great importance in deepening and widening people's understanding of tradition in a era of reform and modernization (ibid.: 120) and in "situating the conflicting Chinese discourse of modern consciousness" (Wang 1996: 38). So it has come to be commonly referred to as the "Great Cultural Discussion" (wenhua da taolun) or "Cultural Fever" (wenhua re).

In High Culture Fever (1996), Jing Wang refers to the Cultural Discussion as a moment/period immersed in criticism towards the construction of Chinese modernity that was performed by a self-conscious intellectual elite. Claiming that "the Cultural Discussion came into being a forum for open debates of what modernity meant to a post-revolutionary society in transition" (ibid.: 39), the author emphasizes the important role of the Searching for Roots (xungen yishi) movement, one of the emerging schools that developed an intense reflection "on the collision of the ideological horizon of modernity with that of tradition" (ibid: 39). Reacting to the post-revolutionary state of self and collective alienation, the xungen movement took, at the same time, the revolution-produced system of self-criticism to a new level (ibid.: 182). Instead of regarding it as a political sanction or an act of public humiliation and ritualized confession, it appropriated the Chinese traditional philosophical approach of self-cultivation and transformed it into in a creative and productive process of collective critique.

According to Nimrod Baranovitch, the xungen movement was,

> "[C]losely tied to an identity crisis that overtook China's intellectuals in the early 1980s. It was an attempt to reestablish a renewed sense of identity and to mediate the conflict that many Chinese intellectuals faced in the post-revolutionary era, being deprived of history and tradition after the Cultural revolution, cynical about communism and the whole revolutionary ethos, and suddenly flooded with Western culture (Baranovitch 2003: 21).

Although this cultural movement gained expression in many different aesthetic forms such as music (Baranovitch 2003), cinema (Clark 2005) and painting (Gladney 2004) it first emerged in literature. Following the influences of magical realism uttered in Gao Xinjian's pamphlet 'A Preliminary Inquiry into the Techniques of Modern Fiction', as well as the call for the affirmation of literary subjectivity and for the redefinition of consciousness rooted in "traditional but non-standard tradition" (Linder: 2009: 516-7) expressed in Han Shaogong's 1984 seminal article 'The Roots of Literature', the Root-searching literary works were driven by an instrumentally nostalgic need of collective reconnection with the past and a strong desire to galvanize the national cultural legacy in order to rebuild a new sense of cultural identity. As a result, and by articulating feelings of loss and belonging, xungen literature engaged in a process of self-rediscovery and of cultural sublimation that aimed to compensate the state of fragility fostered by an ideological imposition of coerced forgetting or "repressive erasure" (Connerton 2011). Xungen writers – most of them sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution – therefore focused their attention on the margins of the nation. In China's most remote regions they were able to find not only "the aesthetic situation, the atmosphere, the cultural sedimentation, the celebration of the power of nature, the unrefined, wild and basic beauty" (Huang Ziping in Zhang, 1997: 138) but also what they considered to be the traces of a collective memory that had long ago been effaced from the urban landscape. The efforts expressed by the xungen writers regarding the creation of an alternative post-revolutionary identity from national sources allow the outlining of two important questions that I propose to critically examine along this article through a close reading of Bai Hua's novel *The Remote Country of Women*.

Fragile Memories, Fragile Identities

The first question deals with the fragility of identity and its connection to the fragility of memory. As Marita Sturken has argued with regard to the intensely intertwined relation between memory and identity, memory can be defined as a process that attributes meaning to each moment of the present, deeply affecting the recognition of the personal as well as the collective self. Therefore, memory becomes the "means by which we remember who we are" providing "the very core of identity" (Sturken 1997: 1).

The fact that individuals and groups experience a cultural trauma provoked by particularly violent and invasive events that undermine "one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole" (Smelser 2004: 38) has a deep impact on the reconfiguration of their personal and collective identities. The fragmenting effects of cultural trauma and its disruptive impact on the way communities and nations search for a redefinition of 'Who am I?' hereby raises the issue of fragility concerning the formation of identities.

In his book Memory, History, Forgetting (2004) Paul Ricoeur presents his considerations on the causes of the fragility of identity, stating that this problem actually derives from a fragility of memory (Ricoeur 2004: 80). The author refers that there are three main aspects that trigger this process. The primary cause is "its difficult relation with time" (ibid.: 81). According to Ricoeur, that is precisely what "justifies the recourse to memory as the temporal component of identity, in conjunction with the evaluation of the present and the projection of the future" (ibid.: 81). The second cause relates to the confrontation with the 'other'. The fact that fragility is a condition of identity leads to an impossibility to actually tolerate and deal with the Other. The other, Ricoeur claims, "comes to be perceived as a danger for one's own identity, our identity as well as my identity" (ibid.: 81). The third cause of the fragility of identity relates to the "heritage of founding violence", to overwhelming acts responsible for the emergence of "real and symbolic wounds" stored in the archives of collective memory (ibid.: 82).

This first question merges with the second aspect related to the role of internal alterity and its floating representations in China. The fact that this

is a multiethnic nation with 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities, makes the topic of internal alterity or internal otherness as one of the central topics of the recent western academic works on contemporary China (Harrell 1995, Kaup 2000, Litzinger 2000, Schein 2000, Baranovitch 2001, Blum 2001, Harrell 2001, Mueggler 2001, Blum and Jensen 2002, Du 2002, Mackerras 2003, Mathieu 2003, Gladney 2004, Walsh 2005).

In spite of the struggles coming both from the elites and ordinary people to preserve and protect China's material and immaterial cultural heritage (Ho 2006), the Cultural Revolution was indeed a brutal act of massive destruction. It produced dramatic effects on the lives of ethnic minority communities, leading ethnic diversity through an effective yet caustic process of silencing. This was mainly activated by the 'Destroy the Four Olds' campaign (posijiu). Such campaign, carried out in the 1960s by the Red Guards, was designed to destroy the material and immaterial traces of cultural identity therefore leading to the erasure of the embodiment of old thoughts, old cultures, old customs and old habits (Yang, 2011: 172) – and by the subsequent efforts of assimilation of the non-Han into the dominant Han culture and the Han-dominated socialist order (Baranovitch 2003: 1). Nevertheless, from the end of the 1970s and as a result of the radical changes in political and economic trends, the representations of the ethnic Other faced major transformations, as China quested for "a locus of resilient Chinese identity" (Schein 2000: 23), thereby invoking a half true half fabricated past and relying on internal difference in order to create new representations of the nation.

By reframing national identity through the internal Other, a new discourse would emerge strongly inspired by a floating representational scheme that locates the minority subject between backwardness and civilization. Inspired by Edward Said's concept of "orientalism" (1979) such an exoticist discourse was labeled as "oriental orientalism" (Gladney 1994) or "internal orientalism" (Schein 1997, 2000). Including both feelings of strangeness and erotic fascination towards the ethnic Other, this new frame of representation drawn from the intersection of ethnicity, class and gender, not only influenced post-revolutionary state policies towards the ethnic

minorities but also inspired the "poetics of cultural reinvention" that characterizes Chinese aesthetics and literature of the 1980s (Lee 2004:164).

On the basis of the aforementioned contributions and drawing on the analysis of Bai Hua's novel *The Remote Kingdom of Women*, I will now examine how post-Mao China articulated the notions of memory and identity and of belonging and othering, in an attempt to overcome the state of fragility caused by the trauma of the Cultural Revolution and the post-revolutionary growing influence of Western culture. I also propose to explore the way some of the literary works produced during this period were to promote an encounter between a fragmented yet hegemonic culture and the cultures of the internal ethnic Other, and how this encounter between majority and minority subjects was to highlight precisely the condition of fragility that underlies the very concept of identity.

Imagination and Affect: between the Middle Kingdom and the peripheral Queendom

The first known classic text that mentions the existence of a kingdom ruled by women situated in a peripheral region of western China was the Shan Hai Jing, the Classic of Mountains and Seas (third century b.c. to second century a.d.), a compilation of legends, myths, and tales that present rich geographical and cultural accounts of ancient China. The Book of the Latter Han, also known as Hou Han Shu – the official history of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 a.d.) – refers as well to a kingdom located in an island of the Eastern Sea. This was described as a place where there were no men and where women would become pregnant just by looking at a powerful and magical water spring. In addition, and according to Christine Mathieu (2003), historical records from the Tang dynasty (618-907 a.d.) also describe a kingdom of women situated in eastern Tibet, known as Dong Nü Guo. Although these descriptions ceased to appear in historical documents from the ninth century on (Mathieu 2003: 408), they eventually reappeared centuries later in renowned classic literary works such as Wu Cheng'en's Journey to the West (Xiyouji) – the Ming classic published in 1592 – and Li Ruzhen's provocative novel Flowers in the

Mirror (Jinghua yuan), written at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the 1980s, the Chinese writer Bai Hua (1930) – a pseudonym for Chen Youhua – would resume the literary fascination for this topic.

A target of the ideological campaign against bourgeois liberalism in 1981, Bai Hua was severely criticized for what the government considered to be a negative attitude towards patriotism expressed in his 1979 film script Kulian (Unrequited Love) (Wu 1995: 118, Barme, 1999: 11; Goldman, 2002: 508-509; Clark, 2005: 93). The following works of the veteran army writer nevertheless continued to show a critical position concerning China's political, social, and cultural realities, namely the destruction of the collective memory and the process of identity fragmentation and alienation. Originally published in 1988 – at the peak of the xungen yishi movement (Blum 2007: 46) his first long novel Yuanfang youyge Nü'er Guo, translated into English in 1994 as *The Remote Kingdom of Women*, evokes precisely such concerns.

Bai Hua's xungen novel is structured along two antithetical narratives (Twitchell, 1995: 167) presented in alternate chapters, two life stories that run parallel within the same national context and yet represent remarkably distinct worlds that overlap at a given moment. Liang Rui, both the narrator and the male protagonist representing the patriarchal Han dominant culture, was living "an idealistic youth" (Bai 1994: 12) as a freshman at the College of Fine Arts when the Cultural Revolution burst forth, having "an entire nation gone insane" (ibid.:12). At the end of this period, and after having spent most of those "ten years of chaos" in a labor camp for intellectuals and then in prison, Liang Rui was taken by a state of disillusionment and emotional void that led him to embark for exile in a remote region of western China. There, he ultimately meets and falls in love with the female protagonist, the young and beautiful Sunamei. A member of the matrilineal Mosuo, a small ethnic community – part of the Naxi minority – living on the Yunnan-Sichuan border in Southwest China, Sunamei is the incarnation of the utopian Other, sharply contrasting with the dystopic yet fragile Self embodied in the character of Liang Rui (Wu 1995).

A specter of the "Big Ditch" (Gellner 1979) starts to be built right from the first chapters of the novel. The creation of this movement of

discontinuity or separation between the modern Self and the pre-modern Other is constructed upon an objectified imagery of internal otherness. The narrative however is clearly based on the premise that all "systems of otherness are structures of identity and difference that have more to do with the establishment of self-identity than with the empirical reality of the other" (Rapport and Overing 2000: 12). Following this logic, Liang Rui is portrayed as suffering under the heavy weight of a system that punishes him for deemed counter-revolutionary conducts and confines him to a long and painful period of rehabilitation and imprisonment. Sunamei, on the other hand, is described as free and happy, leading a carefree and peaceful life under the protection of her extended family. At the age of thirteen, she undergoes the celebration of the "skirt-dressing" puberty rite after which she gradually prepares to meet her first lover.

Liang Rui primarily feels he is the product of a modern and civilized world. But as the narrative develops, his tone works to subvert that first description, and he starts depicting the reality that surrounds him as a place rather undermined by dishonesty, agitation and lack of individual freedom. Comparing it to a miserable, tedious and abhorrent exile, Liang Rui admits living in a panoptic society, an Orwellian world where he is even denied the right to own his body, it being rather the possession of the "great leader, Chairman Mao" (Bai 1994: 36). On the contrary, the world Sunamei was born and raised in is entirely different, it is 'another' world.

In order to explore the dialectical structure of identity reconfiguration and the production of otherness, Bai Hua keeps providing new antithetical elements along the narrative. Besides disclosing the fragilities concerning an extremely politicized modern cultural system, these elements also enunciate the principles that guided the formation of an orientalist discourse towards the internal Other:

Here I witness a matrilineal society that should have existed only in antiquity. Yet it exists today. No outside pressure has the power to change it. The Mosuo people live and love solemnly according to their own primitive way of existence. (…) Mosuo women are their own masters on earth. Only they have the right to love or not to love, to want or not to want, to accept or to refuse. They are independent of men. In their world there are

no spouses in bondage, no lonely old men, no homeless orphans – and, of course, no modernization (ibid.:362).

The internal orientalist discourse is therefore condensed in a set of binary oppositions between Self and Other presented along the novel and that rely mainly on the intersection of ethnicity, gender and class. Han men are depicted as soldiers, intellectuals, painters, party cadres or counter-revolutionaries incarcerated in labor camps. Their characters are built on the basis of specific features such as discipline, subtlety, intelligence, and they are frequently assaulted by particular emotions including terror, rage, loss and guilt. Mainly because freedom is absent, they live with the constant feeling of being "in jail" (ibid.: 114). Mosuo men, on the contrary, are represented as caravaneers, corn crop keepers, skilful dancers and singers, as well as gentle and passionate lovers. Exuding a "hot taste of wine, and the thin, sour smell of sweat" (ibid.: 84) they are the embodiment of perseverance, courage, honesty and of an unsublimated condition of primitive virility, since they often appear "wolfing down large amounts of weat and wine (…) wiping off the sweat from time to time" and "exposing a bronzed hairy chest" (ibid.: 339).

A similar process of differentiation is used to distinguish Han and Mosuo women. Dedicated to the revolutionary cause, Han women possess 'docile' and institutionalized bodies (Foucault 1979) that reveal "a hard calmness condensed by years of hatred" (Bai: 1994: 33). Although apparently self-controlled, they appear as lost, stressed and vulnerable beings. Therefore, Han women are described in sharp contrast with their Mosuo counterparts. Energetic, self-confident, sensual, graceful and exhibiting a beautiful, fertile body capable of conceiving "nine daughters and nine sons" (ibid.: 56), Mosuo women are metaphorized as a "full moon in a starry sky" (ibid.: 82) or as "full-blooming, pollen-laden" flowers (ibid.: 82). They spend much of their time working in farm fields and taking care of the children. However, they also enjoy themselves with relatives, friends and lovers, dancing in circles around a bonfire, singing and drinking wine and tea.

The fact that the Mosuo women clearly embody the mother and the lover figures, emphasizes the importance of sexuality in the configuration of national identities. In Minority Rules Louisa Schein explores this subject

inspired by Chatterjee's argument that situates "the nation in the body or idea of the woman" (Schein 2000: 108). According to Schein, the maternal figure is, as such, "especially pivotal, for women are seen as reproducers of the nation's people both biologically through childbearing and socially through their inculcation of national traditions and values in the young" (ibid.: 108). However, and in spite of being often depicted as exotic and erotic, the internal Other – both women and men – are also frequently portrayed as "sexual misfits in a highly normative national sexual system" (ibid.: 108).

Using a rather satirical approach, Bai Hua uses the trope of sexuality in order to intensify the differences among both the 'civilized' majority and the 'primitive' minorities. In this sense, he describes the unfruitful efforts made by the teams sent by the central committee to "save the primitives" (Bai 1994: 30). Through "a wave of shouting, a gust of criticizing, a surge of vilifying" (ibid.: 4) the brigades sought to "purify the family and marital life" among the Mosuo. By forcing them to reject the ethnic custom of practicing free and open relationships – a modality of sexual life known as the "visit" (Cai 2001) – in favor of monogamy, they would successfully drag them "out of the stone age into the modern life" (Bai 1994: 8) and let them "march shoulder to shoulder with the whole nation" (ibid: 28). These emphatic expressions reveal the significant role of sexuality of the internal Other as a powerful discursive formation in contemporary China. Mainly due to the "anxieties about the health of the nation" (Eley and Suny 1996: 26) as well as to demographic and cultural concerns, China's nationalist projects, as it usually occurs in multiethnic states, have been taking inspiration from biopolitical forms of power, "whether through rhetorics of family values, or by policy offensives around reproductive health, the regulation of sexuality, or the direct control of women's bodies (ibid.: 26).

In addition, *The Remote Kingdom of Women* also brings to light the relation between identity, alterity and affect. In the novel, the Red Guard brigades that were sent to the remote region by the government, holding a powerful "civilizing mission" (Harrell 1995), describe the Mosuo as primitive, underdeveloped and dirty, the carriers of barbarian customs still living as the ancestors of humanity probably did (Bai 1994: 33). Indeed, they are

even compared to "cavemen" (ibid.: 7), since they possess little, if any knowledge of Chinese language, they don't have a writing system of their own, and they speak a language that causes repulsion (ibid.: 338). Due to the identity shock that emerges from the cultural encounter and the perception of selfness and otherness, Liang Rui's initial fascination for Sunamei's village gradually starts to vanish and transforms into aversion:

During the day I could see more clearly that every Mosuo courtyard was too dirty for me to set foot in. Everywhere there was manure, and the worn-out clothing of the children and the elderly seemed to have never been washed. Although beautiful girls wore beautiful clothes, their necks were dirty. Supposing I had met Sunamei here but not in town: could I have brought myself to kiss her? (ibid.: 350).

The perception and construction of alterity appears, then, to be deeply connected with the way the self senses and is affected by the Other. Rew and Campbell analysis on the topic of affect and identity bring us closer to an understanding of this process of recognition of difference and similarity, since they argue that the subjective and experimental dimensions of identity are, in fact, "exercises in the mobilization of emotion though a selective drawing upon affective elements, for example a contextually defined sense of exclusion, fear and anxiety vis-à-vis significant Others" (Rew and Campbell 1999: 13). In fact, because the Mosuo represent the ultimate difference, an insurmountable and impenetrable boundary emerges between the two ethnic subjects and expresses itself through the evocation of dubious feelings, such as attraction, anxiety and repulsion.

Nevertheless, the creation of this boundary failed to protect the apparently stiff structures of the identity of the Self. Paradoxically, it eventually lead the Self to feel and explore the emotions that inadvertently sprang from that encounter. The disturbing affective involvement is initially characterized by romantic notions of self-liberation and self-surrender which evoke both the aspiration to incorporate in Chinese modern society some of the native principles inspired by Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, as well as the will to recreate a lost time and reconnect with the primordial Self, as shown by the following passage:

The next morning the Red Guards commanded the Mosuo, grown-ups as well as children, to persecute their commune cadres. The children balked, as did the grown-ups. They pretended not to understand the instructions. Even the few who knew a little Chinese became incapable of understanding a single world. Instead, the children simply stripped off their clothes and, plunging into Lake Xienami, paddled fiercely. Following the children, the Red guards also jumped naked into the lake. (Bai 1994: 2-3).

But, at the same time, it was also by experiencing the Other, and experiencing through the Other, that the fragilities of the Self such as the sense of identity void and emotional strangeness came to be unveiled and questioned. These excerpts illustrate how this emotional experience made the Self – represented by Liang Rui – gain awareness of what it was missing, namely the absence of individual and collective freedom, the solitude, the abandonment:

[Sunamei's] mind was barren of any political conceptions. Her kind of thinking was utterly impossible to find in China at that time: She seemed to have been living in another world, where she had found "the freedom of an insect in a cocoon – a freedom millions of other Chinese, along with myself were unable to enjoy. I adored her. Once I had been a revolutionary hero who believed, "If we do not run the affairs of the world, who else can run them?" Today I not only admired her insect's freedom but was anxious to gain it myself (Bai 1994: 20).

[The Mosuo community's] beloved had been taken by heaven; I myself had discarded my Sunamei. But I did not cry, not a single teardrop. They could complain to the heavens, to the earth, to their gods and ghosts, turning complaints into sorrow, sorrow into grief. To whom could I complain? (ibid.: 367).

Why stay any longer? I walked past them, past their courtyard, and past their village. I walked away from their world¸ there was no place for me among them, their courtyard or their village. I walked away as an outsider, a miserable exile. Now I experienced the true agony of exile. I was returning to the boring, hateful world I had once known and loved so well (ibid.: 368-9).

Although each society constructs and expresses emotions according to its own cultural frameworks, in some cases, political institutions clearly lead the process of public and private management of emotions. The novel therefore suggests that, on the one hand, Maoism's legitimacy relied on the effective mobilization of society through specific and meticulous strategies meant to awaken and mold the intensity of public collective emotions, such as patriotism, glorification, adoration and loyalty to Mao, as well as induced hatred and violence towards the government's "enemies" (Lu 2004). But, simultaneously, it also explores the fact that the unleashing of those powerful and intense expressions was followed by a process of silencing personal emotions and thoughts. Indeed, the fact that cultural expressions of intimacy and subjectivity were deeply restrained, almost evolving into a taboo during the Cultural Revolution, bring us to Stacey Oliker's argument that in "societies with a more collective culture ethos, attention to the self is dangerous and considered unworthy. It subverts the authority of tradition and the discipline of identifying with social rules" (Oliker 1998: 20).

The cultural encounter made the Self realize the trauma caused by the violent repression of emotions as well as the silencing of the memory of those same personal affects. In effect, it is through the Other that the most fragile of all the identity fragilities is acknowledged: the state of emotional void of the Self. To personify the utmost expression of this bitter and fragile condition of "uncanny strangeness" – an inner condition that leads to an understanding of the self-as-other – Bai Hua uses Liang Rui's words to narrate a moment of emotional disclosure, the moment when Gu Shuxian – a Han female character who was a member of the provincial women's federation – is taken by a sense of inner turmoil just because she allowed herself to feel:

Her sojourn along the beach of Lake Xienami had destroyed Gu Shuxian's hard calmness condensed by years of hatred. She felt a tender sorrow rising from the bottom of her heart. She was disturbed by an emotion she had not experienced for many years. She was unable to figure out her past and present (Bai, 1994: 33).

Distance, the Self and the Other

At the very end of *The Remote Kingdom of Women*, we find a note from the publisher stating that Bai Hua "made two visits to the Mosuo community along Lake Lugu in 1985 and 1986" (Bai 1994:373). Those fieldwork visits were actually inspired by previous readings on the Mosuo culture, namely the works from Chinese anthropologists produced at the beginning of the 1980s. Back then, Chinese anthropology was still limited to a quite narrow theoretical framework, referred to by Charles McKhann as the "two and a half theories of society and culture" (1995: 39): "Stalin's theory of national identity, Morgan's theory of social evolution, and Engel's reworking of Morgan in The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (ibid.:39). Deeply rooted in the evolutionist model, some of these studies would then define the Mosuo as "living fossils of ancient marriage formations and family structures" (Yan in McKhann 1995: 39), a community that was still in the first stages of social formation, a truly "primitive matriarchy" (Walsh 2005: 456). As it happened with other ethnic minority groups, the Mosuo were therefore to become the subjects of contemporary revival of primitivism. Hence, *The Remote Kingdom of Women* relies on modern anthropological representations, hereby assuming the existence of an exotic Other as well as "maintaining an indefensible, asymmetrical 'distinction' between 'Us' and 'Them'" (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 139).

The work of representation of identity and alterity in *The Remote Kingdom of Women* can thus be analyzed on the basis of Joahannes Fabian's critique to the temporal discourse of Western anthropology formed exactly under the evolutionist paradigm (Fabian, 2002: 16). As Fabian contends in Time and the Other (2002), evolutionism led anthropology to construct relations with its Other, stressing the affirmation of difference through the use of specific devices such as distance (ibid: 16). Thus, through the use of temporal distance "not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time" (ibid: 17) leading to the creation of specific temporal terms used to address the other, such as primitive and savage, but also current euphemisms as, for instance, tribal or traditional (ibid: 17). Nevertheless, temporal distance went beyond that

stream of Time and entered the sphere of Space, leading to a process of temporal spatialization, according to which the Other was to be located in peripheral and remote geographies. Following these notions, Bai Hua's novel constructs an ethnic Other by recourse to an essentialized and crystallized notion of alterity and using a spatial and temporal system that inevitably binds him to the past and confines him to places far distant from the center.

However, as I tried to argue along the essay, distance – and, consequently, difference – was also used as a device to unfold one of the main dilemmas of the generation that grew up during the Cultural Revolution and experienced the impact of post-revolutionary structural transformations, the one related with the fragility of identity. By creating a spatiotemporal line that relates the Self with the Other, the novel reveals the complexities surrounding the causes of fragility enunciated by Ricoeur, namely the fragmentation of cultural memory and the difficult relation of the nation to a burdened past, the inability to deal with the (outer and inner) other, as well as the experience of trauma and the "absence of affect" (Bennett 2005: 5) that resulted from it. Focusing on the "deeply felt" (Cai 2004: 45) and through the use of a rather reflective language that brings together the Self and the Other in a particular point of the line, *The Remote Kingdom of Women* engages to rethink the role identity and alterity play in the refashioning of subjectivity in contemporary China.

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