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## The Impact of Taiwanese Popular Literature on China

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### Prologue

Coined in 1990 by the author Joseph Nye, the term “soft power” has become familiar not only in political discourses but also, increasingly, in vernacular English. In contrast to “hard power” (coercion and payment), “soft power,” according to Nye, derives from three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I argue that one area in which Taiwan has clearly exercised soft power on the Chinese Mainland is through its culture. More specifically, the period under investigation is the 1980s, and the cultural form is popular literature.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the ascendancy of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904–1997) as the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, in the late 1970s the People’s Republic

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<sup>1</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, 84. The original study in which the theory was presented is: Nye, *Bound to Lead*.

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of China (PRC) entered the New Era (新时期). Like the opening of a floodgate, a variety of cultural products poured in from Taiwan and Hong Kong. This was manifested, above all, in the realm of popular music. The heart-melting love songs of Teresa Teng (Deng Lijun 邓丽君, 1953–1995) could not be more different from the masculine, patriotic tunes that had prevailed for decades. Despite the politically incorrect lyrics, it didn't take long for her songs to sweep across the mainland. Without ever having set her foot on the mainland, she was in fact the first pop star in PRC history.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1996 award-winning Hong Kong film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (甜蜜蜜), the female protagonist (played by Maggie Cheung) is a recent arrival in Hong Kong from the Mainland city of Guangzhou (Canton). Once in Hong Kong, she tries to make a living by working at McDonald's during the day and selling tapes of Teresa Teng's songs at a night market. At the end of the first night, to her dismay she has sold none. The male protagonist (played by Leon Lai), another recent immigrant, explains that no one will buy her tapes for fear of giving away their identities as mainlanders, many of who are staying in Hong Kong illegally. The scene is set in 1986, which rings true because Teresa Teng was immensely popular on the Mainland where people had only recently discovered her music.

Teng's popularity even put her on a par with the revered leader Deng Xiaoping, as implied by the expression: "We listen to Old Deng during the day, listen to Little Deng at night" (白天听老邓,晚上听小邓). In Chinese as in English, "ting" has two meanings, which are cleverly juxtaposed here: to listen [to music] and to obey. During the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983–1984, when Teng's songs were banned for being "decadent" and "pornographic," people continued to listen to them clandestinely; at the time there were even sayings like these in circulation: "Old Deng is no comparison to Little Deng" (老邓不如小邓) and "We don't want Old Deng, we want Little Deng" (不要老邓要小邓).

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Teng not only hailed from Taiwan, but throughout the 1970s she was also working for the Nationalist government in propaganda warfare against the PRC with broadcasts to the Mainland. This was how Mainland people, who listened clandestinely on short-wave radio, were introduced to her songs before the New Era.

Three decades later, we can still find numerous reminiscences online. A blog belonging to “Old Wang with a Scythe” (弯刀老王) can speak for many:

In those years, we listened to Old Deng during the day, to Little Deng at night. During the day, we broke free of the ideological cage and crossed rivers by groping for stones with our feet. We didn't care if it was a white cat or black cat; any cat that could catch mice was a good cat. At night, we drank “Sweet Wine Plus Coffee,” danced “Topsy Tango,” chased away “The Loneliness of Love,” searched for the “Maiden of the South Pacific,” looked forward to “Longing for Love in Dream” and “Yearning” to express ourselves with “Ten Thousand Words”: “Every day I pray and pray/Please chase away the loneliness of love.”<sup>3</sup>

This short passage amalgamates the most memorable “policy statements” of Deng Xiaoping and the titles of some of Teresa Teng's best-known songs. It is revealing that for the blogger political reform went hand in hand with cultural liberalization—for the first time in decades, young people found an outlet for their longings for love through the refreshingly new tunes and romantic lyrics. The fact that the establishment and the older generations frowned upon these songs made them all the more enticing.<sup>4</sup>

The return of love was inextricable from the craze of popular literature from Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup> Qiong Yao (琼瑶, b. 1938) and San Mao (三毛, 1943–1991) quickly built up a huge following, especially among youngsters. Television and film adaptations of the former's novels, in particular, enjoyed phenomenal success as they reached wider audiences.

<sup>3</sup> 那些年,我们白天听老邓,晚上听小邓。白天,我们冲破思想牢笼,摸着石头过河,不管白猫黑猫,逮住老鼠就是好猫;晚上,我们喝着《美酒加咖啡》,跳着《酒醉的探戈》,驱赶《爱的寂寞》,寻觅《南海姑娘》,期待《相思在梦里》,《祈望》《千言万语》地诉说:“我每天都在祈祷,快赶走爱的寂寞”。

<sup>4</sup> See: Li, *Pop Songs*, 3–4, 10–11. The establishment's attempt to stem the tide of pop songs from Taiwan and Hong Kong also applied to the Campus Folksongs (*xiaoyuan mingge*) from Taiwan, which created a new craze in China on the heels of Teresa Teng.

<sup>5</sup> Romance from Taiwan and Hong Kong was not the only popular genre in post-Mao China. Martial arts fiction, especially as represented by the Hong Kong-based writer Jin Yong (金庸) (Louis Cha, b. 1924) and the Taiwanese Gu Long (古龙, 1938–1985), experienced a robust revival too.

The soundtracks were equally romantic and definitely helped popularize the author-cum-producer for decades to come.

Turning to the genre of poetry, English readers may find it hard to see any affinity between poetry and popular literature. Unlike most developed countries in the world, where poetry cannot be farther away from pop culture, it was widely and avidly read in post-Mao China throughout the 1980s. This was, in fact, true of all literature. Having recently emerged from the “Dark Ages” of the Cultural Revolution, writers were eager to write with their newfound freedom while readers were hungry for writings that were no longer shackled by political doctrines. Thus began a renaissance in literature. A new poetry emerged from the underground in the late 1970s and by the early 1980s attracted national attention. It was at the center of a controversy in the early 1980s over its allegedly incomprehensible style and became labeled as “Misty Poetry” (also known as Obscure Poetry, Menglongshi 朦胧诗); but the controversy only made it more popular, especially among students and intellectuals. Virtually all the leading “Misty” poets went on to become internationally renowned figures.<sup>6</sup>

As the second wave arose in the mid-1980s, underground poetry flourished and developed in many directions. With a stronger self-awareness and more diverse aesthetic positions than under the Misty generation, the underground poetry scene established itself as an autonomous space distinct from, and virtually independent of, the “official” poetry scene. This was an unprecedented time in PRC history. On the one hand, we may say that underground poetry was maturing and coming into its own; on the other, it was apparent that the populist appeal that it had enjoyed only a few years before was fading. The larger context was that as the country became increasingly open, modernized, and consumer-oriented, a wider range of forms of entertainment were available to the masses. The market for literature also became increasingly diversified and commercialized. Highly experimental works tended to appeal only to literary-minded and specialized readers rather than general readers. Whereas in the early 1980s, the Misty Poets had levels of adulation normally associated with rock stars, the public would have a hard time naming famous

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<sup>6</sup>For analyses of the historical and literary contexts in which Misty Poetry arose, see: Crevel, *Language Shattered*; Yeh, “Light a Lamp,” 379–409.

underground poets of the younger generation.<sup>7</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that the most popular poet in the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s came not from the underground poetry movement; rather, it was Xi Murong (席慕容, also 席慕容, b. 1943) from Taiwan.

This chapter will focus on the two above-mentioned Taiwanese writers: the romance writer Qiong Yao and the poet Xi Murong (who is often dubbed “the Qiong Yao in poetry”). In analyzing their phenomenal success in post-Mao China, my emphasis is not so much on the intrinsic qualities of their writings as on the sociocultural conditions of 1980s China that created an environment that was receptive to them. I am keenly aware of the difference in scale when it comes to the production and consumption of these two writers’ works. As is well known, for decades Qiong Yao has been deeply involved in the marketing of her novels and the adaptation of her books for TV and films. She is virtually a one-woman industry – and a lucrative industry at that. By contrast, Xi Murong does not consider herself a “professional poet”; she is by profession a painter (whose work adorns her books of poetry and prose) and an art professor. She has not joined any poetry society or been involved in the “business” of publishing her books.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there is no comparison in quantitative terms. As I have stated, the two writers have each created a “phenomenon” in post-Mao China in their respective genre of writing. They have been paired by the media, critics, and readers alike as the best-selling writer and poet, first in Taiwan and then in China. Another similarity is that, commercial success aside, they have not entered the literary canon; indeed, they are often completely excluded from literary history.<sup>9</sup>

The questions I consider in this chapter are: What accounts for their immense popularity at this particular juncture in Chinese history? In what way did their works appeal to readers and create a significant impact

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<sup>7</sup> It was not until the suicide of Haizi 海子 (1964–1989) that poetry entered the public consciousness again. This happened again in 1993 when a leading Misty poet, Gu Cheng 顾城 (1956–1993), committed murder (of his estranged wife) and suicide. As could be expected, both deaths received much media hype.

<sup>8</sup> See: Yang, “Xi Murong Phenomenon.” The author defends Xi against the title “the Qiong Yao of poetry,” which he interprets as a derogatory term and as unfair.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in the authoritative *History of Contemporary Chinese Poetry* (当代中国诗歌史) written by Hong Zicheng (洪子诚), the preeminent scholar at Peking University, Xi Murong is not mentioned at all, not even in the section on women poets of the 1980s and 1990s.

on China in the 1980s? A simple yet logical answer could be that Qiong Yao and Xi Murong were popular because they gave Mainland readers something new. One desires that which one does not have. The twofold meaning of the English word “want” nicely captures the logic since to want is both to desire and to lack something. But this answer requires further consideration. Sure, one wants that which one does not have; still, many choices are available when it comes to desires. Why does one want this rather than that? Besides access, what other factors are there? What I am proposing in this case is that one significant reason for the immense appeal of the two Taiwanese writers is that their writings resonated with the “collective unconscious” of post-Mao China, that their writings both reflected and reinforced the changing national aspirations and emerging social and cultural trends. In short, Qiong Yao and Xi Murong not only offered Mainland readers something new but, more importantly, they were among the first to respond to certain preexisting conditions.

## Qiong Yao

In 1985, Qiong Yao made a grand entrance into China with six of her novels being published in quick succession. In addition, in December 1985 a chapter from another novel *Water Fairy* 水灵 (1971),<sup>10</sup> titled “A Few Blossoms of the Heart” (心香数朵), was anthologized in *The Lover—Selected Short Stories and Novellas from Taiwan* (情人——台湾中短篇小说选萃), the first collection of Taiwanese fiction to appear in China. Forty more novels by Qiong Yao were to be published over the subsequent four years. The first six novels were: *In the Midst of the River* (在水一方, 1975), *The Young Ones* (彩云飞, 1968), *Gentle Wind* (剪剪风, 1967), *How Many Sunsets* (几度夕阳红, 1964), *Wild Goose at the Tree Top* (雁儿在林梢, 1976), and *Boat* (船, 1965).

Critics in Taiwan have long denigrated Qiong Yao’s romances as escapist in that the world she creates is a far cry from real life and it is a negative influence on young women in particular. They have also criticized her formulaic and melodramatic plots, dismissing her as a writer of

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<sup>10</sup> Hereafter in reference to Qiong Yao, the year in parentheses indicates the original date of publication of her novel in Taiwan.

“boudoir literature” (*guixiu wenxue* 闺秀文学).<sup>11</sup> Lin Fangmei (林芳玫), the author of the only in-depth study of Qiong Yao to adopt a literary-sociological perspective, points out that Qiong Yao has been successful in “locking in” her readers (and viewers) in a tripartite structure of feeling that poses no threat to the patriarchal order: first, melodramatic imagination; second, romantic fantasy, which aestheticizes the objective world and elevates “eternal love” to a new religion; third, affective familialism, treating family relations as the ultimate resolution of all conflicts and the most effective form of redemption in life’s plight and vacuity.<sup>12</sup> All of these studies focus on the Taiwanese context in which Qiong Yao’s work was written, circulated, and consumed. However, there has been little attention to why she became equally popular in post-Mao China under distinctly different socio-politico-cultural circumstances. Why do her “formulas” work equally well for readers in post-Mao China?

To answer this question, we must contextualize the introduction of Qiong Yao within the cultural milieu of 1980s China—a period which saw the emergence of two major trends. With the “thaw” in 1978, China entered the “Age of Enlightenment.” Knowledge that had been repressed and forbidden for decades returned with a vengeance. Broadly speaking, this re-emerging knowledge can be divided into two broad categories: Western and Chinese. For example, whether new or reprinted, translations of Western classics mushroomed and were extremely well received, often selling in the millions. While literary movements ranging from symbolism and modernism to postmodernism were introduced and re-introduced, many philosophical and political theories, such as existentialism, psychoanalysis, liberalism, humanism, civil society, and hermeneutics, were discussed and debated enthusiastically among academics. The publication of the enormously influential monthly *Reading* (读书) in April 1979 both reflected and helped create the intellectual ferment of the New Era. The first essay in the inaugural issue set the tone of the journal with its title: “No Forbidden Zone in Reading” (读书无禁区).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> One minority view is advanced by the culture critic Lin Wenchi Lin (林文淇), who argues that Qiong Yao’s early fiction is realist in reflecting the social changes that Taiwan was undergoing. See: Lin, “Qiong Yao’s Films,” 4–19.

<sup>12</sup> See: Lin, *Interpreting Qiong Yao*.

<sup>13</sup> For the complete tables of contents of the journal from 1979 to the present, see the website: mall.cnki.net.

The 1980s also witnessed a revival of interest in traditional Chinese knowledge and reinterpretations of Chinese literature and culture. The former paved the way for the National Learning Fever (*guoxuere* 国学热) in the 1990s, while the latter manifested itself in two forms of revisiting the canon: restoration and revision. Restoration refers to both traditional and May Fourth classics. Works ranging from *Dream of the Red Chamber* to Ba Jin's (1904–2005) *Family* became bestsellers and went through numerous printings. Revision is best represented by the movement started by young scholars of Chinese literature to “rewrite literary history” (*chongxie wenxueshi* 重写文学史). Hitherto neglected modern writers—most notably, the fiction writer Zhang Ailin (Eileen Chang 张爱玲, 1920–1995), the literary scholar and fiction writer Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书, 1910–1998), and the Romantic poet Xu Zhimo (徐志摩, 1896–1931)—were not only rediscovered but were embraced by scholars and general readers alike. The modern canon underwent enlargement and veered sharply away from the Communist orthodoxy. Concurrent with and related to these efforts was the Root-Seeking movement (*xungen* 寻根) that arose in the early 1980s and gained momentum in the middle of the decade. Manifest in multiple genres and media—fiction, poetry, painting, and film—the movement represented a conscious attempt among artists and writers to redefine “Cultural China” and reassess the Chinese tradition.<sup>14</sup> Like Misty Poetry and the Stars Painters (星星画会) a few years earlier, the Root-Seeking movement marked another milestone in the history of Chinese literature and art.

In what way do Qiong Yao's romances relate to the High Culture Fever (文化热) outlined above? On the surface, they appear to be the exact opposite of the highbrow literature represented by Anglo-American High Modernism on the one hand and the indigenous avant-garde in fiction, poetry, and drama on the other. I submit, however, that despite the obvious differences between Qiong Yao's works and their Western and Chinese counterparts, certain aspects not only resonated with the new cultural trends but also, in fact, helped reinforce and popularize them in the New Era.

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<sup>14</sup>For a succinct study, see: Hong, *History of Chinese Literature*, 366–73. For a study of cultural trends in the 1980s, see: Wang, *High Culture Fever*.



In his pioneering study, Thomas Gold points out that the popular culture of Taiwan and Hong Kong enjoyed phenomenal success in post-Mao China because it redefined “the essence of what it means to be a ‘modern’ Chinese” and it introduced “a new language for expressing individual sentiments.”<sup>15</sup> This insightful observation harks back to the above-quoted reminiscence of “Old Wang with a Scythe;” for his generation, personal liberation was concomitant with the opening up of China and the national project of the “Four Modernizations” (四个现代化) under Deng Xiaoping. Gold also provides an apt framework for analyzing Qiong Yao’s impact in my study. Her romances were so well received, I submit, because they tapped into two emerging social and cultural trends, or two aspects of the changing collective unconscious, in post-Mao China: modernization and a new discourse of love.

Consider the opening scene of *In the Midst of the River*, in which the main characters make their first appearances. This is how the female protagonist Shihui (诗卉) describes her elder brother Shiyao (诗尧):

At this moment, my elder brother Shiyao has a lit cigarette in his hand and a copy of *Collection of World Folksongs*, recently mailed from the USA, on his lap, but he fixes his eyes on the television screen. On the screen Robert Wagner in *It Takes a Thief* is in the act of stealing a “world-famous painting” in some unimaginably ingenious way.<sup>16</sup>

In the course of just two sentences, the word “world” appears twice and there are at least five references to foreign things: an “American” collection of “world” folksongs, a “Hollywood heartthrob,” a popular “American TV show” that ran from January 9, 1968 to March 24, 1970, and a “world-famous” painting—one thinks of *The Mona Lisa* or a Picasso. The matter-of-fact tone in which Shihui narrates the scene also suggests that she is not describing something exotic or unfamiliar, that the middle- or upper-middle-class lifestyle this picture represents is not unknown to Taiwanese readers.

<sup>15</sup> Gold, “Go With Your Feelings,” 255; the article is reprinted in Gold, “Go With Your Feelings,” 255–73.

<sup>16</sup> 现在,我这位哥哥朱诗尧,燃着一支烟,膝上摊着一本刚从美国寄来的“世界民谣选集”,眼睛却直直的看着电视机,那电视的萤光幕上,劳勃韦纳所扮演的“妙贼”又在那儿匪夷所思的偷“世界名画”了。All translations in the chapter are mine unless otherwise indicated.

The fact is that Qiong Yao's romances in the 1960s–1970s contain numerous references to Western music (both classical and pop), literature (almost all canonical writers), popular culture (movies and television shows), and lifestyle. In contrast, for Chinese readers in the 1980s, Qiong Yao conjured up a world that was novel and exotic, a world that was modern, westernized, and formerly forbidden in Mao's China. Yet this world was simultaneously more accessible, relatable, and “palatable” since the characters living such a lifestyle were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally Chinese as well.

Closely related to the detailed descriptions of a modern lifestyle is the fact that many characters in Qiong Yao's romances have studied or lived in the United States and Europe, and English words are sprinkled throughout. Not only do they function as markers of modernity, but they are inevitably associated with elegance, sophistication, and success. In other words, foreign things are ascribed a superior quality and a higher value. It is no exaggeration to say that the lifestyle conjured up in Qiong Yao's romances was an object of adulation and envy—first for readers in Taiwan and later for those in post-Mao China.<sup>17</sup>

To give an example, Du Xiaoshuang (杜小双), the protagonist of *In the Mist of the River*, exclaims:

I think there is no better [television] show than the colorful world of Walt Disney! It is entertainment as well as education, with the most beautiful scenes and the most touching stories. This kind of show is truly “aesthetic”! How is it that Walt Disney can do it but we can't? I guarantee that if we had shows like this, sponsors of TV commercials as well as the general public would watch them, grownups as well as kids would watch them.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Whether or not one needs to differentiate Hong Kong and Taiwan in terms of their impact on China seems to me a minor issue for this reason. Throughout the decades after the end of World War II, the two areas had extensive interactions and mutual influences in literature and popular culture, despite obvious differences in their vernacular language and political systems. Taiwanese culture entered China primarily via Hong Kong in the 1970s–1980s. This is evident in the fact that it was only after 1987, when the martial law was lifted in Taiwan, that civilians were able to travel to China. Another indication is that China—whether the government or the public—always referred to the two areas as “*gangtai*” 港台 throughout the 1980s–1990s, an expression that some still continue to use today. For 1980s' China, *gangtai* represented a “modern,” “westernized,” thus desirable, lifestyle.

<sup>18</sup> 我觉得最好的节目,莫过于华德迪斯耐的彩色世界!那是娱乐,也是教育,有最美的画面,有最富人情味的故事。这种节目,才真正是“唯美派”的节目呢!人家华德迪斯耐做得出来,

Even smoking is romanticized this way in *Wild Goose at the Treetop* when it is associated with the West:

“In London, girls as young as fourteen smoke.” She answers softly, then takes over his cigarette and lights it. He gazes at her as she takes a drag. The way she smokes is elegant and classy. A gentle waft of smoke envelopes her like a veil, making her look so poetic and picturesque, so dreamy and dreamlike .... His mind starts to wander again.<sup>19</sup>

Although smoking is by no means a new phenomenon in either Taiwan or China, the picture Qiong Yao paints of a young woman smoking openly and elegantly is both uncommon and romantic. Related to this idealized view of smoking is the fact that, when it comes to physical appearances, the features that the author emphasizes most about her heroines are almost always their “dreamy eyes”<sup>20</sup> and long eyelashes. While the first description is vague and subjective, the other is a facial feature that Chinese people usually identify with Westerners, as long eyelashes are clearly not a common Chinese trait! This is just another way in which Qiong Yao makes her heroines stand out: they may not be the prettiest girls in the traditional sense, but they definitely look striking.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, I'd like to single out another marker of modernity and westernization in Qiong Yao's romances: the ubiquitous presence of coffee drinking and coffee shops. Every one of her novels published in China in 1985 contains episodes of lovers dating at a tastefully decorated coffee shop in Taipei, where they engage in intimate talks over a cup of coffee. Echoing Lin Fangmei's above-mentioned assertion about preserving the

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为什么我们就做不出来?如果有这种节目,我包管广告客户要看,普通观众要看,大人要看,小孩也要看!

在伦敦,女孩子十四岁就抽烟。”她淡淡的回答,接过了他手里的烟,熟练的点燃。他凝视她,她吸了一口烟,抽烟的姿势优雅而高贵,那缕轻轻柔柔的烟雾,烘托着她,环绕着她,把她衬托得如诗、如画、如幻、如梦.....他又神思恍惚起来。

<sup>19</sup> 在伦敦,女孩子十四岁就抽烟。”她淡淡的回答,接过了他手里的烟,熟练的点燃。他凝视她,她吸了一口烟,抽烟的姿势优雅而高贵,那缕轻轻柔柔的烟雾,烘托着她,环绕着她,把她衬托得如诗、如画、如幻、如梦.....他又神思恍惚起来。

<sup>20</sup> The culture critic Li Ao 李敖 wrote a scathing critique of Qiong Yao's first novel, *Outside the Window*, in 1965, in which he noted the numerous references to the heroine's “dreamy eyes” and “dreamy smiles.” See: Li, “Without the Window.”

<sup>21</sup> In fact, in a Qiong Yao romance, there is often a secondary female character who is more beautiful by traditional standards but lacks the inimitable flair of the heroine.

patriarchal order, without exception it is always the male protagonist who is in charge of the dating ritual: he puts sugar and milk in the female protagonist's coffee, essentially teaching her how coffee is to be enjoyed. Here is a passage from *How Many Sunsets*:

On the wall there are exquisite, translucent lamps. One third of the room is taken up by a pond, with dense, nameless broadleaf plants floating on the surface and colorful tropical fish swimming briskly among the aquatic plants and in the crevices between the rocks. They pick a table near the pond and sit down. Xiaotong can't help but stare at the twinkling little fish and the paintings on the wall. On the stereo Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is playing, the music floating softly in the air. The entire room is filled with an artistic feeling of peacefulness.... Coffee is served. Wei Rufeng puts sugar cubes and milk in the coffee for Xiaotong and stirs it with a small spoon.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, *Wild Goose at the Treetop* clearly associates coffee shops with Western culture:

The coffee shop is tiny and cute, situated on the newly developed Zhongxiao East Road. Inside, the décor is clean and graceful, with whitewashed walls, masts and lampposts of unvarnished wood, plain wooden tables and chairs. It evokes a village on a small Greek island. Jiang Huai and Danfeng have been sitting in the corner of the coffee shop for a very long time. Through the windows they have a view of the street. They had lunch together before they came here... "Athena"—this Greek-style coffee shop is named after a Greek goddess.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 壁上有玲珑剔透的小灯,全厅三分之一的位置是一个水池,里面栽着叫不出名字的阔叶植物,绿荫荫的覆盖在水池上,池中养着五彩斑斓的热带鱼,正活泼的在水草和石缝中来往穿梭。他们找了一个靠着水池的位子坐下。晓彤不由自主的伸头去望着池中那些闪闪烁烁、五颜六色的小鱼,和壁上那些十分艺术的图案,唱机里在播送着一张贝多芬的命运交响曲,乐声在室内轻缓的流动。整个厅内,充满了一份宁静幽雅的艺术气息。...咖啡送来了,魏如峰帮晓彤放下了牛奶和方糖,又帮她用小匙搅着。

<sup>23</sup> 这家咖啡厅小小巧巧的,坐落在新开建的忠孝东路上。装饰得颇为干净雅致,白色的墙,原木的横梁,原木的灯架,和古拙的木质桌椅,颇有希腊小岛上岛民的风味。江淮和丹枫坐在咖啡馆的一角,已经坐了很久很久了。隔着玻璃窗,可以看到窗外的街景,他们一起吃午餐,又一起到了这儿——艾琴娜——这“很希腊”的咖啡馆也有个希腊女神的名字。

Repeating the word “Greek” three times in the passage suggests how hard the author is trying to impress upon the reader that the notion of tastefulness is synonymous with Western culture.

Moreover, coffee is not just for dating; it provides an ideal ambience at family gatherings and is elevated to an “art,” as seen in this passage from *The Young Ones*:

After dinner, Yayun makes a pot of coffee. Then they all take a seat in the living room and chat as they drink coffee. Surrounded by a soft green, he feels that the room exudes peacefulness and tranquility. The ambience is enchanting, even intoxicating. Yayun is making an even deeper impression on Yunlou. What a talented woman who can bring people closer together and create the right atmosphere! Yang Ziming [her husband] is truly blessed. He takes a sip of the coffee. It’s perfectly brewed, not too strong and not too light, so aromatic and full-bodied. Making coffee is an art. He too knows how to make good coffee.<sup>24</sup>

To contextualize the above descriptions of coffee shops and coffee drinking in Qiong Yao’s romances, let’s bear in mind that Taiwan during this period was a loyal ally to the United States throughout the Cold War. The substantial economic aid and the prominent American presence on the island led to extensive Americanization and westernization of the society. American—and, to a lesser extent, European—influences were visible and palpable in both highbrow and popular cultures in Taiwan: from classical music to rock ’n’ roll (often sold in pirated albums), from High Modernism and avant-garde art forms to TV shows and Hollywood movies, from the high value the society placed on achieving fluency in English to the outpouring of college graduates to USA (and, in much smaller numbers, to other Western countries) for advanced education.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> 饭后,雅筠亲自煮了一壶咖啡,大家坐在客厅里谈着天,慢慢的啜饮着咖啡。在一屋子静幽幽的绿笼罩之下,室内有股说不出的静谧与安详,那气氛是迷人的,薰人欲醉的。云楼对雅筠的感觉更深刻了,她是个多么善于协调人与人的关系,又多么善于培养气氛的女人!杨子明是有福了。他饮着咖啡,咖啡煮得很好,不浓不淡,很香又很够味,煮咖啡是种艺术,他也能煮一手好咖啡。

<sup>25</sup> For a wide range of insightful perspectives on Taiwanese society in the 1970s, see Yang, *Ideals Continue to Burn*; Yang, *The 1970s: Confessions*. Although the focus is on the 1970s, the first volume provides comprehensive contexts and a chronology of major events from 1969 to 1981.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when these romances were first published, coffee drinking was far from popular and coffee shops in Taiwan were seen as upscale and exotic. While meeting a friend in a coffee shop or enjoying a cup of coffee at the end of a meal were common experiences in the West, under Qiong Yao's pen they were transformed into a measurement of good taste and successful life.

What I am suggesting is that just as these and other markers of a middle-class, modern lifestyle appealed to Taiwanese readers in the 1960 and 1970s, the same holds true for Chinese readers in the 1980s. As mentioned earlier, Western modernity seemed not only more accessible but also less alien and more palatable when it was mediated through Taiwan, another Chinese-speaking society that is geographically and culturally much closer than the West. After all, in the 1980s China had only recently opened up to the West, and the ideological and cultural differences were not so easy to overcome in a short time. Just as world literature was introduced and reintroduced to Chinese readers predominantly through translation, so "Hong Kong and Taiwan" (*gangtai* 港台) functioned much like *the* translator of Western knowledge and lifestyle.

By the end of the 1980s, Taiwan had begun to move away from American influences as nativist consciousness became widespread and gained ascendancy in the cultural sphere. In contrast, post-Mao China was still very curious about, and desirous of, the West, especially USA. It was common to praise something or someone as being "foreign-style" or "with a foreign flair" (*yangqi* 洋气) in Chinese. The term was probably coined in the late nineteenth century and has come to be synonymous with "fashionable" or "modern." Even today, it is still used as a compliment for both men and women, and a selling point for consumer goods in China. In contrast, the expression has long been obsolete in Taiwan.

I am by no means suggesting that Chinese readers loved Qiong Yao simply because her romances opened their eyes to the West. The reading process is never so simple and the reception of literature takes place at multiple levels, both conscious and unconscious. What I am emphasizing is that Qiong Yao was immensely popular in post-Mao China because what she represented was consistent with the collective desire of

the Chinese people for modernization and westernization. Moreover, the appeal of her novels went far beyond exuding a “foreign flair.” In important ways Qiong Yao’s romances offered nothing less than an initiation to romantic love for young readers; they were part and parcel of a new discourse of love that began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

After decades of delegitimizing love between the sexes by the Chinese Communist Party, a new love poetry emerged after the Cultural Revolution. In *Misty Poetry*, Shu Ting (舒婷, b. 1952) gained national renown with her love poems, and to this day she remains the best-known woman poet in China. “To an Oak Tree” (致橡树, 1977) compares the male “you” to an oak tree and the female first-person narrator to a ceiba tree. The poem opens with a vow between the couple to always be loving and selfless:

If I love you—  
 I will never be a clinging trumpet creeper  
 Using your high boughs to show off my height  
 If I love you—  
 I will never be a spoony bird  
 Repeating a monotonous song for green shade.<sup>26</sup>  
 (Translated by Johanna Yueh)<sup>27</sup>

The poem repeats the bold declaration of “If I love you.” Moreover, it rejects the traditional Chinese role of woman as being dependent on her man like a pliant vine clinging to a tall tree—typically a pine, cypress, or oak. The poem then goes on to compare the bond between the couple to the “entwined” roots and caressing leaves of two trees. Rather than a vine, she is a tree in her own right. Standing as two equals, they greet each other though no one can understand their secret language.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> 我如果爱你——  
 我如果爱你——

绝不像攀援的凌霄花，  
 绝不学痴情的鸟儿，

借你的高枝炫耀自己：  
 为绿荫重复单调的歌曲。

<sup>27</sup> The translation is quoted from the website: China.org.cn. It is cited here and below with minor modifications.

<sup>28</sup> 我必须是你近旁的一株木棉， 做为树的形象和你站在一起。 根，紧握在地下，  
 叶，相触在云里。 每一阵风过， 我们都互相致意， 但没有人 听懂我们的  
 言语。

While attributes such as equality, trust, and understanding may seem universal to any good relationship, to hear the poet declare them in “To an Oak Tree” was a breath of fresh air to post-Mao readers. During the Cultural Revolution, dating and open expressions of love between a man and a woman were strictly forbidden, and anyone who violated this faced grave consequences. More generally, privacy was non-existent as the line between private life and public life was completely erased in the name of the Revolution. In light of this historical context, Shu Ting’s reference to the lovers’ secret language that only they understand is especially bold.

Similarly, her “Goddess Peak” (神女峰), written four years later, is consistent with “To an Oak Tree” in representing a new attitude toward love. The Peak is an ancient allusion to the Goddess of Mount Wu who waited resolutely for the return of her lover, King Huai of Chu; she waited in vain, and she eventually turned into stone. However, the poem is not about fidelity, even less about the virtuous woman languishing in the boudoir, a common motif in classical Chinese poetry. Rather, Shu Ting expresses her skepticism openly: “But can the heart/Really turn into stone?” Instead of “being displayed on the cliff for a thousand years,” she chooses to seize the moment and says: “I would rather have a good cry on my lover’s shoulder through the night.”<sup>29</sup>

In Misty Poetry, nature often parallels the human condition much like a sympathetic witness. This is also seen in “Goddess Peak,” in which nature reflects the poet’s rebellion against the traditional perception of women: “Along the riverbank/A torrent of golden coneflowers and privets/Is instigating a new revolt.” The “new revolt” writ large is expressed in poetry as well as other genres in post-Mao China. In fiction, for example, writers, especially such women writers as Zhang Jie(张洁, b. 1937) and Zhang Xinxin(张辛欣, b. 1953), wrote memorable stories about the importance of love in life.

As part of the new discourse of love, the names of Qiong Yao’s fictional characters all tend to be refined and elegant. In comparison to names in the PRC in earlier decades, they tend to be more literary, romantic, and

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<sup>29</sup>但是,心真能变成石头吗 为盼望远天的杳鹤 而错过无数次春江月明 沿着  
江岸 金光菊和女贞子的洪流 正煽动新的背叛 与其在悬崖上展览千年  
不如在爱人肩头痛哭一晚。



feminine. Rather than the politically correct color “red” (*hong* 红) and its homonym “rainbow” 虹, we find “blue” (*lan* 蓝) and “purple” (*zi* 紫) for Qiong Yao’s protagonists; rather than the patriotic sentiment of “protect the East” (*weidong* 卫东) and “sunrise in the East” (*xudong* 旭东), we find cloud (*yun* 云), wind (*feng* 风), rain (*yu* 雨), and bamboo (*zhu* 竹); rather than such roles as “soldier” (*bing* 兵) and “military” (*jun* 军), we find “poetry” (*shi* 诗) and “dream” (*meng* 梦); rather than the martial “tip of blade” (*feng* 锋), “steel” (*gang* 钢) and its homonym “unbending” 刚, we find “book” (*shu* 书) and “literature” (*wen* 文). The contrasts are understandable in view of the vast differences between Taiwan and China following decades of separation. While it doesn’t mean that ideas related to patriotism or nation-building were absent in Taiwanese names, they were far from ubiquitous. It is therefore revealing that, as the society became increasingly open with a loosening of ideological control, the convention for naming also began to alter. Today, there is little distinction when it comes to the names of young men and women on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, although admittedly this is based on personal observations rather than hard statistics. Have Qiong Yao’s romances had anything to do with it? The following real-life story offers a fascinating example.

In the May 20, 2013 issue of *The Daily Beast*, the American news and opinion website, Matt Lombard, who was teaching English literature in the city of Chengdu, related his experience of teaching *The Great Gatsby* to local students. A nineteen-year-old student in his class asked that she be called Antonia rather than her real name Mengting (梦婷): “The name her mother gave her at birth, which Antonia says means ‘dream and beauty,’ is the name of a character in a popular romance novel by the Taiwanese writer Qiong Yao. But Antonia feels her new name makes her more of an independent woman.”

Given the fact that Antonia is a college student, we may assume that her mother was likely to have been born in the late 1960s or early 1970s and that she would have been in college or the middle school when the “Qiong Yao phenomenon” swept across the mainland. Two things are worth noting about this story. First, the fact that her mother named her after a Qiong Yao character (or a variation thereon) shows the impact of those romances on how she saw herself and what she wanted for her

daughter. Second, the fact that Antonia refuses to use her given name suggests that by 2013 Qiong Yao's works are already seen by young women—college-educated women, at least—as common, trite, and even downright embarrassing. Her negative reaction intimates the overexposure and saturation of Qiong Yao in China after three decades. Ironically, while her mother's generation found their new identities in Qiong Yao's characters, now her generation is turning away from those “dreamy and beautiful” names in asserting their own individuality.

Closely related to the characters' names is the language of classical Chinese poetry in Qiong Yao's writings. Paradoxically, her romances are not only permeated with a “foreign flair,” but simultaneously characterized by the extensive use of literary Chinese. The titles of some of her novels, such as *In the Midst of the River*, *How Many Sunsets*, and *Deep Is the Courtyard* (庭院深深), are taken directly from Chinese poetry: the first from *The Book of Odes* (Shijing 诗经) while the latter two are from *ci* (词) or song lyrics of the Song dynasty. Other titles of three-, four-, or five-character constructions also smack of classical Chinese with their lyricism. In addition, the romances are sprinkled with classical verses. While many critics have noted this characteristic, and Qiong Yao herself has talked about her lifelong love for classical poetry, my emphasis here is that her use of language that echoes classical lyrics was part of Qiong Yao's appeal to readers in 1980s' China. As mentioned earlier, one of the major trends of the decade was a return to the Chinese tradition, including literature, both classical and modern. If prior to 1978 every Chinese was expected to memorize Mao Zedong's heroic poetry written in classical forms, Qiong Yao was now bringing back the beautifully romantic and delicately feminine elements of classical poetry that had been suppressed. Here is the conversation among the three main characters in *In the Midst of the River*:

Xiaoshuang: “Like you said, we can rewrite classical poems. Take ‘In the Midst of the River,’ for example, it's elegant and subtle, and it promotes traditional Chinese culture. So much better than those pop songs like ‘My Love Is a Torch.’”

Youwen: “Among modern writers, only Zhang Ailin is more mature, but still she's not profound enough .... I swear I will write something of

quality, something that can truly represent Chinese literature so foreigners won't think that China only has *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Vase of Golden Plum!*"

Yunong: "I just can't accept it. How is it that little Japan can win the Nobel Prize in literature but no one from China is even in the running?"<sup>30</sup>

One reason for Qiong Yao's populist appeal was the harmonious intertwining of Chinese tradition and Western modernity, of displaying pride in classical Chinese heritage on the one hand and living a sophisticated and affluent modern lifestyle on the other. Her romances present a seemingly perfect marriage between the East and the West, even though in reality they existed—and have continued to exist—in a precarious balance in China.

## Xi Murong

Like Qiong Yao, Xi Murong created a sensation first in Taiwan, then in Mainland China. According to the poet, she started writing poetry at the age of thirteen when she scribbled some verses in her diary.<sup>31</sup> She did not publish her first collection, *Orange Jessamine* (七里香), until July 1981. Within a year, the book had gone through seven printings, and by 1985 it had gone through thirty printings. The unprecedented success continued unabated with her second collection, *Youth with No Regrets* (無怨的青春), published in 1983, followed by her third volume, *Nine Chapters of Time* (時光九篇), in 1987. It is no exaggeration to say that she is by far the bestselling poet in the entire history of Taiwan.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> 小双：“你说过的，我们可以改写古诗词，就像这支‘在水一方’，又典雅，又含蓄，又——宣扬了中国固有文化，总比那些‘我的爱情，好像一把火’来得舒服。”

友文：“近代作家中，只有张爱玲的作品比较成熟，但是也不够深刻。... 我发誓要写一点像样的东西出来，写一点真正能代表中国的文学作品出来，不要让外国人，认为中国只有一部红楼梦和一部金瓶梅！”

雨衣：“我就不服气，为什么小日本都可以拿诺贝尔文学奖，而我们中国，居然没有人问鼎！”

<sup>31</sup> Xi, *Orange Jessamine*, 192.

<sup>32</sup> The most comprehensive study of Xi Murong is by Tiong Shiuuan Shiuuan. See Tiong, *A Critical Analysis*. The study focuses on Xi's writings about Mongolia, her ancestral home, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Taiwan's modern poetry was first introduced into China at the end of 1983 with the anthology *Twelve Poets from Taiwan* (台湾诗人十二家), edited by the senior poet Liu Shahe (流沙河, b. 1931). Xi Murong was not among them. In fact, it was her prose that appeared first in China, in the 1985 collections *Painted Rainbow of the Heart—Letters to Young Mothers* (画在心中的彩虹——写给年轻母亲的信) and *There Is a Song* (有一首歌). Both *Youth with No Regrets* and a number of poems were published in 1986, and these were followed by others in 1987–1989. By 1991, her poetry had sold more than one and a half million copies.

But it is not just the numbers; her impact on readers—especially young readers—can be seen retrospectively in a headline that appeared in the *Xiamen Evening Post* (厦门晚报) on September 4, 2009: “Two Major Tasks for Youths in 1989: Memorizing English, Memorizing Xi Murong’s poems” 1989 (年年轻人的两件大事:背英语、背席慕容诗).<sup>33</sup> To put Xi on a par with the national craze of learning English and to treat her poetry as an annual occupation for young men and women speak volumes for her enormous popularity.

An even more telling example is the following message, dated 10 December, 2011 and posted by a blogger named Helen. With the title “Rereading Xi Murong Now” (此时再读席慕容), the post reads:

Too often I have ignored the feelings I once had. A recent issue that contained an interview by Yang Lan brought back the name Xi Murong from years ago.

It has accompanied so many women through their girlhood days, their youth, and their past, as it will their future.

Of course, that includes me.

I must say that, in my life up to this moment, my attitude toward love came from *Outside the Window* [Qiong Yao's first novel] at the very beginning, then from Xi Murong. Later came one after another inscription of reality.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> [http://news.ifeng.com/special/60nianjiaguo/60biaozhirenwu/renwuziliao/200909/0904\\_7766\\_1335074.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/special/60nianjiaguo/60biaozhirenwu/renwuziliao/200909/0904_7766_1335074.shtml), accessed April 6, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> 太多时候了,忽略了曾有的感受,直到近一期的杨澜访谈,才又焕发起多年前的这个名字席慕容,伴随着许多人,走过少女走过青春走了过去又走向将来/当然,也含了我/不得不说,人生至此,我的爱情观,最始之时,是《窗外》,然后就是席慕容,后来才是那一个个真实的镌刻。See: Helen, “Rereading Xi Murong Now.”

The post is revealing in two ways. First, for young people in the 1980s, reading Qiong Yao and Xi Murong was not unlike an initiation to love. Second, Helen might not have meant to sound critical, but the last sentence contrasts the writings of the two popular writers with the reality of love, which she only came to understand later in life. The word “inscription” suggests the scars left by love. In other words, the kind of love she was initiated into through the romances and the love poems was a far cry from the love she experienced in real life.

Having discussed Qiong Yao’s romances, we must now ask the question: what kind of love does Xi Murong represent that appeals to so many readers in Taiwan and China? The fact is, Xi has come under similar criticisms that Qiong Yao has received: her early poetry is described as precious, sentimental, and dreamy. Zhang Xiaofeng (張曉風, b. 1941), the renowned Taiwanese prose writer, penned the preface to *Orange Jessamine*. In it, she confesses that she had to overcome an obstacle before she came to appreciate Xi’s poetry: “[It is] too beautiful, too beautifully pure, which makes it a little hard for us moderns to believe it. Usually, in our unhappy experiences, things that are too beautiful are either phony or bombastic. But after a little struggle I began to like the uniquely pure beauty of her poetry and prose.”<sup>35</sup> Zhang goes on to say: “Poetry like this should not be left behind for people to study or annotate over and over again.”<sup>36</sup> The preface is an example of damning with faint praise if ever there was one. Why did Zhang have to struggle? What was it that eventually convinced her that the “uniquely pure beauty” of Xi’s poetry was genuine and sincere?

“Pure beauty” lies at the heart of the matter. The characterization is often associated with Xi’s early poetry, and it is what catapulted her to fame in China in the 1980s and 1990s. As in the case of Qiong Yao’s romances, I’d like to suggest that Xi’s poetry resonated with the zeitgeist of the times and met the need that was created by preexisting sociocultural conditions.

<sup>35</sup> 太美,美得太純潔了一點,使身為現代人的我們有點不敢置信。通常,在我們不幸的經驗裡,太美的東西如果不是虛假就是浮濫。但僅僅經過一小段的掙扎,我開始喜歡她詩文中獨特的那種清麗。Xi, *Orange Jessamine*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> 像這樣的詩……應該不是留給人去研究或者反覆箋注的, Xi, *Orange Jessamine*, 29.

First, Xi Murong filled a vacuum on the poetry scene in China. As mentioned earlier, underground poetry had emerged in the late 1970s and became wildly popular as Misty Poetry in the early 1980s. More importantly, it laid the foundation for a new poetry scene that ran parallel to, and was largely independent of, the establishment. As the underground or “unofficial” poetry scene developed and the poets experimented with a wide range of styles, poetry became more diversified, more complex, and less accessible. In other words, as a new generation of underground poets sought to theorize and experiment in new ways, poetry began to lose its appeal to general readers. Moreover, such “professionalization” of poetry took place at the same time as both rising consumerism and the proliferation of mass entertainment. The gap between poetry and the general public seemed to be getting wider and wider, and poetry could hardly escape the fate of marginalization.

Another factor contributed to the increasing isolation and marginalization of underground poetry. After the “Tiananmen Incident” of June 1989, some of the poets who had been active on the scene left China while many others went through a period of silence and self-reflection. Historically speaking, at this low point—both in the short term and in the long run—of underground poetry, Xi Murong’s poetry provided a more accessible, more palatable alternative. It is also in this sense that her poetry was said to represent “the last golden age of poetry.”

The second reason for Xi Murong’s immense popularity is that, like Qiong Yao, Xi makes extensive use of the language of classical Chinese poetry. Many of her phrases and lines are either direct quotes or slight modifications. They come from a variety of popular classical sources, from *The Book of Odes* and Qu Yuan’s (屈原, ca. 342–278 BCE) and *Songs of the South* (楚辭) to “The Nineteen Ancient Poems” (古詩十九首, third century), Li Bai (李白, 701–762) and Du Fu (杜甫, 712–770), to Bai Juyi (白居易, 772–846) and Du Mu (杜牧, 803–852). Xi’s lines “Those who love deeply will laugh at me/In a thousand years/my peppered hair is not the only sign of aging” (多情應笑我 千年來/早生的豈只是華髮) in “Imprisonment” are a variation on Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), and “Pass by a thousand sails ... a thousand sails pass by” (過盡千帆..... 千帆過盡) in “Tragicomedy” (悲喜劇) is a variation on Wen Tingyun

(溫庭筠, ca. 812–866).<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that the classical verses Xi Murong draws upon are familiar to general readers. The quotations and variations do not alienate readers with their strangeness but, rather, create a classical ambiance that is comforting and reassuring.

As China entered the New Era, readers who had been weary of Maospeak and the state ideology hungered for new readings, both traditional and modern. Classical poetry with a long, glorious history made a notable comeback. Xi's early poetry incorporated many famous lines, sometimes in their entirety, sometimes stitched together from different poems, sometimes modified with the modern vernacular. Paradoxically, what was old was made new to Chinese readers.

Last but not least, the exclusive focus of Xi Murong's poetry on the emotional world of the first-person narrator (only occasionally a second- or third-person female persona) is very much in tune with the rising consciousness of individuality in post-Mao China. Again, to quote Thomas Gold: "Song lyrics and written words provide a language for mainland Chinese to express individual emotions—the word 'I' occurs frequently—which had previously been denigrated."<sup>38</sup> After decades of glorifying the collective self at the expense of the individual self, the 1980s witnessed a rejection of the former in favor of the latter. This new orientation was evident in literature, literary theory, and philosophy. Xi's poetry may be seen as a continuation of the intellectual and cultural mainstream of the decade.

"Make me believe, Beloved/This is my story" (親愛的 讓我相信/這是我的故事).<sup>39</sup> In addition to the theme of love and the classically flavored lyrical language, Xi Murong's early poetry is characterized by the ubiquitous "I," "me," and "my"—all three words being the same in Chinese: "wo" (我). She pays meticulous attention to the self, not only the emotional self but sometimes the physical self as well. The poem "Maturity" (成熟) (written in 1959, thus one of her earliest poems) describes her "increasingly slender hands" (漸呈修長的雙手), "feverish cheeks" (火熱的頰), and "page after page of deep blue and pale blue tear

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<sup>37</sup>All the examples are found in Xi, *Orange Jessamine and Youth with No Regrets*.

<sup>38</sup>Gold, "Go With Your Feelings," 262.

<sup>39</sup>Xi, "Four Seasons," 80.

stains” 一頁頁深藍淺藍的淚痕。<sup>40</sup> One of her most oft-cited poems, “A Flowering Tree” 一棵開花的樹 (1980) refers to “the moment when I am at my fairest” (我最美麗的時刻), “longing from my previous life” (我前世的盼望), and “my withered heart” (我凋零的心).<sup>41</sup> In “A Prayer” (祈禱詞) (1979), “wo” appears in 12 of 13 consecutive lines, with only one being the plural form, “women” (我們, “we”).<sup>42</sup>

Like Qiong Yao’s novels, Xi Murong’s early poetry is appealing in terms of its idealization and romanticization of love. Similarly, Xi’s love is almost always associated with youth and beauty. If Qiong Yao’s protagonists go to any lengths in pursuit of love, Xi sings of love despite—and because of—its impermanence. “Why is the most fleeting moment always the most beautiful?” (為什麼走得最急的都是最美的時光), she asks.<sup>43</sup> Love is both beautiful and sad, like the last aria in the grand finale of an opera.<sup>44</sup> In fact, without sorrow and pain, love would not be so unforgettable, an idea captured in the metaphor of pearl: the painful past is watered continuously with “warm teardrops” (溫熱的淚液) until over time it turns into a lustrous pearl.<sup>45</sup>

Central to the dominant theme of love in Xi Murong’s early poetry is the notion of a missed moment or missed love, and the concomitant regret. “A Flowering Tree” expresses a woman’s despair because the man she loves didn’t notice her beauty and her eager waiting. “Wish of a Millennium” 一千年的願望 (1976) pinpoints a specific moment of regret—“That moonlit night when I was twenty”—that the narrator wishes she could relive one more time. “The Secret of the Queen of the Night” (曇花的秘密) (1981) has as its central image the *Cereus* flower, which only blooms once on a single night of the year. The first-person narrator projects her own regret onto the “you” who has missed the rare blooming of the flower under beautiful moonlight.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Xi, *Orange Jessamine*, 36–7.

<sup>41</sup> Xi, *Orange Jessamine*, 38–9.

<sup>42</sup> Xi, *Orange Jessamine*, 44–5.

<sup>43</sup> Xi, “Why,” 83.

<sup>44</sup> Xi, “Aria,” 180.

<sup>45</sup> Xi, “Clamshell and Pearl,” 28.

<sup>46</sup> 我愛也只有我/才知道/你錯過的昨夜/曾有過 怎樣皎潔的月 (Xi, *Youth with No Regrets*, 99).



Consistent with the regret of a missed moment or encounter is the representation of love as one destined moment or a single encounter, which is short-lived by nature but gains eternal life through the poet's remembrance. "In that July afternoon/Before the lotuses after new rain if/If you had not turned your head."<sup>47</sup> Similarly, "The moment you turned around/Many things were decided."<sup>48</sup> By remembering—literally, "head-turning" 回首 in Chinese—the moment, the poet relives the past over and over again. "Only in the moment of looking back/can one gain a lucid/heartache."<sup>49</sup> To the poet, love hinges on "a heart-pouring encounter" (一次傾心的相遇).<sup>50</sup> It may be a "beautiful mistake"<sup>51</sup>—a term Xi borrowed from a fellow Taiwanese poet Zheng Chouyu (鄭愁予, b. 1933), but the fact that it is irrevocable and unrepeatably makes it special. She would willingly "exchange the fragrance of one moment for all of my/Sorrow and loneliness of today."<sup>52</sup> Paradoxically, the destined moment is both unpredictable and inevitable.

Another paradox lies at the heart of Xi Murong's poetry: that love is both fleeting and eternal, fleeting because of a missed moment or a brief encounter, eternal because that moment or that encounter is forever inscribed in her memory, to look back on over and over again. Consequently, the poet prays for that precious moment, as expressed in the poem titled "Longing" (盼望) (1981). Instead of a lifetime, what she longs for is "one glance" from "you" when they meet on a "gardenia-blooming hillside," fall in love and then say goodbye. Again, we see here the paradox at work in the poem: a glance vs. a lifetime, momentary vs. long-lasting. The narrator chooses the former over the latter, apparently against common sense. But she doesn't need to explain why or justify her choice, for she does it through the use of imagery. The brief yet intense encounter takes place on a hill covered with blossoming gardenia, conjuring up a sea of bright white against dark green foliage with a strong

<sup>47</sup> 在那個七月的午後/在新雨的荷前 如果/如果妳沒有回頭 (Xi, "Afternoon of Painting Lotus," 38).

<sup>48</sup> 當妳一回眸/有很多事情就從此決定了 (Xi, "Love's Beginning," 37).

<sup>49</sup> 只有在回首的剎那/才能得到一種清明的/酸辛 (Xi, "Beautiful Mood," 189).

<sup>50</sup> Xi, *Youth with No Regrets*, 114.

<sup>51</sup> Xi, "Distance," 113.

<sup>52</sup> 用芳香的一瞬 來換我/今日所有的憂傷和寂寞 (Xi, "One with No Regrets," 60–1).

sweet scent. The contrast between the richly sensuous image and the abstract, nondescript “lifetime” speaks volumes.

In the final analysis, Xi Murong’s early poetry charms and moves readers with its heartfelt profession that the deepest love is to be found in a single moment, literally “a glance.” When accompanied by the acceptance of destiny or the untranslatable Chinese word “yuan” (緣, destiny), it inevitably evokes sadness because such love does not—cannot—last by definition. The poem “Choice” (抉擇) (1979) epitomizes Xi’s aesthetics of love. “For that one instant in a billion light years” with “all its sweetness and sorrow,” the narrator expresses gratitude to all the helping constellations. As expected, the encounter is soon followed by parting; however, this is how “the poem composed by God” is completed. There is nothing left except to “slowly grow old.”

All the key elements of a Xi Murong poem can be found here: the destined moment of love (it is “meant to be”), the privileging of the moment over a lifetime, love as the defining moment in life, love inevitably followed by separation, and, finally, all of this taking place when one is young and fair. What distinguishes “Choice” from Xi’s other poems is the hyperbole: love is a cosmic event that happens once in “a billion light years,” and God is the supreme poet of love. While the portrayal of love is far from realist, its appeal is undeniable: love is both beautiful and sad, both sweet and bitter, both short-lived and eternal, both extremely personal and fantastically cosmic. It is little wonder that Xi’s poetry has so much appeal to readers—especially young readers—longing for love.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The 1980s witnessed unprecedented transformations in contemporary Chinese history. The opening of the country to the world after three decades of isolation, the national project of modernization, and the loosening of ideological control combined to usher in an era of intense

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<sup>53</sup> Lin Pingqiao (林平乔) offers two different reasons for Xi Murong’s popularity in Taiwan and China in the 1980s: for Taiwanese readers it filled the spiritual void in the materialistic society; for mainland readers who had just come out of class struggles [of the Cultural Revolution], her poetry provided a sought-after home for pent-up feelings. See: Lin, “The Discursive Strategies,” 124–7.

introspection and hopeful self-renewal. Having recently come out of the Cultural Revolution, the public—with intellectuals, writers, and artists at the forefront—veered away from collectivism and embraced individualism, away from ideological purity and embraced personal feelings and private experiences.

This chapter has analyzed the phenomenal success and significant impact of Qiong Yao's romances and Xi Murong's lyric poetry in post-Mao China by contextualizing them in the sociocultural milieu and the collective unconscious of the decade. Going beyond the curiosity factor or the mere pursuit of novelty, I have sought to account for the immense popularity of these two women writers by relating their works to several emergent discourses at the time: the discourse of modernization and westernization, the discourse of return to the classical Chinese heritage, and the new discourse of love. Of the three, the latter two are relevant to Xi Murong's lyric poetry, while all of them are applicable to Qiong Yao's novels. Together, the three discourses were instrumental in laying the foundation for the construction of a new imaginary of China: a China that has been reborn and is eager to join the modern, affluent, and sophisticated world as represented by the West; a China that is proud of its own cultural heritage, of which elements of gentility, lyricism, and romance had long been suppressed by the state orthodoxy.

The above analysis also addresses the question as to why it was these two Taiwanese writers rather than others who exerted such a significant impact. There is no denying the power of popular culture from Hong Kong; to focus on Qiong Yao and Xi Murong is not to dismiss the Hong Kong factor. However, it is also true that when it came to romance and poetry, no one could compare with the two Taiwanese writers in post-Mao China. Although Hong Kong is geographically closer to the mainland, Taiwan represented an Other that was both traditional and modern, both familiar and new. Qiong Yao's idealization of love and representation of an elegant modern lifestyle, as well as Xi Murong's paradoxes of love as simultaneously momentary and eternal, beautiful and sad, are both expressed in a classically flavored, lyrical language. When we consider the fact that nativist literature in Taiwan from the 1960s to the 1980s—whether fiction or poetry—attracted little attention from mainland readers in the New Era, it makes the phenomenal success of Qiong

Yao and Xi Murong even more significant. Taiwan could—and did—exert a major impact because its popular literature fulfilled a burgeoning yearning of the masses in post-Mao China, appealing to them in ways that mainland writers could not during the transitional period.

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