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# Science and Poetry: Narrativizing Marital Crisis in Reform-Era Rural China<sup>†</sup>

Hui Faye Xiao

## Revisiting the 1980s

In the face of radical marketization and global consumerism, a wave of nostalgia for the 1980s is sweeping across China's cultural landscape. The 1980s is often commemorated as a golden era when Chinese intellectuals were idealistic iconoclasts who stood at the center of the cultural transformation that would lead to China's modernization. Viewed through such a nostalgic lens, the 1980s' intellectual-led "new enlightenment movement" (*xin qimeng yundong*) is comparable to the earlier May Fourth movement in terms of their common agenda of bringing enlightenment, humanism, scientific knowledge, and modern consciousness to China. In the past few decades, scholars such as Wang Hui, Xiaomei Chen, Jing Wang, and Tani Barlow have written critical reflections of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, none of these studies considers the interaction between the dominant intellectual discourse of the decade and the drastically changing social life in rural areas, particularly with respect to the "private" sphere.

Outside of the field of literary and cultural studies, Susan Greenhalgh provides an ethnographic account of Dengist China's turn to scientism in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, she reveals the ways in which a group of cyberneticists

<sup>†</sup> I am indebted to two anonymous reviewers and the following scholars for their comments and suggestions: Gary Xu, Robin Visser, Rania Huntington, Nancy Abelmann, Yan Hairong, Matt Hale, Keith McMahon, Maggie Childs, and Randi Hacker. My thanks also go to Kirk Denton, editor of *MCLC*, and to Jason McGrath, the organizer of the 2010 AAS panel "For Modernizations: Reconsidering the Post-Mao Moment in the Arts" and all the panelists and audiences who gave me valuable feedback.

<sup>1</sup> For a dynamic scholarly conversation centering on the 1980s' intellectuals' great debate concerning Enlightenment and scientific knowledge, see Wang Hui 1998; Xiaomei Chen 1995; Barlow 1991; and Jing Wang 1996.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of "scientific policymaking" in the 1980s, see Greenhalgh 2008.

“scientized” the “one-child policy” and how this radical policy affected Chinese society, particularly peasant family life. However, Greenhalgh’s groundbreaking work focuses on the policymaking process, not of the day-to-day lives of the Chinese peasantry. Furthermore, Greenhalgh emphasizes the natural scientists’ crucial role in the 1980s’ “scientizing moment” without taking into consideration the interaction, cooperation, and contestation between scientists and humanists during this transitional period. As a result, many pressing questions have been left unanswered: what structures of classification and domination were built up and sentimentalized in the process of institutionalizing the mechanism of scientific knowledge production and dissemination? What role did literary representations play in legitimizing 1980s intellectual discourse centered on the “emancipatory capacity of knowledge”? In what ways does an alliance of scientific modernity and literary representation affect the reimagination of the “private life”?

In this essay, I address these questions through a reexamination of two controversial short stories written jointly by Chen Kexiong and Ma Ming in the 1980s. In both pieces the power of scientific knowledge is constantly invoked to naturalize strategies of political domination and to intrude in people’s marital life. The first story is “Dujian tigui” (Return, cries the cuckoo). First published in the literary magazine *Qingchun* (Youth) in 1980, it won the national Youth Literary Prize and aroused a heated debate regarding the tension between tradition and modernity, a common theme of intellectual debate at this historical moment. Shi Ping, the male protagonist, is a married peasant from a remote village. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, Shi is admitted into college for his literary talent. There, he falls in love with a girl (Qiu Fei), studying nuclear physics, stirring up a deep dissatisfaction with his rural lifestyle. When graduation approaches, he is forced to make a choice between staying with the well-educated girl in the big city and going back to his peasant wife and young daughter in the countryside. After a long bitter internal struggle, he finally decides to

return to his peasant wife's side.

Discussing their motivation for composing such a highly controversial story, Chen and Ma revealed that they had witnessed many similar divorce cases when they attended Fudan University in Shanghai. Some of their fellow students came from the countryside while many others had been *xiexiang zhishi qingnian* ("sent-down" youths) during the Cultural Revolution. These students had gotten married and had children in their rural homes before attending university in a big city. Chen and Ma decided to write this story in order to expose their marital problems and internal agonies.

One year later, Chen and Ma composed a widely acclaimed sequel, "Feixiang yuanfang" (Flying afar, 1981), to their first story. As the title indicates, the second piece resonates with the Chinese intellectuals' desire to *zouxiang shijie* (marching toward the world) and to connect with the global metropolitan modernity lurking on the distant horizon. Almost an allegory of this new global imaginary, "Flying Afar" completely rewrites the ending of "Return, Cries the Cuckoo": the male protagonist finally divorces his peasant wife and chooses to dwell permanently in the city in the name of pursuing free love, individual development, and a modern lifestyle. In the reform era, as "sent-down" youths returned to the City, the City itself also returned to the center stage of modernization. I capitalize the first letter of the word City to emphasize that it does not refer to any specific city, but to a deterritorialized space of modernity in which the modern subjectivity and the values of modernity can be pursued and realized. In addition, what is especially interesting in this new narrative of modernity is the explicit evocation of the power of modern/Western science, mediated through poetic aesthetics, to resolve the protagonist's marital problem and internal conflict.

Through a close reading of these two short stories contextualized within the political climate and the cultural parameters of the 1980s, I intend to challenge the conventional wisdom that the paradigmatic



shift in the early reform era took place within the boundaries of the public domain (J. Wang 1996: 20). Even as it denounces the socialist state intervention into the domestic sphere, I argue, the early 1980s' intellectual discourse subjugates the "private" realm to regulation by a new dominant ideology of scientific modernity. As Jing Wang (1996: 89) has noted, the reconfiguration of the social stratification and power structure caused an "epistemological reorientation" in the 1980s. While this "epistemological reorientation" took place mostly on the rational level, I propose that there was also a pervasive reconfiguration of the structure of feeling in the domestic sphere. Educated elites dominated not only the emerging "technocratic class order" (Andreas 2009: 258) but also reconstructed the familial order in which domestic power and affective value are reassigned based on one's access to "scientific knowledge" and urban civilization. Moreover, literary representations played a central pedagogical role in the process of narrativizing scientific modernity and modernizing the structure of feeling through a formidable alliance of "science and poetry" at the onset of the reform era.

### **Cooperation of Science and Poetry**

To understand fully the broader cultural implication of the literary representation of a poet's difficult "personal" choice between his peasant wife and his scientist girlfriend, it is necessary to first look at the sociopolitical conditions under which the stories were composed and discussed. A national craving for the development of science and a fever for knowledge marked the early 1980s. As Marxist-Maoist ideology lost its appeal, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) turned to science to regain its legitimacy as a ruling entity and to reorganize political and economic order.<sup>3</sup> Disenchantment with the Maoist revolutionary ideology and political idealism went hand in hand with the new enchantment of scientific modernity and the development mentality.

In the late 1970s, a large amount of Euro-American scientific writing

<sup>3</sup> Susan Greenhalgh's book *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*, particularly its introduction, offers an in-depth discussion of the radical transition from the Maoist party policy made mainly on ideological grounds to Dengist "scientific policymaking."

was translated and published in China. “New industrial revolution,” “information revolution,” “fourth industrial revolution,” and “third wave” (the original title of a translated bestseller by American writer Alvin Toffler) were cultural buzzwords in the discourse surrounding the global technological revolution. Laments over China’s backwardness in this “third wave” could often be heard among Chinese intellectuals. The old question once raised by Joseph Needham resurfaced: “Why didn’t China develop its own system of modern science?”

In 1978, a national science conference was held in Beijing to serve “as a forum to promote . . . rapid and sustained development and technology” (Simon 1987: 136). In his opening remarks at the conference, Deng Xiaoping put forth the political tenet that “science and technology is the first productive force” (*kexue jishu shi diyi shengchan li*). In 1983, Zhao Ziyang, premier at the time, emphasized anew the notion that developing science and technology would be instrumental in narrowing the gap between China and developed countries (Jin 1983: 4). As a result, social progress was equated with technological and material progress; rapid economic development would, so the discourse went, resolve all social problems.

Because technological expertise occupied the central position in economic transformation, scientists, and intellectuals more generally, were expected to be leading agents in the state’s modernization program.<sup>4</sup> In 1977, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was founded to give institutional support to this program, referred to as the Four Modernizations (Barlow 1991: 222). The new political slogan “without intellectuals there will be no modernization” (*meiyou zhishifenzi jiu meiyou xiandaihua*) gained popular currency (Ji 1983: 14–24). An increasing number of technocrats were incorporated into the Party leadership or placed “in positions of authority” (Simon 1987: 141). New party members were drawn from an enlarging pool of college graduates instead of from peasants and workers, as had been the case in early stages of CCP history. It was transformed into “a party of technocratic officials” (Andreas 2009: 7).

<sup>4</sup> The “Four Modernizations” refers to the modernization of China’s agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense. The CCP first put forward this policy in 1964.

Abandoning the Maoist educational policies aimed at leveling class distinctions, the government restored the national meritocratic *gaokao* system in 1977, and the educational system was reinstitutionalized to put exclusive stress on academic success.<sup>5</sup> This overhaul of the educational system helped establish a unified linguistic market in which a new kind of knowledge, like a commodity, could realize its exchange value. As Bourdieu (1977: 652) points out, “The integration into the same ‘linguistic community’ . . . is the precondition for the establishment of relations of linguistic domination.” Once marginalized by Mao-era egalitarian politics, Chinese intellectuals now reestablished a new discursive hierarchy in which scientific knowledge—with its close associations with modernization, development, and notions of historical progress—became a legitimate and universal language that prioritized mental over manual labor and the industrial over agrarian mode of production.

Numerous literary works and cultural debates further fueled the enthusiasm for scientific modernity. The prominent poet Guo Moruo made a landmark speech hailing the coming of “springtime for science” (*kexue de chuntian*) at the National Science Conference in 1978. Following this, the cultural and literary elite forged a strong alliance with scientific workers, as illustrated by the mutual attraction and admiration felt between Shi Ping and Qiu Fei in the stories I discuss later. Their intimate emotional ties best illustrates Li Zehou’s (1985: 178) philosophical speculation, which was influential among 1980s Chinese intellectuals, that a holistic modern subjectivity could only be established by a new knowledge system of “science plus poetry” (*kexue jia shi*). In the spirit of this new alliance of science and poetry, the mental labor of writing was regarded as equivalent to scientific research because both propelled the modernization of the nation and thus shared an interchangeable cultural value and symbolic power. Li Zehou (2003: 116) traces this alliance of humanists and scientists back to Hu Shi’s ideas of “scientism,” which placed equal value on deciphering an ancient character and discovering a new constellation (Li 2003: 116).

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of the historical changes in China’s education policies, see “Part 4: The New Era (1976–Present)” in Andreas 2009.

<sup>6</sup> For more details of their influential methodology and argument, see Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng 1984. In the 1980s, Jin and Liu coedited the "Towards the Future" series to popularize scientific knowledge and modern consciousness. Having graduated from the chemistry department and the Chinese department at Beijing University respectively, the collaborating couple seems a perfect example of the alliance of science and poetry. In this sense, the romance between Shi and Qiu in the stories parallels the collaboration of Jin and Liu in real life.

Not only was scientific discourse incorporated into literary practices and social criticism, but literary phenomena and historical events were also studied as sciences. The best example is Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng's influential study of Chinese feudal society as an "ultrastable structure" (*chao wending jiegou*) with natural scientific models such as control theory and systems theory.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, literary writers endowed their scientist characters with a humanistic interior world. The best-known pieces include Xu Chi's works of reportage literature, such as *Dizhi zhi guang* (The light of geology) and *Gedebahe caixiang* (Goldbach's conjecture, 1977). The books popularized the notion of scientific rationality among general readers by highlighting the sublime figures of Li Siguang and Chen Jingrun, a geologist and a mathematician, respectively, as the national heroes of a new era who unswervingly dedicated themselves to the advancement of human knowledge and the development of scientific research despite economic difficulties and political adversity.

The fever for modern/Western scientific knowledge and the intellectual pursuit of humanism converged in what can be called a "development mentality." As the political slogan "development is the ultimate truth" (*fazhan cai shi ying daoli*) shows, this mentality made economic development the very first priority. In the literary trends and cultural discussions of the 1980s, writers and intellectuals engaged in various ways in this central discourse of development and participated in the formation of the master narrative of "scientific modernity." Writers, poets, humanists, and cultural workers again assumed their historical mission of leading the masses along the path to modernization. Literature became an essential tool for reproducing the everyday structure of feelings and reconfiguring the relationship between the past and the future.

This zealous pursuit of scientism harkens back to one of the major themes of the May Fourth movement. In the early twentieth century, reform-minded intellectuals turned to European Enlightenment rationality to envision a modernized new China. An import from the European

Enlightenment, the modern concept of science was personified as “Mr. Science” and promoted as China’s gendered savior. In *New Youth* (Xin qingnian), *New Wave* (Xin chao) and *Weekly Review* (Meizhou pinglun), the three flagship journals of the New Culture movement, the word *kexue* (science) appears 3,275 times, more than four times the frequency of the other May Fourth buzzword *minzhu* (democracy) (Jin/Liu 1999: n. p.). Together scientists and New Culture pioneers constructed what Wang Hui (2004: 1123) calls a “scientific discourse community” (*kexue huayu gongtongti*) in the hope of calling upon the power of modern/Western science to demolish traditional power structures and construct a coherent modern nation. Wang derives his term from Jean-François Lyotard’s “scientific community,” which refers to the intellectual group whose social influence radiates not only through scientific organizations and journals, but also through the educational system and various cultural media, and consequently blurs the boundaries between scientific and humanist discourses. The “scientific discourse community” takes shape through radical changes in educational institutions, knowledge production, and the social division of labor. As modern science acquires its universal legitimacy outside disciplinary boundaries through the power of the “scientific discourse community,” human society also becomes a subject (or object?) of scientific analysis and categorization. Like Wang Hui’s May Fourth, the 1980s was marked by the formation of such a community and its legitimization of the discourse of science.

### **The Split Modern Subject**

Set in the context of the “scientizing moment” of the early 1980s, Chen and Ma’s stories can be read as symbolic representations of the male intellectual’s painstaking evolution from a member of the local agrarian community to that of the urban-based “scientific discourse community.” Although it may seem strange to include a poet (the male protagonist Shi Ping is a poet) in this community, literature was also scientized in the

sweeping wave of scientism in the early 1980s. As we saw earlier, the constant interaction and cooperation of “science and poetry” expanded the definition of science (and poetry). Different from the strict academic sense of the word, science in modern social life refers to the systematized disciplinary knowledge and professional expertise (usually inscribed in and transmitted through written words) that institutionalize our everyday choices and “personal” decisions.

Caught between the drastically different value systems of the two communities, the poet’s struggle, uncertainty, and angst are projected onto his marital crisis, which leads to a complete destruction and rebuilding of his ethical and emotional life world. At the very beginning of the story “Return, Cries the Cuckoo,” the male protagonist Shi Ping is hurrying on his way back to S city (referring to Shanghai) where he attends F University (referring to Fudan University) after spending a summer at home. The meandering country road leads him to the vast world outside the village, but also serves as an inconvenient link to his past. In a retrospective narration, Shi relates his life story: Born in a secluded mountain village, he consented to an arranged marriage at twenty-five and had a daughter with his peasant wife Caifeng (who remains nameless in “Return, Cries the Cuckoo” and is only identified by name in the sequel).

Described in a language that is lyrical and far removed from the everyday speech of “real” peasants, Shi’s life before attending university is portrayed as quiet and peaceful, following the same pattern day in and day out. Every morning he and his wife toiled in the fields and every evening the country road took them home. Such a life pattern is compared to a clear creek that flows between the valleys, never changing its course. Caifeng’s bright and gentle eyes are then compared to the flowing creek, thus feminizing the idyllic representation of an eternal Nature.

Even their arranged marriage—a traditional Confucian social practice reviled by intellectual and political elites since the May Fourth movement—is softened by its connection with the picturesque landscape.

Erasing any imprint of the historical vicissitudes through which China has passed, the idyllic aesthetics situates rural life firmly in the imaginary realm of the natural, beyond the reach of any political campaigns such as the Land Reform, the Marriage Reform, the Great Leap Forward, or the Cultural Revolution. Only on a personal rather than political level—and then only very briefly—is the *shangshan xiexiang* (up to the mountains and down to the villages) movement mentioned in a reminiscence from Shi's perspective: what distinguished him from his cohorts was his literary talent, which he learned to cultivate from "sent-down" youths during the Cultural Revolution.

Shi's mastery of the medium of written language and poetry consequently changed his life path. He remembers the autumn evening when Caifeng told him about her pregnancy when they were walking back home after a long day's labor. Excited at the good news, Shi sauntered down the country road, enjoying a grand symphony of colors, fragrances, and sounds of the harvest. That night, Shi wrote a poem entitled "Xiaolu yegui" (One night, coming home on the country road) in celebration of the golden harvest season. Untouched by what Raymond Williams (1973: 32) calls the "curse of labor," nature is transformed by the indulgent gaze of the educated male spectator into an all-providing maternal figure who magically produces a natural bounty. Traces of sweat, dirt, drudgery, physical strain, and squalor in the everyday life of rural laborers are erased from this romanticized picture of an idealized natural order.

Following the publication of his poem, Shi composed more poems on the pastoral landscape, idyllic lifestyle, and traditional ethics of his village. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, he was recommended to the Chinese Department of F University as an emerging young poet.<sup>7</sup> At the university, he continued writing about his passion and nostalgia for rural life, delivering philosophical speculations on local traditions, and thus enjoyed renown in university and literary circles.

Ironically, the poetic construct of an aesthetic utopia does not help Shi

<sup>7</sup> This practice of recommending peasants as well as workers and soldiers to college was established during the Cultural Revolution to replace the meritocratic *gaokao* (college entrance examination) system. The recommendation system aimed to narrow the gap between the city and the countryside by recruiting a higher percentage of college students from proletarian families. Ideally, upon graduation, the recommended students would return to where they had come from in the spirit of Mao Zedong's July 21 Directive. For more details about this recommendation system, see Andreas 2009, particularly Chapter 8, "Worker-Peasant-Soldier Student."

Ping delve deeper into the everyday reality of his native village; instead, it breeds a profound sense of alienation from the family he left behind in the countryside. When Shi returns to the village during his first summer break, he is baffled by the banalities of the unsavory village life that appear completely different from what exists in his memory. He finds the winding country road home narrow and bumpy in comparison to the wide and well-maintained asphalt highway in S city. As the object of aesthetic valorization in his first published poem, the country road connects Shi with a new world that promises a bright future. However, in its physical existence, this road of everyday life is like an unsightly scar that constantly reminds him of an abject past that has been sedimented into his self-identity.

Caifeng personifies the ambiguous position of the country road stuck between the future and the past. When Shi returns home during his first summer break, he wants to behave like a “civilized” urban resident by offering to shake hands with his wife whom he has not seen for a year. To his great disappointment, his wife does not react in a “civilized” manner. Rather, she blushes and dodges the proffered hand. While her maternal body once inspired Shi’s poetic celebration of the harvest season of Mother Nature, Caifeng’s lack of modern manners now brings Shi face to face with possible obstacles to his future metamorphosis into a citizen of modernity.

After spending a few days in the village, Shi gets bored and depressed. Compared to the high-rises in S city, the cottage in which his family lives seems particularly shabby and dilapidated. Seen from the newly educated poet’s perspective, rural poverty is amplified as one of the symptoms of the abject Other of urban modernity. The despondent poet misses his school life in S city, of which his illiterate wife has no personal experience or even any remote knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Instead, she can only talk to him about their everyday chores and needs, which are no longer of interest to him. After just a year’s separation, the unfathomable distance between the city and the countryside has driven a wedge between the peasant couple, causing

<sup>8</sup> Shi’s wife, in her thirties, would have grown up around the time when state-sponsored basic education in the form of “illiteracy-elimination class” (*sao mang ban*) was expanding in the countryside. According to the 1982 Population Census, “only 23 percent of men and women aged 15 or over were illiterate, a vast improvement when contrasted with pre-1949 illiteracy rates of between 70 and 80 percent” (Bramall 2007: 152). Therefore, readers might wonder whether Caifeng’s illiteracy was created by the authors to fit their imagination about rural backwardness and to enhance her contrast with the image of an urban-based modern woman. There is no way, of course, that we can confirm this speculation. My thanks go to Matt A. Hale for this insight.



them to lose access to each other's inner world.

Their miscommunication makes manifest a clash of two hierarchical languages. Linguistic exchanges, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 651), reflect power relations between the speakers. In the story "Return, Cries the Cuckoo," Shi joins the class of cultural elites because of his mastery of a literary language used by post-Mao intellectuals, whereas his wife remains a member of the marginalized peasant class. Having internalized the universal power of knowledge, Shi prioritizes poetry over oral communication with his wife about their everyday life and memorizing English vocabulary over helping his wife work in the fields. The rural/urban divide manifests itself in a hierarchy of different systems of knowledge and language. Scientific knowledge inscribed in a modernized written language is regarded as far superior and more meaningful than practical knowledge acquired from manual labor and day-to-day technical innovations, often passed on orally from one generation to another in the local dialect.

The incompatible linguistic systems that they use reproduce and perpetuate the enlarging social and economic differences between husband and wife: the feminine/rural language is particular and meticulous about physical details, practical skills, and the struggles of everyday life, whereas the masculine/urban language is lofty, conveying universal scientific truths that transcend local specificities and legitimize the modern subject. More often than not, the latter linguistic system is used as the standard language to represent—and oftentimes override—the former. The distance between the two linguistic systems reproduces the distance between the countryside, which is closely tied to physical hardship and the local dialect, and the city, which is associated with civilization, mental labor, and the language of universal knowledge and modernity.

Standing in contrast to the ascending male intellectual, the illiterate peasant wife is reduced to the subordinate state of nonenlightened Other who must be expunged from the modern male-female relationship. Primitive body without an intelligent mind, the rural woman is exiled from

the male intellectual's fantasy of an urban-based family life that cultivates modern citizens with Enlightenment consciousness and "civilized manners." Unable to find a market in his rural hometown to realize the exchange value of his newly acquired symbolic capital and linguistic competence, Shi flees back to the S city before summer break ends.

Shi's self-exile from his poeticized "pastoral life," the root of his literary creation, and his failure to reconnect with his wife, remind one of the well-known encounter between a modern intellectual and an impoverished peasant woman in Lu Xun's canonical story "Zhufu" (New year's sacrifice). Toward the beginning of the story, the first person narrator, a modernizing intellectual returning to his hometown of Luzhen, bumps into Xianglin Sao, *the* prototypical exploited and downtrodden peasant woman in modern Chinese literature. In her brilliant reading of this chance encounter, Rey Chow emphasizes the intellectual narrator's internal conflicts caused by his ambivalent position in the narrative. According to Chow, the first-person narrator builds up his social subject through subjugating himself to scholarly learning. While the narrator who is constantly thinking and writing is represented as an intelligent "mind," all the textual details tell us only about Xianglin Sao's physical features and bodily movements. "All the representational channels that could have given her a kind of 'subjectivity' are carefully blocked" (Chow 1995: 110). Confronted with the impenetrable "Other" trapped between tradition and modernization, the intellectual narrator chooses to evade her question, a question that cannot be answered from within the logic of his Enlightenment knowledge system. He flees from his hometown. Thus, not unlike "Return, Cries the Cuckoo," the whole narrative about an intellectual's trip back to his hometown becomes a literary testimony to his strong "desire for departure" (Chow 1995: 108).

Half a century later, in Chen Kexiong and Ma Ming's story, another Chinese intellectual's predicament manifests itself again in the form of the mind/body split, or the unbridgeable gap between existential dilemma

and spiritual transcendence and salvation. However, the fictional peasant-turned-poet in “Return, Cries the Cuckoo” faces is even more entangled with his personal life and everyday reality than the one faced by the narrator in “Sacrifice.” Whereas the latter is still positioned as an outsider to the enclosed small town resistant to the external forces of historical change, Shi straddles the line between village insider and outsider. He cannot withdraw completely from the village without making a personal choice concerning his marriage and family. In other words, Shi is dealing with a past that is part of what he is and what he might become in the future.

Shi’s existential dilemma—caught between lofty poetic longings and the mundaneness of everyday life—was experienced in reality by the group known as “Root Searching” writers of the 1980s. These writers lived in remote frontiers as “sent-down” youths during the Cultural Revolution and returned to the city at the end of the Mao era. In their literary texts, part of the “cultural reflection” of the 1980s, they return to the rural, but only in the form of nostalgic fantasies of the mythical origins of some “uncontaminated” Chinese culture. “Root Searching” writers’ rural experiences, mediated through fiction, exist only as memories, nostalgia, and spiritual quest. In other words, only in being physically removed from the rural site and only through a “magical extraction of the curse of labor” (Williams 1973: 32) in rural life, are they able to resort to aestheticization and sublimation to recuperate indigenous traditions. The separation of the object of the gaze and the owner of the gaze is a necessary epistemological precondition for creating a pastoral landscape.

### **Woman of the Future**

A foil to Shi Ping’s peasant wife, the character Qiu Fei in “Return, Cries the Cuckoo” is the gendered embodiment of scientific modernity. Qiu is a nuclear physics major at F University. Coming from a Shanghai-based intellectual family, this young girl stands at the frontier of urban civilization

and natural science. Pretty, intelligent, and aggressive, she symbolizes exactly what Caifeng lacks. In their very first meeting, Qiu impresses Shi with her sharp critique of the latter's serial poem entitled "Xiang lian" (Longing for the country). She says:

Sure, some lines are very beautiful. But as for the overall motif, I cannot say I like it. Don't you think the "oil lamp" and "ox plough" should be sent to a history museum? Are those signs of the outdated rural life still worth your poetic passion in the late 1970s, a new age marked by the wide application of computer technology? (Chen/Ma 1989a: 155)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Shocked by such a future-oriented view heralded decades before China (and the world) enters the age of information, Shi tries desperately to defend himself by alluding to the time-honored tradition of pastoral lyrical poetry in classical Chinese literature. However, his poetic philosophy of "returning to the Roots of Chinese literature" does not convince Qiu. She cuts him short, and proclaims that poetry should keep up with social reality, which is always changing and moving forward. All of a sudden, she switches their discussion from verse writing to her own major to illustrate her argument concerning historical progress and scientific advancement: "My major is nuclear physics. How I worship nuclear fusion!" She goes on and on describing in lengthy detail the whole process of nuclear fusion. The following day, Qiu takes Shi to her lab. Pointing at her equipment, the odd shapes of which suggest the mystical technological power of modern science, she exclaims: "This is real poetry!" She passionately declares that nuclear fusion will generate an explosive energy that could cause a real revolution in the material world and usher humankind into the modern era.

Though he knows nothing about nuclear physics, Shi surrenders completely to the power of scientific knowledge embodied by the figure of the urban woman. From then on, they meet often, discussing his poems,

her research projects, and the future of the young generation. Even though they live on the same campus, Shi and Qiu exchange letters frequently. In one long letter, he talks about his bold experiment with new poetic styles. In response, Qiu tells him excitedly that her lab is collaborating with Dr. Chen Ning Yang (Yang Zhenning), a Nobel laureate physicist, to work on a groundbreaking research project. Basking in the bliss of discovering the immense revolutionary power of modern science and technological innovation, Shi is inspired to compose a series of narrative poems championing the reform and development of social life and popular consciousness.

Normally, the cultural image of the modern scientist is gendered male—for example, Chen Jingrun and Li Siguang in the 1980s' reportage by Xu Chi. In "Return, Cries the Cuckoo," the urban/rural divide is powerful enough to reverse the usual gender model of male mentor and female student. Although Qiu Fei's role complicates such a male/female duality,<sup>10</sup> there is an additional layer of gendered power structure in the story: Qiu catches up with the latest international scientific developments through her cooperation with Dr. Yang, a male scientist whose Nobel Prize made him a household name in reform-era China. The reversal and subsequent reinforcement of conventional gender roles indicate that "male" and "female" are not merely biological concepts, but relational positions in multilayered power networks.

Emphasizing the relational aspect of the notion of gender, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991: 13) reminds us:

No one "becomes a woman" (in Simone de Beauvoir's sense) purely because she is female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex. . . . It is the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as "women."

is only through these interwoven power nexuses of class, gender, nation,

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting this point.

urban/rural divide, and educational institutions, that a global network of hierarchical relations has been built up: the Chinese American Nobel laureate leads a young Chinese woman scientist to join the international scientific community; she in turn seeks to reform the peasant-turned-poet, who is torn between his past and his present, with her future-oriented scientific project; and at the bottom of this hierarchical chain of classification and distinction is the illiterate rural woman, the object Other of the Modern, or the disturbing traces from a past that needs to be erased to make way for the birth of a modern subject.

It would be simplistic to conclude that Qiu Fei is simply a masculinized woman scientist, rationally predicting what China will be; her feminine appeal is constantly highlighted and superimposed on the urban space of Shanghai with all its modern facilities, educational institutions, and visual spectacles. Qiu first meets Shi at a college dance party. She takes the initiative to teach him how to do ballroom dance, a popular “Western” leisure activity in Chinese cities since the late 1970s. Constantly correcting Shi’s clumsy steps, Qiu gives the awestruck poet a first lesson in how to adjust his body to the pulsating rhythm of modern nightlife. Later, Qiu takes Shi to the Bund, a riverside walkway in downtown Shanghai where young lovers would go to display their physical intimacy in public. Here, on “the center stage of S city civilization,” Shi, shocked at what he sees, receives an education in sexual modernity.

Charged with erotic energy, the night scene on the Bund is described as seductively charming: the gentle wind caresses the young lovers’ faces and hair, and the lights from countless ships dance on the dark surface of the Huangpu River. In contrast to the pastoral image of the serene creek in Shi’s hometown, the Huangpu River, artery for Shanghai’s manufacturing industry and international trade, illuminates the modern ideals of unlimited mobility, constant action, and rapid changes. The dazzling spectacle of a vibrant modern space replaces the rustic landscape as the setting for a romantic drama.

A similar pattern of light and shadow can be found in the profile of the modern woman Qiu, who is fused with the seductive night scene. Observed from Shi's point of view, Qiu's face is hidden in the dark, thus taking on almost mystical feminine charm. However, her eyes shine through the darkness, glistening with the light of hope for a brighter future. Qiu's future-oriented gaze changes the focus of the dynamic picture of urban nightlife, elevating a yearning for passion and intimacy to a strong commitment to social advancement and historical progress. Through such a well-balanced poetic account of darkness and light, spontaneous passion and progressive reason, scientific modernity is aestheticized by and synchronized with the everyday sensibilities of a feminized urban civilization.

Attracted by this woman of the future, Shi becomes more and more alienated from his wife, the woman of his past. Thus, upon graduation, he is confronted with a life choice: to return to his wife in the countryside or stay in the city with Qiu. With his future career development in mind, he determines to divorce his wife. He returns to the village to inform Caifeng of his decision. Caifeng reacts by staring at him in despair for a long time. However, unwilling to ruin his future, she silently acquiesces. The night before Shi leaves for the city, Caifeng kneels beside his bed to take a last look at him. Awakened by his wife's streaming tears soaking his face, Shi closes his eyes, struck by mixed feelings of sadness, helplessness, and guilt.

The next morning, as he prepares to leave for the city, Shi discovers an unexpected letter from his wife. (During the days when he was absent, his wife struggled in her spare time to learn to read and write.) Her farewell note indicates that she is willing to sacrifice her own happiness for his bright future in the city on one condition: he must take their young daughter to the city and send her to college so that she will not repeat the experience of her mother's suffering and misery. This is the first time in the story that the reader has gained access to Caifeng's inner world. While his wife's tears

did not change his mind, this gesture of self-sacrifice, mediated through the power of written language, miraculously short circuits Shi's determination. Deeply moved, he breaks into tears and suddenly pleads with his wife for forgiveness. As Kam Louie (1985: 81) points out in his analysis of the story, Shi's decision is "an act of compassion and supreme sacrifice, and the wife [is] an object to be pitied, someone who [can] not survive on her own." Thus, the story ends on a seemingly happy note: the male protagonist finally rejects the temptation of the technology-savvy Shanghai girl and heeds instead the call of traditional family ethics in the rural community by returning to his wife's side.

### **Rewrite the "Happy Ending"**

Conveying a completely different message, one that contradicts the overall theme of the story, the hasty and anticlimactic "happy ending" is more like a question mark than a period. After its publication, the story "Return, Cries the Cuckoo" was widely read and discussed among college students and literary critics. On one end of the spectrum of its literary reception was praise for the way the male protagonist's sense of responsibility aligned with traditional Chinese family ethics; on the other end was ridicule for a choice that was seen as old-fashioned, conservative, hypocritical, and decidedly not modern.

Essays in the Party publication *Xinhua ribao* (Xinhua daily) condemned the male protagonist's extramarital affair as "bourgeois corruption" and compared him to Chen Shimei, a stock villain in traditional Chinese drama who abandons his wife to remarry for social advancement.<sup>11</sup> Even those who praise the literary merits of the story regard the ending as weak, conservative, and hypocritical. One critic, Wu Xin (2000: 50–53), argues that the backward economic conditions in the countryside made it impossible to build a "civilized spiritual life" anchored in a highly developed material civilization. For this critic, therefore, the ultimate means to eradicate the peasant wife's misery would be to accelerate economic development.

<sup>11</sup> For examples of such criticisms, see Zhao Guangde 2000 and Zhong Chengxiang 1981.



In this sense, though the authors have touched on a significant issue in the reform era, the ending is out of step with the essential spirit of the times. Another critic, Dong Jian (2000: 58–60), supports Wu's argument by positing that the marital crisis is a natural result of the conflict between the old and the new. The woman nuclear physicist is representative of a new generation while Shi's wife personifies the old, whose mindset is determined by total ignorance and strenuous physical labor. Thus, the narrative of the "personal" relationship in the story became a site at which various discourses ("socialist" morality, traditional ethics, romantic love, and modern consciousness) competed intensely for legitimacy.<sup>12</sup>

Under pressure from these harsh criticisms, Chen and Ma wrote a sequel to change the "conservative consciousness" of the much-maligned ending. The alteration of the ending calls the story's "realistic" style into question and draws reader's attention to the shifting ideological lenses through which reality is perceived. Called "Flying Afar," the sequel seems to divorce the rural past and strive for a temporal and spatial reorientation toward the boundless outside world and the modern future. This "forward-looking" tone resonates with some of the most popular slogans of the 1980s such as *zouxiang shijie* and *mianxiang weilai* (facing the future).

In the sequel, Shi lands a job as a literary magazine editor in P city (referring to Beijing). He brings his wife to the city for a short visit, thus creating even more conflicts and miscommunications between them. In awe of the splendid cityscape at her first sight of it, Caifeng becomes completely disoriented by the profusion of unfamiliar everyday details. She does not know how to use a washing machine or any household electrical appliances. Ironically, modern technology increases her stress and frustration rather than relieving her burden of household chores. Her fear of the natural gas stove reminds readers of Shi's unease about the explosive power of modern machinery when he visits Qiu Fei's nuclear physics lab for the first time.

Moreover, Caifeng fails to dress and talk properly at a cultural salon organized by her husband's colleagues in the literary circle. She can neither

<sup>12</sup> For a brief genealogy of the concept "modern consciousness," see Jing Wang 1996: 139.

appreciate nor pretend to appreciate the modernist paintings exhibited in the National Art Gallery. But by far her most shocking experience occurs when she witnesses young couples' public displays of affection, again reminiscent of Shi's own difficulty in adapting to sexual modernity under Qiu's guidance. Catapulted into metropolitan modernity, she fails to accumulate the kind of everyday knowledge and urban life experiences that would allow her to develop a new, modern subjectivity. Her very language, moreover, has lost its validity in the context of urban modernity. Having no access to any legitimate linguistic authority, she becomes the silenced rural woman, lurking as an Other from an outmoded world still tethered to the past, totally lacking the possibility of articulating an appropriately modern subjectivity.

Caifeng's failure to perform as a modern subject brings Shi Ping face-to-face with his abject past. Such a past threatens to shatter the fantasy of himself becoming a modern subject and to pull him back to the status of the undesirable Other. His strong sense of shame at Caifeng's failure indicates his awareness of the different status between rural and urban in the modern space of Shanghai. In order to complete a successful transformation, he finally chooses to drive away the wretched traces of his past and fully identify with the modern subject position. In the end, his wife leaves to return to the countryside, and Shi is determined to get a divorce for the sake of a new life infused with a "modern consciousness." Because the split between the written word and everyday experience cannot be overcome within the aesthetic world of pastoral poetry, in the sequel the poet seeks to end his constant inner struggles by abandoning his "backward-looking" stance and succumbing to the power of modern knowledge and the development mentality.

The sequel begins with a wordy narrative "lecture" about important scientific discoveries: In 1912 German geologist Alfred Lothar Wegener discovered that the contours of the eastern coast of South America and the western coast of Africa match perfectly. Based on this groundbreaking

discovery, he proposed the theory of “continental drift.” Three decades later, William Maurice Ewing at Columbia University discovered that earthquakes and volcanoes along “a great submarine canyon” and its branches had caused the drift of the continents. This continuous drift, geologists predicted, might lead to a rearrangement and realignment of the continents.<sup>13</sup> Immediately following this uncanny “lecture” on geology, a series of curious Roman letters and Arabic numbers further puzzle the reader: “YNX 7385, 1045, 8821 1420 0120 7344 0018.” Later we are told that these undecipherable signs are telegraphic codes informing Shi that his wife will take the train to visit him in Beijing. Throughout the story can be found passages like this that describe the penetration of scientific knowledge and modern technology into the very fabric of modern urban life. The hard facts and verifiable data reorganize the space of everyday life and give Shi’s personal choice the luster of scientific objectivity, in the logic of which modernization is considered a neutral and rational system that comprises a series of quantifiable technical indices.

Echoing this scientifically informed beginning, the ending paragraphs of the story repeat this obsession with scientific rationality and the developmental mentality. In vivid literary description, the end of the story continues with a popularized account of earth science: “Continents move eternally. Earthquakes and volcanoes erupt constantly. They may have brought immense damage to human life, but they also provide the possibility of new construction and new life. Who can make the earth stop moving?” (Chen/Ma 1989b: 207). Drastically different from Shi’s first poem eulogizing the birth of new life from the womb of Mother Nature, these groundbreaking geological discoveries transform Nature into the object of scientific observation and analysis. Rather than aestheticize the feminized details of everyday country life, the sequel shifts its spatial focus from the local to the global, and its temporal mode from looking back to contemplating the future. This forward-looking vision in Shi’s personal choice actually mirrors the broader discursive trend of constructing the

<sup>13</sup> The foreign scientists’ names are spelled as “L. Wegener” and “M. Ening” in the original Chinese text.

modern subject through an alliance of “science and poetry” in the 1980s intellectual discourse.

Lyotard (1984: 35) suggests that scientific knowledge requires a narrative to achieve legitimacy, for “knowledge finds its validity not within itself . . . but in a practical subject—humanity.” Through the mediation of literature and culture, the relevance of abstract and sophisticated scientific advancement to everyday life can be easily understood. Thus, discursive scientific modernity and a development mentality are able to circumscribe all aspects of social life as a legitimate everyday narrative and an internalized constituent of the “modern consciousness.” Within such a structure of domination normalized in our everyday life, not much room is left to explore their exact connotations and how their meanings are inscribed into the words of “ordinary language.” Through such an alliance of science and poetry, the urban-based educated elites become the architects of a new interior space in which abstract scientific terms and concepts find concrete forms in literary and cultural representations of individual experience and the modern/urban lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

Analyzing England’s industrialization and increasing social mobility in the nineteenth century, Raymond Williams (1973: 210) has pointed out that “one of the most immediate effects of mobility . . . is the difficult nature of the marriage choice.” At such a historical juncture, he continues, “personal” choice is more often than not a choice of class identification, “a choice primarily of a way to live” (ibid.). Compared to preindustrial society, the modern age promises average people more freedom in choosing marital partners and in accruing material possessions, social status, and symbolic capital within a new system of social differentiation and stratification. As post-Mao China has gone through a similar historical process of industrialization and urbanization, Williams’s observation about England is also applicable to Chinese society. The stories “Return, Cries the Cuckoo”

and “Flying Afar” portray such a difficult choice between urban and rural life at the onset of China’s post-Mao reform era. At this transitional moment, social mobility is the privilege (and sometimes source of anxiety) of the male intellectual Shi Ping, while the peasant wife Caifeng, who has few resources, is adversely affected and left with not much choice.

However, gender inequality and the urban/rural divide were often glossed over in the discourse of scientific modernity that dominated mainstream ideology in the early 1980s. Emphasizing the “scientizing moment” as a historical rupture from radical (often equated with irrational and unscientific) Maoism, the intellectuals of the 1980s failed to subject modern scientism and its alleged universal values to critical scrutiny; neither did they reflect on the historical continuity of scientism in modern China. China’s zealous pursuit of modern science, started at the turn of the twentieth century, was further “intensified under Soviet tutelage in the 1950s” (Greenhalgh 2008: 24), and in the 1980s the ideology of scientism reached its peak as China turned to a technocratic mode of governance. The publication of the two stories under discussion here, coincided with the early 1980s “scientizing moment” when “the growing participation of scientific experts in the policy process . . . ushered in a more systematic, realistic, and data-driven process of policymaking” (Greenhalgh 2008: 20).

Moreover, I have argued that literary and cultural representations of science help popularize scientific knowledge and created unified narratives that regulated the everyday sensibilities and imaginations of the private realm. As a result, romance associated with scientific modernity and metropolitan splendor became the legitimate articulation of feelings. At the same time, far removed from the proper domain of metropolitan modernity and urban domesticity, the feminized countryside became synonymous with a timeless and stagnant past, the abject Other lurking outside of the symbolic order. Writers such as Chen Kexiong and Ma Ming contributed to the formation of a new universal language of “science and

poetry” by reconfiguring the popular narratives of romantic love, gender relationships, and domestic order in early reform-era China.

## Glossary

bashi niandai	八十年代
Caifeng	彩凤
Chen Jingrun	陈景润
Chen Shimei	陈世美
<i>Dizhi zhi guang</i>	地质之光
fazhan cai shi ying daoli	发展才是硬道理
Gaokao	高考
<i>Gedebahe caixiang</i>	哥德巴赫猜想
kexue de chuntian	科学的春天
kexue huayu gongtong ti	科学话语共同体
kexue jishu shi diyi shengchan li	科学技术是第一生产力
kexue jia shi	科学加诗
Li Siguang	李四光
meiyou zhishifenzi jiu meiyou xiandaihua	没有知识分子就没有现代化
mianxiang weilai	面向未来
Qiu Fei	秋飞
Shi Ping	史平
xiaxiang zhishi qingnian	下乡知识青年
"Xiaolu yegui"	小路夜归
"Xianglian"	乡恋
Xianglin Sao	祥林嫂
xin qimeng yundong	新启蒙运动
xungen wenxue	寻根文学
Yang Zhenning	杨振宁
zhishi gaibian mingyun	知识改变命运
"Zhufu"	祝福
zouxiang shijie	走向世界

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