

## **ABORTION AS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN CHINESE WOMEN'S FICTION: THE 'ALIENATED MATERNAL BODY' IN LU XING'ER'S "THE SUN IS NOT OUT TODAY"**

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Abortion is common in contemporary China, both as a private choice to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, and as a means for state enforcement of its population policy. The common and controversial nature of the issue has meant that abortion in China, and more broadly Chinese culture, has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Research into the area can be found within studies of historical and contemporary medical discourses, and studies of contemporary population policy, as well as sociological, anthropological and demographic studies.<sup>2</sup> These studies contribute to our understanding of abortion in China in a broad social, political and cultural context. Little work, however, has been carried out on abortion at the highly personal level of individual motivation, personal experience, and psychological and emotional response.<sup>3</sup> What factors lead individual women to have an abortion and how

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Rigdon (1996) for an overview of abortion law and practice in China; Moskowitz (2001) for an anthropological study of foetus ghosts and foetus-ghost appeasement in contemporary Taiwan. Consideration of the abortion issue can also be found in Dikötter's (1998) study of eugenics in contemporary China, Furth's (1987, 1999) studies of historical medical discourses; and in demographic and reproductive policy analysis by Banister (1984 and 1987) Greenhalgh (1994) and Scharping (2003). Evans (1997) looks at abortion within her study of dominant discourses of female sexuality and gender in post 1949 China, while Croll, Davin and Kane (1985), Kane (1987), White (1994) and Xie (2000) consider various aspects of the development and implementation of the One-Child Policy. Honig and Hershatler (1988), Milwertz (1997), Mosher (1983), and Wolf (1985) all cover some aspects of abortion in their studies of Chinese society after the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> A study by Jing-bao Nie (2001) is the only work in this area I have located to date (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this work to my attention). Nie's work is based on interviews conducted in mainland China and the US. He summarizes the twelve major reasons women gave for having abortions, and looks at women's chief concerns regarding the medical procedure and their reflections on the aborted fetus. Nie's study is broader than this current study, which seeks to probe more deeply into some of the intensely personal and

do they feel about their experiences? What are some of the personal meanings of abortion (or refusal of abortion) in China?

The political sensitivity of abortion makes sociological investigation of these issues difficult unless it is done under Chinese government control. Such studies, however, are susceptible to the problem of producing highly controlled and not necessarily accurate results and conclusions.<sup>4</sup> Even when surveys are not directly government controlled, there still remains a problem that interviewees, particularly medical professionals are well aware of what they are officially supposed to say, and this could influence their responses. For personal reasons too, women might not wish to acknowledge any experience of abortion, and if they do, their accounts may be no less filtered and mediated than a purely fictional account. In fact, it can be argued that fictional accounts are at greater liberty to present problematic aspects of women's experience of abortion because fictionalisation protects individual women from any potential social or political repercussions of speaking out in their own voices. Under these circumstances, fiction written by women writers who have the explicit goal of expressing the feelings and experiences of Chinese women, as the authors of works in this study did, can provide insights into Chinese society not readily available through other avenues of research.<sup>5</sup> Such fiction, of course, also presents a mediated view influenced by the urban intellectual elite status of its authors, but reading through this 'bias' can also illuminate some of the class differences between women in Chinese society.

Among the works of fiction on abortion, Lu Xing'er's "The Sun is Not Out Today" presents the broadest range of characters dealing with the widest

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individualized aspects of abortion in China. There is therefore little overlap between the studies, which adopt very different approaches and therefore derive different types of conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> Greenhalgh (2001) details the continuing reluctance of Chinese intellectual women to speak publicly against the One-Child Policy, which she characterises as a "space of great danger for women wishing to articulate feminist alternatives" (848). Stephen Mosher, who detailed excesses of the birth control program in southern China in his book *Broken Earth: the Rural Chinese* (1983) has not been permitted to return to China. At the other end of the spectrum, a sociological investigation carried out through officially authorised channels, Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz's *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (1997), skims over the issues of forced abortions and resistance to the policy. The conclusions Milwertz draws, as indicated by the title of her book, may well be accurate, but nevertheless are open to doubt of bias as the subjects she interviewed could not be considered a genuinely random selection. In fact, one could be certain that women likely to present views contrary to the officially sanctioned line would not be permitted to be interviewed. Milwertz herself mentions the difficulty of carrying out research in this field (206) and had to disguise her own research under a general title of 'Changes in the social status and role of Chinese urban women in education, employment and family life' in order to gain permission to carry it out. Nie's (2001) work mentioned above seeks to avoid this problem by interviewing subjects both in China and abroad and therefore could be considered the most reliable study to date.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the words of Lu Xing'er quoted below, and see Han Chunxu's explanation of her motivation for writing "Rejecting Fate" – her desire to convey the feelings and experience of an unmarried woman forced to abort at six months whom she met when in hospital having her own baby (Han 1987: 245-46).

range of abortion related issues, and was published in journals that would have afforded it the widest domestic Chinese readership.<sup>6</sup> All major issues raised in the other fictional works are also raised in Lu Xing'er's story.<sup>7</sup> For this reason Lu's story has been chosen as the main focus of analysis in this study, with other works cited where relevant.

### **Author and Story: Lu Xing'er and "The Sun is Not Out Today"**

Lu Xing'er was born in 1949 in Shanghai. As a teenager, she was at first an ardent supporter of the Cultural Revolution, but ten years on a state farm in China's remote North-east left her profoundly disillusioned. She escaped rural life when she was accepted into the Central Drama Institute in Beijing in 1978. Lu began writing in the early 1970s with prose essays in the highly politicised style then demanded. When restrictions on literature were relaxed after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Lu underwent a painful period of adjustment during which she abandoned her understanding of literature as propaganda and began to write about her own thoughts and feelings. She described her transformation as follows:

In 1980 some people advised me not to worry about whether the subject matter I write is important or not but just to write according to my own feelings. I wrote a short story entitled "Pregnancy." [...] It is about a young woman who has just been admitted to university and finds out that she is pregnant. The story focuses on her emotional changes. [...] When it should have been time to fall in love she had no love; and when it should have been time for her to be a mother, she couldn't be. When I showed the story to my classmates they were quite moved. It suddenly dawned on me that I should write what I feel and what I have experienced.

After I had a child, I became more mature, with a broader range of emotions. I felt that women of my generation shared many

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<sup>6</sup> Other works dealing exclusively with abortion issues include Tang Min's (1986) "Artificially Induced Miscarriage" (*rengong liuchan*); Li Songjing's (1987) "Abortion" and Han Chunxu's 'Rejecting Fate' (*beidui mingyun de dubai*) (1988). Zhang Xinxin's (1982), "On the Same Horizon" (*zai tong yi dipingxianshang*) (1983), the first post-Mao story to mention abortion, also deals with abortion issues briefly within a much longer story.

<sup>7</sup> One issue I cannot deal with in this study is that of reader response. An extensive search of journals of the time was unable to locate a single article that specifically analysed or responded to these works on abortion. I finally concluded that this must surely have been the result of a deliberate policy to prevent public discussion of abortion issues, since other sensitive issues such as sex and sexuality were widely and publicly discussed at the time. However, it is significant that these stories on abortion were nonetheless chosen for multiple republication in journals and anthologies, indicating that editors judged them to be of particular interest to readers.

feelings. When I write down my own I am writing theirs too  
(Leung 1994: 141).

Lu Xing'er's words show that her fiction attempts to represent the genuine feelings and experiences of both herself and her generation of women.

Like many other former 'rusticated youth' writers, Lu's political disillusionment led her to question many aspects of Chinese society and culture. Her works throughout the 1980s focussed around two themes: the fate of rusticated youth in the countryside and on their return to the city, and issues and dilemmas facing Chinese women, especially female intellectuals. Lu Xing'er's own personal experience of abortion and as a divorced woman and single mother, no doubt give her a particular understanding of the difficulties and dilemmas associated with abortion and single motherhood in contemporary China.

The story "The Sun is Not Out Today" was first published in the major national literary journal *Shiyue* (October) in January 1987, and then reprinted in the wide circulation journal *Xiaoshuo xuankan* (Reprints of Selected Fiction) in April of the same year. At the time *Xiaoshuo xuankan* was one of the most widely read literary journals in China because of its reputation for selecting the best, most interesting or most controversial pieces of recent fiction from an otherwise bewildering array of nationwide literary offerings.<sup>8</sup> The story was also included in at least one anthology also published in 1987.<sup>9</sup> While it is difficult to gauge actual readership numbers, its multiple reprints and publication in two separate popular national-circulation journals made it available to, and probably read by, a wide readership throughout China.

The present study utilizes two different theoretical frameworks to analyze the experience of characters in Lu Xing'er's story. Personal *motivations* for abortion are analyzed as various aspects of an 'alienated maternal body', a concept derived from the theoretical conception of reproduction in contemporary Chinese state and society, and an approach which allows a wide variety of external and internal motivating factors to be considered within one framework. The women's *responses* are analyzed primarily using the framework of reading through a Chinese 'moral bricolage', an approach adopted because it is more suited than the previous framework to facilitating a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive understanding of the characters' emotional and psychological responses to pregnancy and abortion.

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<sup>8</sup> On the recommendation of Chinese colleagues and friends in Beijing, I subscribed to *Xiaoshuo xuankan* during the mid-1980s for precisely this reason. That this was a widely held view is also confirmed by congratulatory messages published in the journal on its fifth anniversary in the October issue, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> It appeared in Lu Xing'er, 1987, *Tiansheng shi ge nuren* (Born Woman), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe.

## Theoretical Approaches

### *The Alienated Maternal Body*

The complex pressures – personal, psychological, social and political – motivating the women portrayed in “The Sun is Not Out Today” can be usefully analysed using an approach derived from the basic conception of reproduction that emerged in China under the communist state in the early 1970s.

As Tyrene White’s study of the origins and development of China’s birth planning policy argues, Zhou Enlai’s inclusion of birth planning work in the Fourth Five Year Plan in 1970 marked a conceptual shift in official thinking that “redefined population goals as part of the centralized state plan and the crucial prerequisite to successful economic planning.” As a consequence of this conceptual shift:

With population planning thus linked to the primary obligation of the socialist state – the production, allocation, and distribution of material goods – childbearing became subject to those same mechanisms of depersonalized centralized planning. Under this rationale, women were production instruments subject to the structure of state monopoly and supply, and children became a planned product of the socialist state (White 1984: 276).

The significance of such a conceptual shift for this study is that if women bear the same relation to babies as workers to the products of their labour, then they could be expected to suffer similar problems to workers as a result of their structural positioning within the political and economic system. Marx’s classic analysis of alienation argued that in capitalist society conditions make it impossible for workers to live meaningfully in relation to each other, to the products of their labour, or even to their own natures.<sup>10</sup> Although Marx envisaged such alienation as disappearing in socialist society, significantly, in the early 1980s, Chinese intellectuals, most notably Wang Ruoshui, argued that this was not the case, and that in Chinese society, the Party and bureaucracy had become the new overlords, leading to the perpetuation of political, economic and intellectual alienation among the people. If this is the case, then it follows that under China’s birth planning policies, women could similarly be expected to experience various forms of alienation from the processes and products of their reproductive labour.

As well as the alienation caused by state and bureaucratic control of women’s reproductive labour, this study also draws on the extended concept of alienation developed by feminists including Simone de Beauvoir, that in patriarchal culture women are also alienated by their treatment as objects of

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<sup>10</sup> Alienation is defined as “extreme separation from one’s own nature, from the products of one’s labor, or from social reality, which often results in an indifference or outright aversion toward some aspect of life that might otherwise be attractive and significant.” (*Philosophical Dictionary* 2004).

male desire and their forced submission to male norms. This is helpful in analyzing issues such as women's psychological alienation from their reproductive bodies brought about by cultural attitudes to motherhood. Hence the concept of the alienated maternal body helps elucidate a complex range of external and internal factors influencing women's reproductive lives.

In analysing Lu Xing'er's story, this article argues that three of the four minor characters represent different aspects of the alienation of women from their reproductive bodies. In this respect they both illuminate and embody criticism of some aspect of contemporary Chinese society (the fourth functions to emphasise diversity of experience). The main character, by deciding not to have an abortion, conversely represents the woman who reasserts control of her pregnant body, thereby issuing a radical challenge to both the state and broader patriarchal culture.

### *Reading Through the Chinese Moral Bricolage*

To complement the structural analysis carried out using the concept of the 'alienated maternal body', a theoretical framework needed to be found that would allow characters' emotional/psychological responses to abortion to be considered in their own cultural context. A useful concept is that of a 'moral bricolage' used in William La Fleur's (1992) study of Japanese *mizuko* rituals carried out by families to appease the souls of aborted fetuses. La Fleur uses the concept to analyse the diverse influences that shape Japanese thinking about abortion.<sup>11</sup> Applying the concept to contemporary Chinese society, the following two sections look briefly at some of the social, political and religious influences that contribute to the Chinese "moral bricolage" on abortion.<sup>12</sup> The technique of reading through this Chinese "moral bricolage" is then used later in the article to offer a more culturally sensitive understanding of the women's personal responses to abortion.

Chinese traditional culture, with its central focus on the family as the basis of society, has been described as "profoundly pro-natalist" (Furth 1987: 9; also see Nie 2002). However, there is also evidence that strong pro-natalist tendencies were tempered by a more overarching concern for serving the social, religious and economic interests of the collective – whether the patrilineal family or the state. These interests were not uniform throughout society or stable over time, but varied according to multiple factors including class, economic circumstances, urban/rural occupation, number and gender of

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<sup>11</sup> La Fleur borrows the concept of "moral bricolage" from Jeffrey Stout in *Ethics after Babel: the Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988). He quotes from Stout: "In finding our way through moral dilemmas – especially relatively new ones – we have no alternative but 'to draw on a collection of assorted odds and ends available for use and kept on hand on the chance that they might someday prove useful'"(12).

<sup>12</sup> Because of limitations of the length of this article, the analysis of the Chinese moral bricolage on abortion is necessarily brief. It is in no way intended to be a history of abortion in traditional and contemporary China, rather it is a compilation of the key ideas and attitudes, latent and conscious, that might be drawn on by women in their thinking on abortion.

existing siblings and so on. Therefore, while the social ideal was for a multi-generational family and numerous children,<sup>13</sup> particularly several sons, in practice family limitation was also widely practiced by various means including contraception, abortion and infanticide<sup>14</sup> and given some accommodation within the major belief systems.

Some of the strongest pro-natalist factors in traditional culture derive from Confucian and Buddhist beliefs (Nie 2002: 17-18). One of the key concepts of Confucianism is that of filial piety which demands the birth of sons and heirs to continue the family line and maintain sacrifices to the ancestors. There are probably few Chinese not familiar with at least the portent of the classical maxim (still much quoted in contemporary China) “Of the three great unfilial acts, to be without heirs is the greatest” [*Bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da*].<sup>15</sup> The collective interest of the patriline therefore dictated that families must produce at least one son. Moskowitz also notes that in traditional Confucian thought, one had a filial responsibility to protect one’s body (including a foetus) because it was the property of one’s parents and ancestors. Killing a foetus was therefore an unfilial act of severing familial ties, failing to procreate, and mutilating familial flesh (Moskowitz 2001: 25-26).

Perceived state interests also tended to reinforce pro-natalist tendencies right up until the implementation of birth control policies in the 1970s: imperial scholars commonly believed that if China were to be rich and powerful it needed a large population (Dikötter 1995: 103) – a belief echoed in the early years of the People’s Republic when large families were encouraged. Concern

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<sup>13</sup> Popular sayings associate happiness with many children: e.g. ‘*duo zi, duo fu*’ (many children, much happiness). In folk art the popular New Year pictures often contain symbols of fertility, the lotus and pomegranate (their many seeds symbolizing many children) and peanuts (*huasheng*), which were explained to me as a homonym for mixed births (i.e. symbolizing giving birth to both sons and daughters).

<sup>14</sup> See Wang, Lee and Campbell (1995: 383) for historical references to family limitation and infanticide in 11<sup>th</sup> Century China, and page 384, note 5 for a list of studies of infanticide in imperial China. The article itself argues that data on the Qing imperial lineage offer evidence of deliberate fertility control among the Qing elite through a combination of late starting, early stopping and wide spacing of births. For these elite families on fixed emoluments, extra children meant more stretching of family resources, as compared to say a well-off farming family whose total income could benefit from the labor of more children. Evidence in Kane (1987, 144) suggests that the distinction between contraception and abortion was not always clear, as some recipes supposedly for herbal contraceptives were probably actually abortifacients. She also notes that traditional abortion techniques were often crude and fatal to the mother (152) but that infanticide was much safer (153). (This should probably be understood as non-medicinal methods of abortion, as Furth’s discussion of abortion in medical literature does not suggest a high resulting maternal mortality rate. This may reflect class differences in the availability of safe abortion in traditional China). Infanticide also allowed families to gender select children. Abortion and infanticide should then be seen as two related aspects of family limitation.

<sup>15</sup> This saying was quoted to me many times during my years in mainland China in the 80s. Qiu, Wang and Gu (1989, 345) also mention the saying and the traditional preference for many children.

for the collective welfare of family and state therefore promoted birth and not family limitation.

Chinese Buddhism reinforced this view with its strictures against harming any form of life (Nie 2002: 16-17). Song dynasty Buddhist morality tales warned the population of the “ghosts of aborted fetuses and dead infants” returning to blight their mothers’ subsequent pregnancies (Furth 1999: 107), beliefs that are still held in contemporary Taiwan (Moskowitz 2001) and therefore probably also in parts of mainland China. Another Song dynasty morality tale describes the agonising death of Peony White, a woman who sold abortifacients for a living (hundreds of ghostly infants gnaw at her skull in her dreams). Just before she dies, she renounces her trade and warns her family not to carry it on after her death. Morality books, designed to aid the path to Nirvana, list abortion as eliciting three hundred demerits (Yuan dynasty), while preventing an abortion attracts one hundred merits (Ming Dynasty) (Waltner 1995: 196).<sup>16</sup> These tales of retribution, ledgers of merits and demerits and so on can be seen as evidence of a strongly pro-natalist, anti-abortionist Chinese cultural consciousness firmly rooted in both popular and state culture.

Against these pro-natalist tendencies, however, there are also ambiguities, paths through the dilemmas raised by abortion. Medical treatise from imperial China opposed abortion in general, but permitted it where pregnancy was threatening the mother’s life (Furth 1999: 252-5; Nie 2002: 19). Abortion was also acceptable where the foetus was suspected of having abnormalities (Furth 1999: 256), or even where the woman was weary of repeated childbearing (Furth 1999: 168).

The status of the foetus itself was also ambiguous in the Confucian and Buddhist understanding. Furth (1987: 12) argues that in the Confucian understanding a child did not develop a fully human physical or spiritual identity until the end of infancy, although Nie (2002: 19-21) cites the ancient practice of foetal education as evidence that the unborn child *was* recognised as a human being. However, recognition and incorporation by the family did not occur until a month after birth when a ceremony was held to enter the child into the family register (Naquin and Rawski 1987: 80). Consequently, abortion was not killing a socially or morally recognised ‘person’ and therefore not considered to be a serious crime. In the Buddhist understanding, too, the crime of destroying a foetus was mitigated by the belief in the cycle of rebirth: abortion did not kill the child, it simply returned it to a state of limbo awaiting rebirth.<sup>17</sup> These understandings may have helped to mitigate possible emotional and psychological trauma caused by abortion discussed above.

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<sup>16</sup> This makes abortion a relatively minor offence compared with offending one’s parents, violating a chaste woman or causing a death, which attracted 1000 demerit points. See Waltner (1995: 196).

<sup>17</sup> A similar belief in Chinese regional folk culture is referred to in Gao Feng’s, “Hei peng” [Black sail] (Gao 1986, 274). The female protagonist gives birth to a boy who dies several days later. The local villagers comment that he had gone to look for his (drowned) father, and was quite likely to return someday (“*Mei zhun nei tian hai hui huilai de*”).



In the contemporary period, state and family concerns, and Western concepts of individual and human rights have added new and contradictory elements to the existing bricolage. Under state-sponsored birth control campaigns since the 1960s, the state has swung from a pro-natalist position to one that promotes all forms of birth-control. Under the one-child policy, abortion, though officially to be used as a last resort, is framed as a moral act that protects the state from poverty and weakness caused by overpopulation (Milwertz 1997: Ch 4 and 5). In support of this ethical position, doctors are taught during their medical training that life begins after birth, and abortion is acceptable at any time beforehand. (Tankard-Reist 1995).<sup>18</sup> Concern for population quality has also made abortion legally compulsory for categories of people considered unfit to reproduce (Dikötter 1998: 174; Evans 1997: 152). At the same time, however, the state actively campaigns against the burgeoning practice of selective abortion of female foetuses as an immoral act.

Particularly in urban areas, practical considerations, including crowded living conditions; financial constraints (raising one child requires an ordinary dual income); the demands on time and energy of the triple burden of work, domestic duties and child-raising; and rising expectations of living standards, all encourage the single-child family, and probably make abortion more readily accepted (Kane: 1987:129-134).

Nevertheless, there is evidence that traditional Confucian concerns for continuing the patriline are still influential. In a letter to an advice column in *Zhongguo Funü*, in January 2003, a pregnant widow asked whether her parents-in-law had the right to force her to give birth to her dead husband's son. The response was that the woman should understand that her in-laws were anxious about "ending the family line" but that they could not force her and the ultimate decision was hers. The woman is enjoined to recognise the validity of their claim even as her choice to ignore it is affirmed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This is information provided by a former Chinese medical worker seeking asylum in Australia. While I have not been able to access Chinese medical training material that verifies this claim, other evidence suggests it is the view that Chinese medical workers are *in practice required to accept*. Evidence presented by Gao Xiaoduan, a former birth control officer in Fujian Province, to the US House of Representatives, Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights of The Committee on International Relations on June 10, 1998, details medical abortion occurring even after the head had crowned (Gao 1998:15 and 22). Other evidence is in the form of what can be considered an officially sanctioned view of medical ethics (because the authors are leading officials in CAS and the Capital Medical College in Beijing): Qiu, Wang and Gu (1989) conclude that in terms of medical ethics late abortion is justified. Although they do not define the limit of 'late abortion,' in one of the three cases they examine, an abortion at eight months resulted in a live birth, so their conclusions clearly allow for the abortion of a viable fetus. In this case both the woman herself and the physician initially resisted the abortion and had to be 'persuaded' by the woman's workplace officials – the doctor seemingly having no choice but to accept the official ethical position.

<sup>19</sup> In this case, a complex situation is exacerbated by the 'one-child policy.' Leaving aside other considerations, on one side, the parents-in law have lost their son and face both the loss of their grandson and failure in their duty to continue the family line. From the woman's point of view, however, even if she sympathised with her in-laws' position, if she does not

Adding to the complexity of the bricolage, the “Movement to Liberate Thoughts,” and influx of Western ideas in the 1980s, introduced ideas of individual rights and freedoms that influenced China’s educated elites.<sup>20</sup> These ideas incorporate concepts of the rights of the unborn child independent of broader collective interests.

In more personal terms in both traditional and contemporary culture, women have been socialised into identifying their primary role in life as that of wife and mother. Women are believed to be inherently nurturing and motherly. This aspect of the socialisation of Chinese women must intensify any innate human instincts to protect the next generation that might be present, and can be reasonably assumed to increase the emotional and psychological trauma associated with abortion.

The collective and individual elements of the bricolage shape every individual woman’s experience of abortion, and contribute to how (psychologically, morally and socially) she will negotiate that experience. Later in the article this understanding will be applied to the analysis of the abortion clinic patients in Lu Xing’er’s story.

### **“The Sun is Not Out Today”: Overview**

“The Sun is Not Out Today” is set in a Maternity and Gynaecological hospital in a middle-sized city in China. The narrative moves from outside the hospital gates where early morning registration takes place, to the waiting room of the abortion clinic, the recovery room, and the reception hall where patients are met by their families when they leave the hospital. As well as following the physical route of each of the women undergoing an abortion, each location represents one stage in a personal emotional and psychological journey for the central character.

The story portrays five very different women waiting for abortions, each there for quite different reasons. As they are collectively subjected to the dehumanising production-line procedures of the big hospital and callous treatment from an old nurse, however, they gain a sense of solidarity in adversity. They provide mutual support, and share their experiences until they are hurried out of the clinic so that the next batch can come in. The central character learns that because she is too far advanced in her pregnancy, she must go through induced labor to abort. She decides to have the baby instead,

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about the pregnancy, her chances of re-marriage are doubly difficult: first she would be taking a child into her second marriage, and second she would not be permitted to have a second child with her new husband and therefore would be unable to carry on *his* family line. This would make her an undesirable marriage partner.

<sup>20</sup> A 1990 survey of Shanghai college students, for example, found that 30.8% said they identified with the theory of individual autonomy espoused by Existentialism, 26.9% identified with the ideas of democracy, liberty and human rights in Western political theories. Quoted in Pei (1994: 168).

a radical decision that puts her in conflict with both the state (she has no birth quota) and society (she is unmarried).<sup>21</sup>

### *The Characters and Their Representational Value*

In “The Sun is Not Out Today”, Lu Xing’er has created a set of characters from a diverse range of backgrounds and social classes in urban China. Some are educated, some relatively uneducated, some beautiful and others ugly, some are married and others unmarried, so that through them the author can symbolically represent the diversity and commonalities of experience of Chinese urban women in general. As each character reveals her experiences, or is subjected to abuse by the old nurse, a group of unidentified women waiting with the main characters also provide a general chorus of commentary and criticism, not attributable to any individual, that appears to represent a general female voice.

The main characters include:

1. Fan Hong, a factory worker – young, working class, attractive, not highly educated, middle-low status job, unmarried.
2. Qiu Ying, an actress – young, beautiful, some education, well connected socially, middle class, married to a theatre director.
3. A hunchback married to a truck driver – her job is not mentioned, but we get the impression she is from the lower rungs of society. She is older than the other women, ugly, deformed and has little education. She is identified only as “the Hunchback.”
4. Song Lizhen, a primary school teacher – educated, not wealthy, middle class, married.
5. Dan Ye, a college teacher – the central character. She is highly educated, attractive, about thirty and unmarried. Her other background is not clear.

Three other important minor characters are also women:

1. An old nurse, who represents both rigid traditional moral values and state and bureaucratic power.
2. A factory birth-control officer who also represents the impersonal state and bureaucratic power over women.

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<sup>21</sup> Stacey (1983) makes the point that the Chinese state often plays a patriarchal role in which its interests have a mutually reinforcing relationship with patrilineal/patriarchal control of society. We can see this reflected in the treatment of extra-marital pregnancy. In terms of the administration of state birth control policy, Dan Ye’s conflict with the state is caused by her decision to continue with an out-of-quota birth, and would be no different if she were married and insisted on an out-of-quota pregnancy. However, the state’s refusal to grant birth quotas to unmarried women derives from and reinforces the view of society that it is inappropriate and immoral for unmarried women to have children. Here, state administrative power reinforces the social moral censure that functions to protect patriarchal interests and ensure that a child can only be born as part of a recognised patriline. (Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out the relevance of Stacey’s work to this analysis).

3. A second younger nurse who replaces the old nurse. She acts as a counter to the negative image of the first nurse and can be seen as representing more modern and sympathetic social attitudes to women.

### **Analysis 1: Motivations for Abortion**

#### *The Factory Worker*

“He did it on purpose,” Fan Hong said. “He was afraid I’d throw him over. He calculated the days of my period. I didn’t know. He is seven years older than I am.” The girl’s voice broke. “When I discovered I was pregnant, I thought I might as well get married. But now his parents do not agree to the marriage, say I am too young, too flighty [...] They have asked the Workers’ Union to talk me into this abortion” (196).

The path of the factory worker, Fan Hong, towards abortion can be read as Lu Xing’er’s examination of an array of external factors that manipulate women’s reproductive bodies in contemporary Chinese society. Fan claims to be pregnant because her older and more experienced boyfriend used her ignorance to make her pregnant against her will. He knew how to count the days after her period to calculate when she would be most fertile, while she did not. Fan’s pregnancy is a result of individual male manipulation but also of a society that deliberately kept her ignorant about her own body. Harriet Evans’ study of women and sexuality in China notes that although sex education is now widespread in China, the emphasis remains on instilling correct moral attitudes, while knowledge about intercourse and contraception is deliberately avoided on the grounds that it will lead to promiscuity (Evans 1997: 39-40). Lu Xing’er’s portrayal of Fan Hong in this story highlights the resultant disempowerment of women from taking control of their own fertility. Ignorance affects women in particular, both because their partners are commonly older and therefore, as in this case, likely to have acquired sexual knowledge from other sources, and also because it is women who must bear the greater weight of the consequences of unwanted pregnancy.

Fan’s boyfriend makes her pregnant in order to trap her into marriage by bringing to bear on her the social pressure to marry if pregnant.<sup>22</sup> Social pressure therefore also plays a part in controlling her fertility. His parents, however, oppose the marriage and use their traditional authority over their son to make him conform to their wishes. They combine their patriarchal familial authority with state and bureaucratic authority to manipulate Fan’s fertility by

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<sup>22</sup> Such pressure, of course, exists in many societies. In China the pressure is intensified by the continuing high value placed on female virginity and chastity in the selection of marriage partners.

approaching the girl's trade union birth-control officer to force her into an abortion. Under pressure she agrees to the abortion.<sup>23</sup>

At the hospital, however, Fan is refused an abortion by a moralistic old nurse who uses her bureaucratic power to publicly humiliate and punish Fan for being unmarried:

“According to regulations, our hospital doesn't deal with cases like yours. Nowadays there are special clinics for the likes of you. Outside the city. Everything self-paid. Your pay gets docked if you take sick leave after the operation. Even so, consider yourself lucky. You are no longer penalised.”

The girl named Fan Hong stood with head bowed, as if arraigned before a law court. The tears rolled down her chest.

“What's the use of crying over spilt milk? A woman should know which end is up.” Apparently, the nurse relished lecturing (195).

Fortunately for Fan Hong, a change of roster brings on a new nurse who lets her go ahead with the procedure. Both nurses, however, the censorial and the sympathetic, symbolise the arbitrary power of the bureaucracy to deny or permit women the right to abortions as they choose. From beginning to end Fan is denied control over her own fertility and her own body. She can be seen as a fictional representation of the alienation of Chinese women from their reproductive bodies by various external forces, and a fictional voicing of the helplessness, anger and resentment that some women consequently experience.

Through her portrayal of the character of Fan, Lu Xing'er also highlights the contradictory nature of this split. Fan Hong's fertility is removed from her control, but simultaneously she is held responsible for it by society. It is she who is publicly humiliated by the old nurse, not the boyfriend, his parents or the birth-control officer who have combined to get her to the abortion clinic. As Tang Min's "Abortion" expresses it: "Society is too harsh on women, too cruel. The spiritual and physical cross should not be borne by women alone" (451). In raising as an injustice the problem of women having to bear the brunt of social and moral blame for pregnancy when society and culture deny them control over their bodies, these stories echo the concerns of feminists who raised the same issue in the West in the 1970s and 1980s. The character of Fan also points to an aspect of the one-child policy often overlooked, that is, the way in which the policy itself may be manipulated by

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<sup>23</sup> In traditional Chinese culture the parent-child relationship, one of the key social relationships, is a hierarchical relationship in which the child is morally obliged to submit to the wishes of the parent. In China of the 1980s, a further incentive to sons complying with their parents' wishes was that in many cases the newlyweds would be reliant on his parents to provide them with accommodation, and could expect some financial and child care assistance in future. Marrying against the parents' wishes could see this assistance withdrawn, leading to real practical difficulties in addition to the moral censure of society.

individuals (here the boyfriend's parents) to achieve coercively their own private goals (prevention of the pregnancy and marriage).

### *The Actress*

The character of the actress, Qiu Ying, can be seen as a fictional exploration of a more internalized set of motivations towards abortion. Qiu Ying is pregnant to her husband, a stage director. Her choice to abort is her own, and she has not even told her husband of her pregnancy.

“I didn't tell my husband [...] He loves children. But this is my first appearance in a major role. If I succeed in these seven performances, I will be given the opportunity to appear fourteen times in the next play” (194).

Initially Qiu Ying's rejection of motherhood seems to “a radical denial of woman's instrumental position in a patriarchal discourse”; an act which “cuts the traditional tie that binds a woman to a man as a sexual partner” (Lu Tonglin 1995: 98). Using this line of reasoning, Qiu Ying's decision to abort could be seen as an act of resistance against carrying on the male line. Her choice of abortion could be read as deliberately placing her own interests above those of the man's heir, and acting as a conscious agent in controlling the meaning of her sexual relationship with her husband (she determines that she will be lover and not mother). However, countering such a reading in Lu Xing'er's story is Qiu Ying's desperate reaction on learning that she might be denied the abortion she is seeking because she lacks the correct paperwork:

“The father is a director. He's going to be promoted deputy head of the company. I can't rush into pregnancy and child-raising at this moment. I'll lose myself and he will lose interest in me. I need time. I must keep my good looks. I must succeed on stage, so that he can't do without me. I'm keeping this from him. He mustn't know” (205).

It seems Qiu Ying is chiefly concerned with self-development as a means of securing continued male interest and pleasure in her, which implies that as much as being a symbol of female resistance, her refusal of motherhood is in this case also a symbol of female self-objectification.

The actress can be seen as representing a different type of alienation of the woman from her reproductive body. Although at one level she has taken an independent decision about her fertility, her motivation for the abortion is nevertheless based on her desire to win male approval as well as on cultural stereotypes of mothers as physically ugly and sexually unattractive. She is therefore not a symbol of female assertion of agency as much as a symbol of a kind of female self-alienation in which the woman defines herself primarily as an object of male sexual desire, while assigning her own desires only secondary importance.

*The Hunchback*

“Ah, so it *is* you!” The old nurse emerged from behind the glass doors leading to the operating room and fixed the Hunchback with her eye. “No wonder the voice sounded so familiar! Here again? And you have the nerve to boast about your last one. How many times is this now? If you ask me you must be sick of living.” She spoke with measured deliberation, every word a mocking, sarcastic barb (198).<sup>24</sup>

With fear and trepidation, the little woman followed her through the glass doors marked “SILENCE” (199).

The character identified throughout the story only as “The Hunchback” is a happily married woman, with a devoted husband. Both of them love children, and we can infer from the text that she must already have at least one son. She repeatedly gets pregnant, and each time she aborts the child in compliance with the state’s one child policy.

The Hunchback’s deformity seems to be presented as symbolic of the crippling of her loving maternal nature by the state intrusion into her reproductive life. Her abundant fertility is rendered fruitless by the insensitive and uncaring state represented by the old nurse who deliberately bullies her. Consider the description of her appearance (I translate literally, if awkwardly, so as to capture the imagery of each word, italics are mine):

A hunchbacked little woman, one skinny shoulder higher than the other, body withered as if it had never physically developed, *like an ossified fruit that had grown distorted and could not grow ripe* (*Xiaoshuo xuan kan* version : 70).

The imagery of fruit unable to ripen has direct association with the use in traditional popular culture of ripe fruit with many seeds (pomegranate and lotus) to symbolize fertility and many children. But the Hunchback is not infertile as her many and frequent abortion show, so the analogy of distorted, withered growth points to not physical but psychological or emotional development. Similarly the ‘fruit’ unable to ripen’ cannot be referring to the woman’s physiological condition, but can be seen as a dual reference to unrealized maternal desire, and to the state intervention that, to follow through the analogy, is preventing the fruit from bringing its seeds to maturity.

The Hunchback can be seen as representing alienation in the form of a grotesque dislocation between maternal desire and the maternal body. Maternal desire is strong, but its repeated denial through abortion has led to physical and psychological damage to the mother. Both of the nurses at the clinic warn her about the damage to her health caused by too many abortions.

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<sup>24</sup> I have slightly modified Zhu Hong’s translation in this and the following quote back to a more literal meaning for the purposes of textual analysis. Both passages of the Chinese text are from *Xiaoshuo Xuankan*, (1987, No 4: 70).

This can be read as an implicit criticism of the effect of the one child policy on the physical health of women forced to undergo repeated abortions (198).<sup>25</sup> Psychological damage can be seen in the form of the distorted maternal pride she takes in her aborted child. In a scene where the women awaiting abortions have just commented on the misfortunes of being a woman, the actress comments she would never want to give birth to a girl. The Hunchback responds:

“Some people are all in favor of girls.” [...] “My husband always complains that I can only produce boys.”

“Let me see your palms.” A primary-school teacher, shed of her classroom reserve, clutched the hands of the little woman. “You’ll have a string of girls. That is, if you are *allowed* to have them.”

“How true!” the Hunchback exclaimed. “The last one I aborted was a girl!” The fortune-telling had come true, and a flush of excitement brought a dash of color to the little woman’s wan cheeks (197).

The scene carries elements of black humor, as the Hunchback, in her delight at the predicted birth of the desired baby girls, seems to be oblivious to the fact that one has already been aborted and any subsequent ones will be too.

The Hunchback also has a role in articulating the physical and emotional trauma of abortion in a Chinese hospital, a subject treated in even more vivid and disturbing detail by other writers, including Tang Min and Han Chunxu, whose narration is made even more powerful by their use of first person narrative. The generally traumatic nature of the experience is described in interview reports in Nie (2001), but in this fiction is given much more powerful and direct expression. Consider Tang Min’s fictionalized account of her own personal abortion experience:

I lie on the operating table, breathing in the freezing air and looking around the room at the equipment, which seems very old and out of date. How many women have been here before me? All of them as helpless, alone and steeped in shame and fear (28).

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<sup>25</sup> In the case of the old nurse, but not the new, this can also be seen as an implicit criticism of her sexuality. The old nurse berates the Hunchback for having the gall to openly talk about her previous abortion (*kui ni hai shuo de chu kou* – the Chinese implies the Hunchback should be ashamed) (Lu: 1987:70) and expresses her open contempt for all the women awaiting abortions, so that “every one of them ashamedly reflected on her own behavior, as if having committed a grave sin (*shenzhong de zuinie*). The punitive attitude expressed towards pregnant women (married or unmarried) for supposedly being sexually immoral is stated even more clearly in another contemporary novella, “Sunrise” by Chi Li (a woman writer born in 1957). As the central character (married and with a birth quota) screams in pain during childbirth, an attending nurse is contemptuous: “A nurse stuffed a piece of sanitary cloth in her mouth, saying, ‘What are you shouting about! If you’re afraid of pain, then don’t go around sleeping with men’” (Chi 1994: 300).



Meanwhile, the doctors are scolding another woman who has just given birth and is pregnant again. Then another first-time abortion patient is grilled to see if she is married or not. [...] My ears are full of reproaches. Only one patient gets a warm reception; she's a doctor herself, who runs a hospital. She has come to have her IUD removed, and is allowed to wear her pants into the operating room. In my humiliation, even the horror of my child going into a water bottle a smashed and pulpy mass fades from my mind. I just want to get out (28-29).

In Lu's story, emerging from the operating room in great pain, the Hunchback lies down on the bed and with clenched fists weakly pounds the "unresponsive cement walls," crying "It's killing me, it's killing me!" (202). In the context of a culture and society that usually ignores, suppresses or denigrates the expression of pain and suffering associated with childbirth and abortion, vividly symbolized in this story by the forbidding glass doors leading to the operation room marked with the large characters 'SILENCE,' Lu Xing'er's use of the Hunchback to give voice to the unvoiced is itself an act of resistance.<sup>26</sup> At a symbolic level, the "unresponsive cement walls" are also easily read as symbolizing the controlling and alienating state and bureaucracy, and the Hunchback's cries, and feeble pounding, a protest against the damage they inflict upon her.

### *The Primary School Teacher*

The primary school teacher, Song Lizhen, is not depicted in the same depth and detail as the other clinic patients. However, her character provides an alternative example that undermines any suggestion that the experience of the other characters is the universal experience. For example, when the women indignantly criticize the Hunchback's husband for continually making her pregnant, the school teacher provides a counter voice:

"It is no crime. This is also *my* third abortion. What an abominable nuisance! When I take the kids for morning exercise, I skip rope like mad, hoping to abort the thing. Whenever my period is late, I am sick with worry. When I discover I am pregnant, I get so desperate. I act crazy, shouting at him all the time" (199).

In this fictional representation, for Song, as for many Chinese women, the ready availability of abortion is a welcome escape from unwanted pregnancy. Her needs and wishes are being met and therefore have not been made a focus of the story, which is attempting to highlight aspects of China's birth control policies which are problematic. For Song the experience of abortion is not

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<sup>26</sup> Such silencing and denigration is mentioned, for example, in Wolf (1985: 155-156). It also occurs in many other societies, although the motivating factors (political, social, religious etc) vary considerably.

alienating, but of course this is only because her desires happen to coincide with those of the state.

### *The College Teacher*

Dan Ye, the college teacher, is the central character, and clearly has the author's greatest sympathy. Through her Lu Xing'er encourages women to make their own choices about their reproductive bodies, and to resist the alienating political and social forces that function to control them.

Dan Ye is pregnant as a result of a passionate five-year love affair with a married man who already has a son and has no intention of leaving his wife. She has told him not to come to support her at the hospital but is still initially disappointed by his failure to appear. Such a relationship and, even more, the illegitimate pregnancy, is regarded as completely immoral by traditional Chinese society, but Dan Ye's attitude and the authorial stance is not one of criticism, but one of celebration of the genuine nature of their love and the purity of their passion. The author's sympathetic depiction of Dan Ye's passionate relationship with and pregnancy to a man whom she does not expect to marry, can be seen as a significant challenge to social and moral norms. It can be read as a statement supporting greater freedom of sexual expression for women, as well as greater tolerance and understanding of single pregnancy.

The main focus of Lu Xing'er's story and of this study, however, is the issue of abortion for Dan Ye. In terms of this article's framework for analysis, psychologically Dan Ye goes through a process of alienation from and then a reconnection with her maternal body. First the very mechanical, impersonal nature of the abortion process in Chinese society destroys her romantic view of her pregnancy. Her association of her pregnancy with intensely personal and poignant stolen liaisons with her lover is rudely shattered by the complaints of the old nurse, initially directed at the Hunchback:

“Three abortions in six months! How can anyone stand it? If everybody behaves like you, we won't be able to cope with all the work, even if our feet were turned into extra hands!” The old nurse spread out her arms to include everybody. “Even as it is, we have two dozen of you every morning, every single morning of the week” (198).

The nurse's diatribe relocates Dan Ye's pregnancy and abortion from being what was for her part of a unique romantic experience, to being just one of a never ending stream of abortions performed on (supposedly irresponsible and morally suspect) women every day, forcing on Dan Ye an alienated view of her pregnant body, that makes her feel “suffocated, . . . everything beautiful was desecrated” (198). The protagonist of Han Chunxu's ‘Rejecting Fate’ is depicted suffering a similar sense of alienation as her beautiful feelings for her lover and her pregnancy are crushed by the cruelty and contempt she is subjected to at the hospital. Tang Min also describes how impersonal process

gives women an alienating revulsion of their own bodies even when they actually want the abortion:

With the lower parts of our bodies naked for examination, the self-image changes, seeming loathsome and ugly. The women who had come for abortions were asked by the doctor: “First pregnancy or second pregnancy? Twenty yuan for the first one, ten yuan for the second one. Go to the cashiers and pay. Get a stamped receipt, then go to the abortion department and stand in line” (28).

In Lu’s story, Dan Ye’s shared experience with the other women also makes her aware that while for her lover the abortion is a convenient solution to a problem that could ruin him socially and perhaps politically, for her it is an intense emotional and physical experience not so easily dismissed. Learning that she will have to be admitted to the maternity ward and go through labor brings home to her the fact that she is carrying a life, and rouses in her maternal protective instincts towards the child:

“Give it a try,” Dan Ye murmured. “Give it a try.” She was bracing herself. Give it a try. See if a tiny life illegally conceived can be given the legal right to survive. Dan Ye treasured her love. More, she treasured the life so naturally born of that love. For that she was prepared to pay the price (206).<sup>27</sup>

She rebels against the dual alienation imposed by the indifference of the man towards the child and the attitude of the system that regards that life as something to be used to prove one’s political capability (as in the case of the union birth-control officer) or one’s moral superiority (as in the nurse). Symbolically crushing and tossing away her hospital admission slip, she rejects the bureaucratic state control imposed over her body through the hospital, and state representatives such as the birth control officer (there will be one at her college). As she walks down the stairs out of the abortion clinic, her eyes fall on the sign “Male comrade(s) stop here” (*nan tongzhi zhibu*), signaling her psychological break from the control of her lover (205).

Her decision not to abort the baby lends itself to be read as a refusal of the patrilineal system more challenging than the rejection of motherhood discussed in relation to the actress, Qiu Ying. Rejecting motherhood in a refusal to be the instrument of bearing children to carry on the male line, is a radical position, but it does not challenge the underlying patriarchal assumption of the father’s ownership of the child. Dan Ye, however, refuses the constraints of the patriarchal ideology that conceptualizes the child as only able to exist as part of a male line. The end of the story makes it clear that Dan Ye will break off all physical and emotional relations with the father of the child, so that the child is not being born for the man, as part of the father’s line, or

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<sup>27</sup> I have changed Zhu Hong’s translation slightly to remove the incorrect impression that the text refers to a ‘right to life’ similar to that espoused by anti-abortionists in the West. The Chinese text uses the term *hefa* (legal).

as a substitute man as we had seen in some earlier literature.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, the child is being born for itself and for the woman, in other words in direct opposition to the patriarchy and in spite of it. Birth here then takes on a radical gender power significance proclaiming the right to reject and resist the patrilineal order, and set up an essentially subversive, even if minute, matrilineal order within it.

Significantly a similar theme can be found in more recent stories. ‘Conjugal Bliss’ by Bu Tiemei, for example, ends with the protagonist leaving a note for her husband agreeing to a divorce, and then going to the hospital for her early pregnancy check up, happily contemplating life as a single mother. Her husband is sterile and she is pregnant from a single extramarital encounter. Her husband will not claim the child and she will not tell the biological father because: “This child was not his, it was hers alone” (Bu 2001: 16).

By deciding not to have an abortion, Dan Ye in Lu’s story asserts her control of her own reproductive body, symbolically claiming for herself the role of “sun” in the title of the story. Based on classical yin-yang theory that still exerts a powerful influence on Chinese thought today, the sun (yang) has traditionally represented man in a male/female bipolarity of sun/moon.<sup>29</sup> It also symbolizes the Communist Party and socialist state through its association with Mao Zedong. Initially it can be read as carrying this traditional symbolism in the story, the failure of Dan Ye’s lover to appear at the hospital being echoed by the failure of the sun to come out.

The eventual appearance of the sun at the end of the story, however, after Dan Ye has psychologically broken free from him and decided to keep the baby, can be read as carrying a new symbolism as a new female independence and a new female future. It can be seen as a radical proclamation of support for women’s right to make their own reproductive choices, and for the reuniting of the alienated maternal body against the divisions imposed on it by the state, society and the patrilineal order.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> In Zhang Jie’s “Zumulu” [Emerald] for example, the heroine, Zeng Linger also decides to produce an illegitimate child without telling the father she is pregnant and after all relations between them have been cut. Her motivation, however, is quite different. She breaks off relations in order to protect her lover, Zuo Wei, from political trouble and moral censure, but insists on going ahead with the pregnancy as a symbol of her devotion to Zuo Wei, seeing the pregnancy as fate having given Zuo Wei back to her. The child is conceptualised not just as a continuation of the father’s line, but as a replacement for the father himself. The underlying patriarchal ideology controlling the relationship between mother and child therefore remains unchallenged. See Zhang Jie (1987: 39).

<sup>29</sup> According to yin-yang theory, yin (shadow - represents femininity, passivity, darkness, cold, wetness, softness) and yang (sunshine - represents masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, and hardness) are two cosmological principles or forces through whose interaction all phenomena of the universe are produced (Fung 1966: 138). Binary pairs derived including male/female; active/passive; sun/moon, bright/dark while theoretically equal and opposite are in practice hierarchical with the ‘male’ side of the binary regarded as superior to the ‘female.’

<sup>30</sup> Reviewers have also suggested a second reading in which the sun is a symbol of the unborn child – hidden at the beginning of the story symbolising the threat of abortion, and

## **Analysis 2: Emotional Response & Cultural Context: Class, Gender & the ‘Moral Bricolage’**

In examining the representation of the emotional responses of Lu Xing'er's characters to abortion, a reading of underlying discourses embedded in the text can facilitate and extend understandings gained by direct analysis of characters' speech, thought and action. In particular it is relevant to examine gender and class discourses that serve to support existing prejudices about women, class and motherhood in Chinese society, and therefore affect women's experience of pregnancy and abortion in China. A more culturally sensitive analysis of the responses to pregnancy and abortion of the women in Lu Xing'er's story can also be facilitated by reading through “the Chinese moral bricolage” to better understand each character's emotional response within its own cultural context.

### *Gender Discourse and the Dilemma of Motherhood*

In the portrayal of the characters of Dan Ye, Qiu Ying and the Hunchback, a duality of attitudes about women and motherhood can be located that are potentially psychologically damaging to women, and make their responses to pregnancy and abortion more complex. On one side of this duality is the concept that womanhood equals motherhood. The conventional view is expressed through an unidentified female voice advising Fan Hong to marry and have her baby: “You must give birth to one child anyway, so why go through this extra pain?” (196). This expresses Chinese social convention without the suggestion of endorsing it, but even Dan Ye, the character who directly questions and defies convention, also reinforces the view of motherhood as an essential experiential component of her identity as a woman. In the process of reaching her decision to continue with her pregnancy, she reflects: “Only through this as yet uncompleted cycle could she ever know what it is to be a woman” (205). The thought clinches her decision. Hence, this character that is clearly most representative of authorial voice is motivated by the concept that real womanhood must include the experience of motherhood.

Even if we leave aside Western feminists' rejection of similar ideologies in the West as not necessarily applicable to the Chinese cultural context, it is relevant to consider how motherhood is then represented by the other side of

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appearing at the end when Dan Ye decides to have the baby; and a third reading in which the sun and darkness are symbols of emotions: the sun representing the emergence of hope and happiness after the despair and depression represented by darkness. I would argue that these other meanings coexist in multiple layers with my own reading, and are in no way contradictory in their overall elucidation of the woman's multifaceted experience of abortion. In the present study, however, the reading of the text I have presented is more logically consistent with the remainder of my analysis, hence I retain it in preference to other readings.

the duality.<sup>31</sup> In republican times, it was believed that pregnancy and motherhood cause shrinkage of women's brains (Dikötter 1995: 34-35), and that pregnant women are ugly and permanently disfigured: "even the most beautiful woman will wither at once" (Dikötter 1995: 79). Such beliefs seem to some extent to have continued to inform attitudes in contemporary society. It is particularly significant that in "The Sun is Not Out Today," the symbol of perpetual motherhood and embodiment of maternal feelings is a hunchback (the only major character not given a name and identified only by her deformity) whose physical ugliness and mental simplicity are referred to repeatedly throughout the story (e.g. 197, 198, 199, 203).<sup>32</sup> Further, the actress, Qiu Ying, rejects motherhood specifically on the basis that it will make her ugly and sexually unattractive to her husband. As quoted above, she argues: "I can't rush into pregnancy and child-raising at this moment, I'll lose myself and he'll lose interest in me. I must keep my good looks" (205).<sup>33</sup> The text places Chinese women in an irresolvable dilemma: To become real women, they must become mothers, but to become a mother implies to become ugly, sexually undesirable and intellectually diminished. While each side of the duality may individually be appropriate or rational in the Chinese cultural context, in tandem, they serve to create a gender discourse in which women are either not "real" women or are physically, intellectually and socially inferior beings. This creates a potential source of psychological tension for Chinese women.<sup>34</sup> Lu Xing'er seems unconsciously to be perpetuating these attitudes in this story, despite her overall efforts to challenge male-oriented cultural norms.

### *Class Discourse: Emotional Response and Class Difference*

It is notable that in this story, the character of Fan Hong, particularly as contrasted with that of Dan Ye, seems to be informed by persistent elitist class stereotypes of lower class women as being intrinsically more shallow and materialistic and having fewer lasting or deep feelings about life events than

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<sup>31</sup> The concept that real womanhood must include the experience of motherhood and that normal women are deeply imbued with maternal instincts, was challenged by Western feminists such as Rich (1977) and Badinter (1981). They saw it as a construct imposed on women to control them in the interests of capitalist patriarchy, and condemned it as damaging to the many women who did not wish to have children or did not enjoy child-raising.

<sup>32</sup> The naming and representation of this character reflects the deep-seated prejudice and discrimination against the disabled in Chinese society. There is no evidence in the story that Lu is trying to challenge or create awareness of such cultural and social practices.

<sup>33</sup> Moskowitz (2001: 24) also quotes a Taiwanese woman who aborted her third pregnancy because she was afraid she would become sexually undesirable and lose her husband.

<sup>34</sup> This tension finds also expression in Bu (2001): In the hospital gynaecology and obstetrics examination room, a crowd of women surround the doctor anxiously firing questions; "If I breastfeed the baby will my breasts sag?" "If I have it myself will my vagina get loose? Can I have a caesarean instead?" The protagonist, looking forward to single motherhood, feels released from such anxiety (17).

higher class women. Throughout the story, Fan Hong simply seems to accede relatively happily to whatever decisions are forced on her: whether it is the originally unwanted marriage and child or the subsequently unwanted abortion. As earlier quoted, she pours out her sense of injustice against the way she has been manipulated by her boyfriend (196), but immediately after the abortion is depicted as emotionally unmoved by the experience. It even seems to be suggested that she takes a shallow materialistic pride in her boyfriend having kept a taxi waiting the whole time (most people in the late 1980s could not normally afford taxis) to take her home:

“Fan Hong was the first to sit up. ‘He hired a car to take me here and has ordered it to wait.’ Her eyes were recovered from their swollenness, and the sense of injury was also gone” (202-3).<sup>35</sup>

The other lower-class character, the Hunchback is also depicted as seemingly emotionally little affected by the forced abortion, despite her love of children being established earlier in the story (203). Only Dan Ye, one of the intellectual elite, grapples with conflicting emotions and is moved by maternal love and compassion to refuse an abortion.<sup>36</sup> Tang Min’s story repeats a similar class stereotype:

“As we are leaving I look around the waiting room again. It looks like a scene in hell, full of women in agony, some groaning, some weeping, some vomiting. And then there are some chattering away that the birth quota in their factory has already been filled so they couldn’t get a birth permit and will have to wait until next year” (29).

The emotional trauma of the author who is one of the educated elite contrasts with the unconcern of the last group of women identified by their chatter as factory workers.

The perpetuation of these class stereotypes of the unfeeling lower classes and the sensitive upper classes highlights real class differences between Chinese women that perhaps relate back to the traditional sense of superiority of the intellectual elite in Chinese society. Lu Xing’er seems to be accepting these elite attitudes without interrogation in this story, hence perpetuating cultural norms that divide women despite setting out to show women the commonalities of their experiences. If we return to the idea of the Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> This is also pride in his solicitude, but it is significant that her primary measure of his solicitude (as presented to readers in the story) is through how much money he has spent by keeping a taxi waiting for her throughout the operation. In contrast, the primary school teacher (a more educated, higher-class character) is depicted as taking pride in her husband’s great emotional concern for her welfare – material expressions of his concern are not mentioned at all (203-4).

<sup>36</sup> Even if one considers that Dan Ye, as the main character, is necessarily rendered with more complexity, it is still true that in constructing the minor characters, the author has consciously or unconsciously selected dialogue and action that presents them in a particular way and points the reader towards a particular understanding.

moral bricolage, however, and use this as a basis to consider how each woman portrayed has reconciled her experience with her social reality, a very different and equally relevant understanding of their responses emerges.

*Orthodox Moral Bricolage: Fan Hong and “The Hunchback”*

In an alternative reading, Fan Hong and *The Hunchback* can be seen as not emotionally shallow and insensitive, rather, as each drawing on elements of the bricolage to negotiate her way through the abortion and still remain in harmony with society. Fan Hong at every stage of her pregnancy and abortion responds to her situation in a culturally rational and appropriate manner. Having become pregnant, she agrees to marriage. In accordance with China’s pro-natalist tradition, she does not consider abortion at this stage. When faced with opposition from her fiancé’s family, however, she has to consider the interests of the family. If she insists on marrying and having the child, the all-important relationship between herself and her in-laws could be so difficult as to make her life a misery. It could also damage the relationship between her husband and his parents. Traditionally it is the younger generation who must make the concessions in such a situation. Hence even if Fan Hong had wanted the child, she could draw on the moral comfort of knowing she was fulfilling collective obligations to help her negotiate the experience of abortion morally and emotionally. Once she has had the abortion, her conflict with her potential in-laws is resolved. If she wishes she can work towards gaining their approval for her marriage in the future. The abortion also leaves her free to redefine her relationship with her boyfriend, and relieves the shame of an out of wedlock pregnancy.

*The Hunchback* draws on an overlapping but different subset of the bricolage to negotiate her experience of abortion. The story presents her character throughout as a simple, honest woman who takes tremendous pride in being a model socialist citizen. She leaves the recovery ward early so that her husband will not be late for work and spoil his team’s outstanding work record (203). Despite her love for children, she is embarrassed by her pregnancies and has not attempted to contravene the one-child policy by having an out-of-plan birth. Her consciousness is dominated by a sense of responsibility to the state, and hence she can deal with the abortion by understanding it as doing her moral duty to protect national interests by limiting population growth.

*Heterodox Moral Bricolage: Dan Ye*

In contrast to the two women above, whose moral bricolage is chiefly composed of elements derived from or already assimilated into mainstream Chinese culture, tertiary educated Dan Ye has absorbed Western ideas that lie outside mainstream Chinese culture. Her flaunting of social and moral conventions seems to point to an absorption of ideas of free will, free choice,



authenticity and autonomy that were popular among young intellectuals in the early and mid 1980s (recall her decision to continue the pregnancy: "See if a tiny life illegally conceived has a right to survive": 206). The effect of these ideas becoming part of her moral bricolage supports her rejection of abortion.

Having made the decision not to abort, however, what is her likely fate? Author Lu Xing'er avoids having to consider the issue by ending the story with Dan Ye's bold challenge to cultural and moral norms. Tang Min's "Artificially Induced Abortion," however, puts the case bluntly:

In other countries there are a large number of 'unwed mothers,' but in our country it is practically forbidden to keep a child 'who has no papa'. From attitudes to economic conditions, everything is against the woman who would raise a child out of wedlock (28).

As a single pregnant woman, Dan Ye would be subjected to intense pressure from her family, friends, colleagues and officials at her workplace and perhaps also the local neighbourhood committee. She would be pressured for bringing shame to the family and her work unit, and might be threatened with loss of work and accommodation. Han Chunxu's "Rejecting Fate," which also deals with the issue of single pregnancy, depicts the tragic outcome that could be awaiting the courageous Dan Ye. Han Chunxu's protagonist, who is based directly on a single woman with whom the author shared a maternity ward, was initially equally determined to carry her baby, but eventually could not withstand the pressure any longer and so underwent abortion by induced labour at six months. The story uses interior monologue to reveal the woman's overpowering love and grief, her anger at society and her remorse for her own failure to protect her child. Hence in the reality of Chinese society, Dan Ye's resolution of the problem is probably ultimately doomed to failure or hardship and discrimination for herself and the child. Her attempt to draw on elements of a moral bricolage which were as yet unassimilated by mainstream culture in effect left her unable to negotiate the experience of abortion as easily as her less educated, more culturally orthodox fellow patients.

Does that then mean that Dan Ye's brave challenge to her alienation from the products and processes of her reproductive labour and her challenge to the conceptual constraints of patriarchal ideology are meaningless? It can be argued that Dan Ye should be seen not as a symbol of social change that has already occurred, but as a symbol of change that is evolving. There are no current statistics on single mothers available, and numbers are clearly very small, but related statistics suggest that social change is occurring that could make single motherhood a genuine choice for Chinese women in the future. Even in China of the late 1980's when the story was written, the rate of abortions among unmarried women was rising rapidly. A survey of three Shanghai hospitals found that the percentage of abortions obtained by unmarried women rose from 14% to 25% between 1982 and 1988 (Wu et al 1992: 52). In recent years this has reached 50% (He 2000:1). So clearly pregnancy among single women is very common, and sexual mores are changing rapidly in China. An indication of the extent of change in general

social attitudes to single pregnancy can be seen in a article in the February 2003 issue of *Zhongguo Funü* (generally a conservative women's magazine expressing officially sanctioned views) expressing outrage at a university for attempting to expel a single female student because she was pregnant (Wu 2003: 45). At the same time, highly educated, high achieving women in China, the *nu qiangren*, are the group who are most likely to remain single because men prefer to marry women with less education and a less successful career than their own. It is also this group of women who are psychologically and intellectually most capable of ignoring social pressure and going ahead with single motherhood. At present, the one-child policy is a major barrier to single motherhood, but if, as some studies suggest, economic and social transformation are making state control of the population unnecessary (U.S Embassy Beijing 2001, 2), this constraint will also disappear. Then single Chinese women may genuinely have the choice to continue a pregnancy if they wish.

Even if population control is not relaxed, however, Dan Ye's assertion of female independence and female rights still has a more general significance. Child or no child, Dan Ye's subjective consciousness has undergone a profound change. In taking for herself the role of sun (even if it is a still weak, newly emerging sun) she redefines her position within all her personal and social relationships. This new female identity identified by Lu Xing'er, and found also in more recent literature (Bu 2001) poses a fundamental challenge to traditional gender relations in Chinese society.

## Conclusion

Chinese women's literature played a unique role in acting as a voice for women to express their experiences of abortion and to call for social and cultural change to alleviate their suffering at a time when no other public forum was available for women to express themselves on these issues.

Literature's special ability to convey thoughts, emotions and physical sensations and recreate in readers' minds the physical and social environment of its characters made it a highly effective medium for conveying the most personal aspects of women's experience. This has been drawn on in this study to offer new insights into and understandings of abortion in China.

The concept of the "alienated maternal body" has also been shown to be useful in identifying structural links between women's position as reproducers in socialist society and their position in patriarchal ideology ("feudalism") on one hand, and the major problems authors have identified as faced by women in their total experience of pregnancy and abortion on the other. Analysis showed that these problems included forms of alienation experienced by women as a result of external intervention in their reproductive lives by representatives of state and patriarchal power, as well as alienation caused by women's internal acceptance of their own role primarily

as objects of male sexual desire. These findings add a further dimension to current understandings of women's experience of abortion in China.

While the fictionality of these works is fully acknowledged, so is the intention of its writers to use their works both to force into public notice women's experiences that are denied or ignored by society, and to issue a call for significant social change. This political and social agenda is often embedded in the narrative as in Lu Xing'er's story, but also finds overt expression in works such as Tang Min's 'Abortion.' Tang devotes a four-page final section of her 'story' to a series of direct demands on women's behalf. These demands include: feudal concepts of women's chastity and virtue must be discarded; education must be reformed to provide young women with adequate knowledge about sex; women's reproductive health must be better funded and better planned: equipment must be updated and medicines kept in adequate supply; women must be given a voice to express their grievances; steps must be taken to reduce the reliance on abortion for birth control, and society and hospitals must treat all pregnant women with humanity (*rendaozhuyi*) instead of treating them as if they must be punished. Significantly, these were largely the same issues that the Chinese government finally began to address in the mid-1990s under increasing pressure from the Women's Federation and women from the intellectual elite (Greenhalgh 2001). This fiction therefore should be recognised not only as a unique insight into Chinese women's experiences of abortion, but also for its role in bringing abortion issues into the public arena, thereby providing some of the earliest impetus towards change.

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