

## TRAVERSING THE SUBLIME: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE FEMALE BODY IN LU XUN'S *REGRETS FOR THE PAST*<sup>1</sup>

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Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh.

— Lacan, *Seminar*, v7

Despair is like hope, in that both are vanity.

— Lu Xun, quoting a verse of Sándor Petőfi

The history of the May Fourth movement has been written in the grand narrative dominated by the esthetic of the sublime. Lu Xun was one of the prominent actors who pursued the sublime figure vigorously and has been endowed with sublime qualities.<sup>2</sup> He devoted his entire life to the process of cultural elevation and nation-building, as well as personal perfection. As the pioneer of modern Chinese literature, the heroic figure of Lu Xun as a fighter continues posthumously to inspire and empower people.<sup>3</sup> However, one cannot separate the *low* whisperings of disillusionment and despair from the “Sturm und Drang” of the May Fourth movement. In fact, Lu Xun had been struggling against the spectral image of despair which nefariously haunted the grand discourse of revolution and modernization. The grim image of despair and nothingness became an unexorcisable specter in Lu Xun’s writings from the mid 1920s; it circumvented, menaced, and encroached upon the sublime figure which was ardently cherished by reformers and iconoclasts. Lu Xun confessed in the preface of his *Self-selected Collection* (*zixuan ji*, 1932) that he was rather “disappointed and dispirited” after witnessing the ups and downs of successive revolutions in China (*QJ* 5, 177). In the same preface he quoted a line of the famous Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi: “Despair

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- 1 I would like to thank my advisor, Ban Wang for his intellectual guidance and encouragement. I also wish to thank Janet Walker and Rosie Roberts for polishing and editing my paper.
  - 2 Ban Wang’s *The Sublime Figure of History* is a monograph on the dynamics of esthetics and politics in modern Chinese history. In his book Wang devoted one chapter “Writing China: The Imaginary Body and Allegorical Wilderness” (pp.17-54) to Lu Xun, in which he offers detailed research of the esthetics of the sublime in Lu Xun’s writings.
  - 3 Lu Xun has been accorded the status of national hero posthumously and thus became a sublime figure in the CCP’s propaganda.

is like hope, in that both are vanity” (*QJ* 5, 177).<sup>4</sup> While it is understandable that despair can be regarded as the vacuum of hope, why is hope vanity?

In a letter to Xu Guangping, his student lover, in 1925, Lu Xun confessed that sometimes he felt that “only the darkness and nothingness is ‘substantial’” (Lu 1980, 7). Wang Xiaoming points out that Lu Xun’s perception of nothingness differs from the mere pessimism of a revolutionary as “it questions if there are other values beyond the darkness” (Wang 1993, 83). The substantial nothingness, and the elusive sublime, together raised a question more complicated than simply pointing at Lu Xun’s often castigated skepticism about Chinese revolution. The important question is to what extent and in which way, the dialectic of the sublime and nothingness can be sufficiently addressed, deciphered, and translated into the discourse of Chinese revolution in the early twentieth century.

In this paper I set out to question the dichotomy between the two esthetic concepts – the esthetic of despair and the esthetic of the sublime. Slavoj Žižek’s critique on the Kantian sublime, which combines Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis, will help to shed light on the theoretical conundrum. I will use the Žižekian critique of the sublime as a hermeneutic tool to read Lu Xun’s fiction “Regret for the Past” (*shangshi*, 1925)<sup>5</sup> as an allegorical work which foregrounds the representation of the esthetic of the sublime and the esthetic of despair, whose relationship needs to be reexamined against the backdrop of the Chinese revolution.

### Revisiting the Kantian Sublime

The sublime is an anomaly in esthetic categories. According to Kant, the sublime both prolongs and problematises the project of generating a self-subsistent, whole, and harmonious subject. While the beautiful always pleases, the sublime marks the point of the breakdown of the beautiful by presupposing a displeasure. The pleasure of the sublime feeling comes from the somatic subject’s realization of the totalitarian success of reason – that it can now represent even the unrepresentable. The uplifting experience involved in the sublime, therefore, is the great rational power that the subject convenes in order to cope with the failure of the representation of the real object.

Slavoj Žižek challenges the Kantian notion of the sublime using Hegelian dialectics. He argues that Kant’s presupposition that there is a positively given entity beyond phenomenal representation is untenable. In contrast, Hegel’s position is that “there is *nothing* beyond phenomenality.” Kant thinks he is still dealing with a negative presentation of the Thing, while he is already “in the midst of the Thing-in-itself” (Žižek 1989, 205). What appears to be the Kantian sublime, therefore, is precisely the eclipse of the real sublime object. The Kantian sublime, which suggests the approach of the positive Thing in its negative representation, should be replaced with the Thing

4 Lu Xun quoted the same line of Petőfi’s poem in “Hope” (*xiwang*, 1925) in *Wild Grass*. See *QJ*, vol.1, p.483.

5 In *Lu Xun Quanji* [*The Complete Works of Lu Xun*] Vol.2, pp.276-304.

in its radical negativity – the no-thing, the lack, the void of representation; since the very void, the very nothingness, the very absence of the representation of the Thing is in fact the Thing which exists in radical negativity. The real Thing can be approached only “through purely negative presentation – the very inadequacy of the phenomenality to the Thing is the only appropriate way to present it” (Žižek 1989, 205). Therefore, the sublime is the face-to-face encounter with, instead of a bypassing of, the Real. The sublime object, instead of being one indicating through its very inadequacy the dimension of a transcendent Thing, is an object which occupies the position of the Thing as the void, as the pure Nothing of absolute negativity.

Žižek uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to anatomise nothingness as an inherent component of the sublime. He points out that Nothing as the embodiment of the Thing “is not simply nothing but a determinate nothing” (Žižek 1989, 195). Although “nothing” is unrepresentable in the field of phenomenology, it can produce certain affective effects and series of properties. The content of nothing, Žižek asserts, is the notorious *jouissance*, enjoyment-in-sense. *Jouissance* is nothing, because it “does not exist,” but it can produce certain traumatic effects that affect the formation of symbolic order (Žižek 1989, 164). *Jouissance* as extreme enjoyment is the hard core of being which “simultaneously attracts and repels us” (Žižek 1989, 180), a certain excess or remainder which inevitably resists all signifying operation. If the esthetic of the sublime is ultimately the esthetic of *jouissance*, then it is questionable that the sublime can be elevating without corrupting, perfecting without undermining, defending without subverting, heroizing without belittling. The representation of the sublime, therefore, becomes a contested field by itself.

It is in this sense that the esthetic discourse in modern China, which almost unanimously touted the grand image of the sublime, appears to be pathological. From Wang Guowei (1877-1929) in the early twentieth century, to Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986) and Liang Zongdai (1903-1983) in the 1930s, the esthetic of the sublime in modern China retained, if not reinforced, the self-assuring tone of Kantian esthetics. For example, Wang Guowei attempted to promote the “sublime personality” (*zhuangmei renga*) as “a cure for an emotionally depressed and morally degenerate society” (Wang 1997, 24); Zhu Guangqian’s esthetic theory, in turn, favors “action, power, grandeur, and adventure” (Wang 1997, 118). As a discursive practice, the esthetic of the sublime in modern China had as one of its aims to *sublimate the sublime*. Since the calls for sublimation were egged on by the revolutionary discourses of self-strengthening and national salvation, what was touted as sublime was overwhelmingly revolutionary passion, spiritual striving or heroic sacrifice, which served as an ideal for political and individual perfection.

Lu Xun himself also contributed to the discourse of the sublime in modern China by writing the essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (*moluo shili shuo*),<sup>6</sup> in which he eulogized the satanic and robust power of romantic literature. However, Lu Xun’s faith in the grand sublime figure was transient. His later works, especially those written

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6 “On the Power of Mara Poetry” was written in 1907 when Lu Xun was in Japan. See *Lu Xun Quanjī* [*The Complete Works of Lu Xun*] Vol.1, pp.55-102.

after the heyday of the May Fourth Movement, register his reflection on the esthetic of the sublime. I will turn to the most “romantic” literary work of Lu Xun, the only love story in his oeuvre, “Regret for the Past”, to explore how Lu Xun’s literary works challenged and subverted the prevailing discourse on the sublime through the lens of the Žižekian reformulation.

### The Metamorphosis of Zijun

“Regrets for the Past” was collected in *Wandering (panghuang)*, 1926), Lu Xun’s second short story collection. It relates the failed love story of a young couple. Zijun, the tragic female protagonist, is galvanized by Juansheng’s love as much as she is mesmerised by the modern ideas advocated by him, leading her to leave her old-fashioned family and cohabit with Juansheng. After a brief moment of ecstasy, however, Juansheng’s love wears out in the trivialities of daily life; and Zijun ceases to appear as charming and sublime as she used to be. After Juansheng tells Zijun that he no longer loves her, she leaves, and soon dies.

Leo Ou-fan Lee sees Juansheng as a “typical May Fourth romantic intellectual” and the text as a “typical May Fourth romantic story” (Lee 1987, 63). “Regret for the Past” is also a story about the typical esthetic representation of a typical May Fourth revolutionary. Subtly yet faithfully, the vicissitudes of the esthetic representation index the history of the formation of the subject. Throughout the story, Juansheng undergoes drastic emotional fluctuations which revolve around the two palpable literary images: the sublime and nothingness.

The most sublime moment in the story is attained when Zijun decides to break away from her family to live with Juansheng by claiming “I’m my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me” (*QJ* 2, 278). It is noteworthy that Juansheng has been spontaneously playing the role of an enlightener who bombards Zijun with modern ideas and romantic figures. Ironically, when Juansheng’s preaching takes effect, he himself is somehow taken aback. The words and tone of Zijun sound like deafening thunder hitting his soul. The female body looms large in front of his eyes and becomes a promising harbinger, through which Juansheng sees the “resplendent dawn” of the future (*QJ* 2, 279). At that very moment, their roles are reversed. Zijun, who now embraces the sublime ideal with her own body, transcends the conceptual ideal that Juansheng breathes into her; she is the loftier one. In contrast, Juansheng is outshone and loses his superiority as an enlightener. Witnessing the woman being elevated to such sublime height is almost a traumatic experience for him. Overwhelmed by ecstasy, he is left dumbfounded.

Juansheng’s traumatic experience extends to the subsequent moment in the story when he asks for Zijun’s consent to have a sexual relationship:

I cannot remember clearly how I expressed my true and fiery love to her at that time. Not only now, but soon after it happened, the memory became blurry. When I tried to recall it at night, there were only fragments. Even the

fragments dissipated like a dream without a trace after a couple of months of living together. I only remember that I spent a dozen days studying carefully the manner of confession and the order of phrases, and the solution to handling a possible rejection. But at the moment they all seemed useless. In bewilderment, I could not help myself adopting the means that I learned from a film. I feel ashamed whenever I think of it. However, it is the only thing that forever hangs in my memory, like a solitary lamp in a dark room, illuminating me – I was clasping her hand in tears, and knelt down on one knee... (*QJ* 2, 279)

In contrast to the preceding moment of the sublime, the latter marks a moment of shame in Juansheng's experience. When Juansheng is so close to Zijun, the newly-crowned sublime object, he is not only undermined in his linguistic ability, but also suffers a loss of memory, and eventually, a loss of selfhood. He cannot remember, cannot speak or act as he plans, and he ends up borrowing a gesture from a film to communicate with his woman. The loss of self is intensified in the ensuing days. No sooner does Juansheng start to live with Zijun, than he develops a different feeling for her. The body which was endowed with sublime beauty rapidly transforms into a repulsive bundle of life. When Zijun diligently plays the role of housewife, she ceases to be the attractive woman in Juansheng's eyes. Her previous innocent beauty is marred by the effects of labour: "Her face was sweat-soaked all day, short hair sticking to the forehead. Her hands grew rough" (*QJ* 2, 284). He detests the way she "went on munching away quite unconcerned" (*QJ* 2, 288). Her existence now represents nothing more than what he disdains and fears. His hope for the splendid future is in jeopardy. He realises that "the happiness and peace" is freezing him (*QJ* 2, 283); he feels himself like a bird with paralysed wings.

"Regret for the Past" therefore registers the metamorphosis of Zijun's body in esthetic terms. The story begins by representing the body as a pleasing object of feminine beauty; the body is enlightened and elevated as a sublime object, and then falls from that height and becomes a vulgar object. The drastic transformation of the body, or, more precisely, the drastic change in Juansheng's esthetic experience of it, tallies with Žižek's description of the sublime object:

The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object – it can persist only in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen. If we want to see it in the light of day, it changes into an everyday object, it dissipates itself, precisely because in itself it is nothing at all (Žižek 1989, 170).

Since the sublime object is the embodiment of pure negativity or emptiness, the esthetic experience of the grand sublime is nothing but a mirage created by the subject. Out of the desire to assure the self, a desire associated with the ego's libido, the esthetic subject is propelled to the Kantian misrecognition – that is, the subject insists on "perceiving" a positive sublime object, one existing beyond its range of perception, when it finds that there is nothing in the field of phenomena. Out of this compulsive desire to represent the positive thing even through negative means, the

subject unavoidably misrecognises the nothing as something, the meaningless as meaningful, and the ordinary as exceptional. In fact, the so-called sublime object has no intrinsic sublime quality, nor does it exist in any extra-phenomenal field. As Žižek argues, using Lacan's definition, the sublime object is "an object raised to the level of the (impossible-real) Thing" (Žižek 1989, 202-203).

Similarly, Juansheng compulsively misreads Zijun's words and actions as a modern woman's manifesto, a revolutionary gesture guided by a rational power, while he turns a blind eye to the truth that is right in front of him – Zijun breaks away from her family out of fervent love for him. When Juansheng is able to read through Zijun's body and mind, he finds himself on the brink of his accustomed symbolic universe. Juansheng is forced to attest to the scandal of the sublime and to realise that "the humanist dream of fullness is itself a libidinal fantasy" (Eagleton, 263). It is in this phase that Juansheng traverses the grand image of the sublime and suffers great disillusionment. What awaits him is a void, a hole, the devastating nothingness. Painfully he comes to the desperate realization: "all the ideas and the intelligent, fearless phrases she has learned are empty in the end" (QJ 2, 293). With the fading of the sublime quality, Zijun's body resumes an ordinary, if not a more vulgar, modality.

Apparently, Juansheng's symbolic universe is grounded in empowering reason and a progressive trajectory that he unfalteringly believes in. However, the traumatic encounter with the sublime has cast him in a world where temporal progress has been suspended. In this world, *nothing* really happens, and he is forced to repeatedly live out *the* moment, in which he knelt on one knee in tears. The moment is no longer sublime; it now represents the fatuous and obscene nature of love – and the startling secretive backstage of enlightenment and revolution.

Zijun's body eventually becomes the materialization of the impossible *jouissance*. According to Juansheng, ever since they began to live together Zijun had become "more lively," yet she has dismissed the revolutionary ideas that he imparts to her and drifted into the world of nothingness. For Juansheng, life is constructed through meaning and the hope of a splendid future; a life without purpose is a life of emptiness. Zijun, nonetheless, becomes the living exhibition of the life of emptiness. Instead of loving flowers, which is romantic in Juansheng's view, Zijun "has a liking for animals" and she begins to raise four chicks and one dog. Juansheng does not like the fact that Zijun spends a lot of time in cooking and feeding the chicks and the dog; he tells her that he does not care about eating at all – he'd rather starve than see her busying herself like this (QJ 2, 284). Zijun's enthusiasm for everyday trivialities is meaningless in Juansheng's eyes. He cannot understand why her body is getting plumper and her cheeks are becoming rosier (QJ 2, 282-283), while he at the same time languishes, struggling for a position in the symbolic world. Nevertheless, Juansheng can plainly perceive the unrepresentable enjoyment of Zijun, the *jouissance* that circulates in her vulgar body and boosts her material existence.

For Juansheng, the most excruciating reality is that the enjoyment repetitively beckons him. Zijun loves the little game of reviewing the past, in which she would question and examine him, or request Juansheng to retell every detail of his moment of

shame with a contented smile on her face and a blazing sparkle in her eyes. Juansheng abhors the enjoyment that Zijun embodies precisely because it is unavoidable – as the enjoyment is originally and eventually his own. The exhibition of Zijun’s enjoyment is nothing less than torture for Juansheng, because it reminds him that his sublime ideal, which he cherished heart and soul, is far from ideal.

Juansheng later realises that the courage of the revolutionary Zijun comes from love, instead of ideas; and he regrets having lost sight of “the essential meaning of life” because of “blind love” (*QJ* 2, 292). What Juansheng does not realise is that the lack of meaning is embodied in the representation of the sublime, and that the shameful nothingness is the very object that he labouriously pursues. In this sense, there is no way that Juansheng, as a modern revolutionary youth, can redeem himself from this fundamental regret. The truth of Juansheng’s dilemma is cogently contained in Lacan’s famous statement: “Sublimate as much as you like; you have to pay for it with something. And this something is called *jouissance*. I have to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh” (Lacan, 322). The metamorphic body of Zijun is therefore the pound of flesh that needs to be weighed by its owner, Juansheng. It mocks his self-sublimation with an abhorrent surge of *jouissance*, reminding him of the obscene force which undercuts the esthetic of the grand sublime. Since the pound of flesh originally belonged to Juansheng, the repetitive insurgency of the unconscious *jouissance* would not die out even after Zijun’s death. The dog Asui, which is raised by Zijun but later dumped by Juansheng, comes back at the end of the story like a phantom. Asui’s return is startling; although the dog looks “thin, covered with dust, more dead than alive” (*QJ* 2, 302), it continues to unsettle Juansheng, to bewilder him and drive him out of the symbolic space.

For Juansheng, to start a new life means to overcome the memory of Zijun, who has come to represent the traumatic nothingness. Even the narrative of “Regrets for the Past” itself, in the form of his handwritten notes, is therapeutically “devoted to erasing and exorcising Zijun and casting her into the empty space between words” (Liu, 165). Yet the contradictions and despairing notes contained in the narrative furthermore subvert the possibility of restoring an eloquent and rational subject. Behind the broken memory is a volatile subject who struggles to collect himself through writing. The regret Juansheng feels, toward the end of the story, is more for the loss of his selfhood than for the death of Zijun.<sup>7</sup>

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7 In December, 1926, Lu Xun wrote another story “Flight to the Moon” (*ben yue*), which is a parody of the famous Chinese legend of Chang’e, the mortal woman who became the moon goddess after stealing an elixir of immortality from her husband, the champion archer Yi. In many ways “Flight to the Moon” can also be regarded as a parody of “Regrets for the Past,” in which the roles of man and woman are reversed. In “Flight to the Moon,” it is the man’s job to take care of daily meals, whereas the woman Chang’e is preoccupied with immortality (as a form of sublimation). The story nonetheless reveals the fundamental anxiety of the male subject that they will somehow lose the connection to a higher spiritual layer once they are imbedded in quotidian life driven by biological needs. “Flight to the Moon” is collected in Lu Xun’s short story collection *Old Tales Retold* (*gushi xinbian*). See *QJ* 2 467-483.

### The Esthetic of Despair

Many scholars believe that the literary representation of “Regrets for the Past” renders the real woman as an empty bearer of meaning whose existence is insubstantial. As Lydia Liu points out, the narrative of “Regrets for the Past” is dominated by the male: “no authentic discourse of the ‘other’ is represented,” the real woman is silenced and ostracised into “the empty space between words” (Liu, 165). Ching-kiu Stephen Chan points out in his article “The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the ‘New Women’ by May Fourth Writers” that Zijun was unfairly allocated the liability for Juansheng’s loss of selfhood, while in fact her position “is nothing but emptiness, the empty existence the man is allowed to objectify and exchange for ‘truth’” (Chan, 26). He maintains that the representation of woman’s despair actually reflected the male intellectuals’ despair – their crisis of consciousness in the post-May Fourth period. The crisis of consciousness of the dominant masculine discourse consisted in men’s lack of means to represent a new mode of reality with their habitual set of discourses. While the modern intellectuals endeavoured to represent themselves via the crisis of the other, the other was destined to be objectified as polymorphic and hopeless in such a representation. Zijun, as a Chinese Nora who was “openly betrayed by her share of the revolution” (Chan, 25), joined the images of new women that emerged in specific cultural and historical “formations of despair.”

However, one needs to question if there is a certain relationship between the very emptiness of woman’s symbolic position and the despair she comes to represent. The Žižekian formulation of the esthetic of the sublime may help us to redefine the relationship between the subject, the other, and despair. If despair can be viewed as “the utter loss of the will to discourse, and the disbelief in actions and ideas of any positive value” (Chan, 36), then it has to be performative in nature. There would be no subject of despair if there is no subject of representation in the first place. Despair manifests itself precisely in the performative act of repeatedly failed representation. Therefore, the locale of despair should be relocated from the subjective representation of woman to the very empty position that woman occupies in that representation. That is to say, what best characterises despair is not the transference of the masculine despair to the female body; the despair that causes the masculine anxiety lies in the very fact that he is unable to achieve any symbolic representation of the *real* woman. It is the crisis of representation that leads to the crisis of consciousness.

One can say that there would be no subject of despair if there were no subject of representation in the first place. While the ability to represent is doubtlessly a demonstration of subjective agency, this very agency faces a breakdown vis-à-vis the fissure of representation. The dilemma which man faces is that the more subjective integrity he achieves, the emptier the representation of woman becomes, which in turn retroactively questions his subjective validity. Therefore, the act of remembering or writing cannot redeem Juansheng from his despair, because the more he writes, the more he tends to forget or distort the past, and the emptier the image of Zijun becomes. The woman’s body thus comes to embody the impossible domain of representation, a domain which was once ironically misrecognized by Juansheng as too meaningful to represent. Juansheng’s ecstasy, trauma, disillusionment, and regret all result from his encounter with the unrepresentable other – the sublime object.



Moreover, the Žižekian formulation would deny the possibility of constructing any transcendental subject through representation. If representation can be regarded as an exhibition window of subjective agency, the representation of woman's despair casts doubt on the consistency of the representing subject. When the subjective representation stops short of the despair of woman, it is evident that the masculine subject cannot achieve a transcendental and integral self through the representation or transference of his own crisis. Chan notices that the masculine subject's own ethical consistency "is often undermined by an aesthetic tendency in his language to mitigate, if not vulgarize, the articulation of any alternative voice of the woman" (Chan, 32). Yet is there a way to represent the alternative voice of woman in a consistent and rational discourse? At several points of his article, Chan also pauses to ponder if there is any "alternative rationality" (Chan, 30) when the subject is at the end of his wits. After quoting Herbert Marcuse's theory of "negative totality" (Marcuse, 159), Chan comes to the conclusion that "any possible transcendence of self is to be achieved in its very negativity" (Chan, 23).

This notion of a transcendental self in its negativity, which presupposes the existence of a positive, unifying subject, is quite Kantian; thus, it contains the same Kantian "error." One needs to challenge the very notion of a transcendental subject in the first place with Hegelian dialectics: why does one look for a transcendental subject when he is already facing the truth of the subject? When Chan talks about the self in its negativity, he is already "in the midst of" the formation of the self. The truth of the subject lies in its non-transcendental nature – it has to embrace the unrepresentable despair, because it is this very negativity that constructs its own existence. In other words, the crisis of consciousness, or the existential dilemma, is not something that the (masculine) modern subject can overcome or transcend, but something he has to live with, something that defines him as he is. For the May Fourth iconoclasts and revolutionaries at that particular juncture in history, "where contradictions were lived as part of everyday reality" (Chan, 23), their subjectivity had to be formed in radical negativity, if they were to implement the "impossible" mission to subvert the same ground that they stood on. It was a mission that required so much passion and momentum that it was impossible to gather them from any integral realm of being or established hierarchy of consciousness. Therefore, as much as the past and Zijun fetter Juansheng's progressive move, he cannot move on if he does not have a past to regret and a woman to forsake. Zijun is not an object for the "justification of one's own assertion of self-integrity, one's own transcendence of a painful crisis of identity" (Chan, 25); nor is she the cause of Juansheng's despair. Juansheng's despair, ironically, is caused by his own relentless pursuit of a revolutionary subjectivity.

Despair functions both as the representation and the disruption of such representation, exhibiting a tension between the self and a radical otherness, as well as "the self's symbiotic containment of the other" (Chan, 30). Negative as it is in regard to subjective representation, despair can become a positive condition for the course of revolution. One can certainly find the phantom of *jouissance* in Chan's expression of the power of despair: "Once repressed, the language of despair – despair as the root of existence, despair as the cause of life – now erupted through layers of institutional and ideological dominance to appear in the formation of a new ethic and a new culture. It gave rise to an alternative discourse that might have contributed to women's new

entry into history” (Chan, 22). Despair, as *jouissance*, is the radical other which both empowers and frightens a revolutionary. In its fathomless precipice of hopelessness, despair confers on the self the most formidable power, the power of death, which, ironically, is the biggest crisis for the subject. Only when caught in despair can the self meet the traumatic nothingness which lies at the starting point of any formation of the subject; there, the self conjures for itself again the devastating power between death and birth. Chan extols despair “as the only remaining powerhouse in the twilight of history” (Chan, 22). Indeed, one is too feeble to fight for revolution if one has not fought the fierce battle against despair, a sublime battle over one’s own existence.

### The Sublime Women

In December, 1923, Lu Xun gave a talk entitled “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home” (*nala zouhou zenyang*)<sup>8</sup> at the Peking Women’s Normal College, in which he tried to list the realistic scenarios that might happen to Nora<sup>9</sup> after she leaves her husband and family. In all of the scenarios Nora is doomed: she could become a prostitute, starve to death, or simply give up her newly acquired identity by returning to her family. Therefore he called Nora’s action of leaving the family a gesture of sacrifice, and a gesture only meaningful as a sacrifice. As a subject of sacrifice, the fate of the new woman is objectified as a spectacle for the dominant subject of discourse. The vicissitudes of her fate were there to be viewed, judged, and represented by the masculine subject, who in turn tried to speak on her behalf.

In “Regrets for the Past,” the only time Zijun becomes a subject of enunciation is when she speaks in the language of Juansheng: “I’m my own mistress. None of them has any right to interfere with me.” Apart from this borrowed discourse, she seems to have no means to express herself. On the other hand, Juansheng’s effort to define Zijun as what she says proves to be a mistake, and his own language and memory fall short of her representation. In the end, it is as if the narrator has to sentence the woman to death, thereby dispatching her into the bottomless gulf in the discourse that seeks to represent her.

Therefore, behind the jubilation over the liberation of woman in the May Fourth era, there lies the insuppressible doubt: where is she to be found? The anxiety has a reasonable base, as Shuei-may Chang asserts: “if women remain silent, they will forever be outside the process of history” (Chang, 191). Many other new women, like Zijun, were the unrepresentable objects in this particular historical and cultural circumstance. Lu Xun himself was a cynical spectator of this process of his-story, as opposed to her-story. In “Gendered Spectacles: Lu Xun on Gazing at Women,” Eileen Cheng sets out to examine “the intimate link between women and spectacles” in Lu Xun’s writings (Cheng 2006, 4). The gendered spectacles she discovers include Qiu Jin (1875-1907),

8 See *Lu Xun Quanji* [The Complete Works of Lu Xun], Vol.1, pp.143-151.

9 Nora, the female protagonist in the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen’s social play *A Doll’s House* (1879), left her husband in search of individual freedom. She was lauded by Chinese reformers as the model of New Woman.

Ruan Lingyu (1910-1935), Liu Hezhen (1904-1926)<sup>10</sup>, and the Chinese Nora, Zijun. Although Lu Xun himself was critical about turning women into spectacles which, as he believed, catered to the baser instincts of human nature (Cheng 2006, 4), he was apparently mesmerised by the spectacles of these women, or, to be more accurate, the spectacles of dead women. For instance, as Cheng discovers, Qiu Jin represents “everything he is not and refuses to become” and was an object for his criticism when she was alive. Yet, after her voluntary sacrifice in 1907, Lu Xun suddenly became sympathetic toward her, as he participated in several memorials commemorating Qiu Jin and paid tribute to her in his short story “Medicine” (*yao*, 1919) (Cheng 2006, 7). In other writings, Lu Xun continued to focus on the spectacles of dead women: he expressed his sympathy and indignation over the death of his student, Liu Hezhen, in 1926; he defended the death of the actress Ruan Lingyu because he thought her choice of committing suicide was “not so easy” (Lu 1995, 901).

One may wonder if the only way for women to have a symbolic life is to embrace death. Qiu Jin’s choice of death had made her the first sublime female figure in modern Chinese history; Ruan Lingyu’s suicide absolved her of any moral sin and saved her a position in the symbolic world. According to Žižek, “everybody must die twice” – one is “the natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of nature’s continual transformation;” and the other is “absolute death – the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*” (Žižek 1989, 134).<sup>11</sup> In other words, the difference between the two deaths is the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization. The sublime object, Žižek asserts, is located precisely in the interspace between the two deaths.

The women who sacrifice their physical bodies in return for the symbolic life, therefore, are always imbued with sublime beauty. In Zijun’s case, however, her symbolic death precedes her biological death. In Juansheng’s eyes, her life is devoid of meaning long before her actual death; the vulgar body of Zijun, which becomes the embodiment of emptiness, exists completely in biological drives. However, it is precisely the symbolic death of Zijun, the ceasing of her meaningful, progressive, revolutionary life that cast her into the interspace between the two deaths and transformed her into the unrepresentable sublime object.

Zijun loses her symbolic life, as did thousands of new women who believed in free love and marriage. In a way, “Regret for the Past” represents the prevailing post-May Fourth sentiment that the new women, over time, would lose their newly-acquired subjectivity; “bound and exhausted,” they would continue to lose “their understanding of

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10 Liu Hezhen was a revolutionary female student who died in the March 18<sup>th</sup> Incident in 1926, at the age of 18. Lu Xun eulogized Liu Hezhen in an essay “In memory of Liu Hezhen” (*jinian Liu Hezhen jun*) in 1926. See *QJ* 3, pp.256-262.

11 Slavoj Žižek. “You Only Die Twice,” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, pp.131-149.

the world, their identity, and their ability to reason.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, woman’s enthusiastic response to the call of new ideas was out of touch with reality; her Nora-like act could not be justified on the basis of reason.

The motive behind her choice, then, became inexplicable. What might be equally inexplicable is the masculine interest in this half-seen, unrepresentable spectacle. Lu Xun wrote in his correspondence that Qiu Jin is “clapped to death;” thereby he must have been aware of the intersubjective exchange with the gendered spectacle and he must have thought of Qiu Jin’s sacrifice more or less as a concerted performance between her and the viewers. Interestingly, Eileen Cheng has noted that, in “Regret for the Past,” Juansheng is apparently attracted to performative gestures, particularly “Zijun’s Nora-like words and gestures” (Cheng 2004, 13).

The drastic change in Juansheng’s esthetic experience seems to remind us of the chasm between discourse and action. As the mentor and enlightener of Zijun, Juansheng is the one who knows and talks better. However, in the real moment of realization – the moment of performing the modern ideas and fully embracing the revolutionary zeal body and soul, Juansheng’s absolute rhetorical advantage pales in the face of Zijun’s real action. Zijun, the woman who comes from a reactionary family and always listens silently to Juansheng, is better prepared for the realization of revolutionary ideas. In Juansheng’s understanding, the moment of revolution would naturally come when ideas are ripe. It does not occur to him that revolution is initiated through bodily impulses and carried out corporeally. Zijun’s action, which is largely motivated by sexual love, deviates from Juansheng’s rational scheme from the outset. She carries out the revolutionary moment without a reality check and without any concern for the future; her sacrifice is something Juansheng is incapable of. Therefore, this moment excites the male subject as much as it dwarfs him, since it is the woman who has the power to fulfill the promises in the abstract ideas he delivers.

In *Emerging from the Horizon of History*, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua assert that the only moment the dominant ideology of May Fourth culture retains for (new) women like Zijun, in which she is visible, is the moment of Nora (Meng & Dai, 37). Zijun, like other Chinese Noras, answers man’s idea of revolution through her bodily dispositions and action; yet man, who gives her the promise of the future, betrays her right away. Man is unable to carve out a future for woman, as he promised, nor is he ready to accept her as a subject equal to himself. Consequently, the new woman is caught in the moment of sacrifice, without the ability to move on with the man, without the will to live up to his new promises. Therefore, just like Qiu Jin, who was clapped to (biological) death, Zijun is wooed to her (symbolic) death. Between the two deaths the two women both become the sublime object, which exists in the fissure of representation of a history that is written in masculine discourse. This lacuna cannot be assimilated into history, although it is retroactively produced by the symbolization of his-story itself.

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12 Ye Shengtao, “The Question of Women’s Character” (*nǚzi rengen wenti*). In Lan and Fong (eds), *Women in Republican China*, 154 & 156. Originally published in *New Tide*, vol. 1, no. 2, February 1919.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard uses the term modern to designate a metadiscourse with an appeal to some grand narrative; and defines postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, xxiv). According to Lyotard, the “modern aesthetic is an aesthetic of the sublime;” in the modern representation of the sublime, the unrepresentable is represented only “as the missing contents” (Lyotard, 81); In contrast, the postmodern “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself [...] in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (Lyotard, 81). Lyotard argues that since grand narratives are from the outset problematic and untrustworthy, the postmodern exists in the embryonic form of the modern. “A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard, 79).

In this sense, Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past” is postmodern, as it puts forward the unrepresentable object – the polymorphic female body; it shows the body’s mundane modality as well as its sublime beauty. As a sublime object, Zijun is not an empty signifier; she is the embodiment of the nothingness and despair that is “substantial,” as Lu Xun perceived. While the other May Fourth reformers were compulsively preoccupied with the grand image of the sublime, Lu Xun relentlessly journeyed through literature in search of symbols and images befitting his vision of the world that resists representation. The metamorphosis of female body in “Regret for the Past” not only subverts the prevailing esthetic order, but also subverts the rational paradigm of the May Fourth ideal.

Therefore, revolutionary subjectivity is formed out of a symbiosis of a rational, masculine self and a radical other as represented by the polymorphic female body. This is why Lacan actually identifies the pleasure principle with the symbolic order in his late seminars. Woman is capable of inserting herself into history as the sublime object, or nothingness, due to her innate connection to the mystical *jouissance*. Lacan calls woman the symptom of man; a symptom is “a particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship toward enjoyment (*jouissance*).” The grand image of the sublime is but a facade of the symptom; if one insists on seeing through this symptom, in other words, if one traverses the sublime, what he will encounter is the unrepresentable nothingness and despair.

The May Fourth reformers and iconoclasts never stopped searching for a strong, violent, and crude force for revolution; this force was looked upon as a general rule which had a fixed form – the masculine, positive, and elevating sublime. Such esthetic of the sublime was achieved through a misrecognition which denied the existence of the unrepresentable. *Jouissance* as the unrepresentable thing is beyond any principle or fixed form, yet it exists. Therefore the grand sublime image which is embodied in the masculine ideal can be regarded as the biggest illusion of the May Fourth culture. Through the metamorphosis of the female body in Lu Xun’s “Regret for the Past,” we can traverse the sublime image and discover the kind of sublime – the irrational, disruptive, and polymorphic nothingness – that men are afraid to confront.

It is necessary to mention a particular episode in Lu Xun's private life that presumably inspired the creation of the love story. In the summer of 1925, shortly before Lu Xun wrote "Regret for the Past," he fell in love with one of his female students, Xu Guangping. He was forty-four years old and married; she was only twenty-seven. Their relationship lasted till Lu's death in 1936. However, Lu Xun had confessed several times that he did not believe in love. "Regret for the Past" definitely is not a story glorifying love; love, as the allegory of the grander trope of revolution, is only to be deconstructed.

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