The Search for Identity in Fiction from Taiwan

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More than a decade ago C. T. Hsia drew attention to a theme in modern Chinese writing that he identified as an "obsession with China." This patriotic tendency clearly appeared in May Fourth era fiction as an "obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity." In a later essay Professor Hsia observed the same phenomenon in the works of certain writers who publish in Taiwan, particularly those whose memories of the mainland before the Communist takeover were strong. The volume of critical studies of these "patriotic" writings, particularly those of the 1920s and 1930s, is enormous. The personal involvement of many of these writers in the political, social, and cultural revolutions of their time is well known; engage writers of the twentieth century far outnumber those who, like many of their Japanese contemporaries, explored the inner life of the individual, it would seem. But despite the volume of studies of these writers, C. T. Hsia is one of the few students of this literature who addresses the nationalistic sentiments of its creators in psychological terms.

It is my intention here to use Professor Hsia's "obsession" theory as a starting point in a search for the self whose identity relies so heavily on political questions for validation. My object is to identify the development of conceptions of self through modern Chinese literature, in particular a few of Taiwan's outstanding story writers. From this perspective, political and social concerns are at most a vehicle for self-expression; on this basis, "modernist" and "regionalist" (hsiang-t'u) writers may be compared despite differences in scope of commitment (to China as a political entity among the family of nations in "modernist" writings, or to the working people of Taiwan in "regionalist" literature). First, let us review a few examples of literature that exemplifies the "obsessive" quality in its concern with China's needs.

With his first story, "Ch'en-lun" (Sinking, 1921), Yü Ta-fu (1896–1945) established his reputation as an autobiographical writer concerned primarily with the self. "Sinking" addresses sex and patriotism through the vehicle of a Chinese student in Japan. Isolated from the comradely happiness of classmates by their ethnocentrism and his own feelings of inferiority, the story's protagonist falls into voyeurism which brings self-loathing, retreat from all human contact, and eventual suicidal tendencies. "O China, my China, you are the cause of my death!" he cries, at the conclusion of the story. Yü Ta-fu's story represents clearly the perception, shared as well by intellectuals of an earlier decade, that China was weak and powerless to resist either the economic and military pressures of the West or the influx of Western ideas that threatened to engulf all traditional values. The establishment of self-concept by such young intellectuals was closely tied to their assessment of the state of Chinese society, despite the concern with self presupposed by the autobiographical approach. To them, self-realization involved service to society through didactic writing no less than it did to Confucian literati of generations before them.

To Yü Ta-fu and the May Fourth period writers, the disappearance of traditional values would have been nothing to lament. China's customs were cannibalistic, Lu Hsün (1881–
1936) asserted in his “K’uang-jen jih-chi” (The Diary of a Madman, 1918). Pa Chin (b. 1904) illustrated this contention in his novel Chia (Family, 1931) with the tragic deaths of many of his characters, particularly young women. Lao She (1899–1966) castigated the hedonism, laziness, and self-delusion of the Chinese people in his satirical novel Mao-ch’eng chi (Cat Country, 1933), the “most savage indictment of China ever penned by a Chinese,” C. T. Hsiay aptly terms it.6 Self-doubts regularly parallel this patriotic theme in May Fourth writings. Even when the self is not identified with the state, the commitment of the self to serve the needs of society is regularly total. China’s political and social needs thus provide the details for a paradigm of the ineffectual young intellectual whose idealistic visions are shattered by the ugliness of reality. Lu Hsün records the bitter failure of enthusiastic young intellectuals to remake China overnight in his “Tsai chiu-lou shang” (In the Wine Shop, 1924) and other stories; Yeh Shao-chün (b. 1894) does the same in his novel Ni Huan-chih (1929).7 Here as in a host of other May Fourth writings, the protagonists’ self-concept plummets when they face defeat in their numerous social or political crusades. Their “obsession” with the problems of China, despite its sincerity, is in many respects merely a modern version of Confucian social responsibility expressed in new literary media, the Westernized short story and novel, as a means of self-exploration.

Patriotism was unmistakable in the writing published in Taiwan in the fifties. Winners of the Republican government’s annual prizes for literature regularly express nostalgia for the mainland and frustration over the plight of its people under Communist rule. But in the hands of the more skilled writers, Taiwan literature came to have, in Hsiay’s words, “a poignant appreciation of the historical greatness of their mother country.”8 These developments came despite a new awareness of Western literature on the part of young intellectuals in Taiwan. Under the direction of Professor Hsiay’s elder brother, the late Tsi-an Hsiay, students of literature at National Taiwan University began publishing literary periodicals filled with translations from James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, D. H. Lawrence, and others. Their goal was to introduce Modernism from Europe and America. Some writers, such as Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Kuang-chung, b. 1928), experimented with Western-style symbolism in poetry intended for the sophisticated reader while insisting that modern Chinese literature must be built on its cultural heritage as well. A visit to the United States in 1964 inspired Yu’s “obsession”; his “Ch’iaot-ta yüeh” (Music Percussive, 1966) ends with the poet identifying himself with China and its numerous social and political disasters of recent decades.

China is me I am China.
Her every disgrace leaves a box print on my face I am defaced.
China O China you’re a shameful disease that plagues me thirty-eight years.
Are you my shame or are you my pride, I cannot tell.9

Despite the Western veneer, personal identity and the plight of the nation are inseparable in Yu’s verse. His sense of social and political responsibility and his sensibilities are to this extent a continuation of earlier trends in modern Chinese literature, awakened, probably, by his need to face the reality of a divided nation from this new vantage point in the United States.

One of the more imaginative writers of Yu Kwang-chung’s generation is Shui Ching (Robert Yi Yang, b. 1935). His “Hi Lii, Hi Li . . . .” (1967), is an attempt “to allegorize the precarious condition of Chinese abroad,” Joseph Lau remarks, a shift from earlier mainland social realism to a modernist psychological realism. Shui Ching here enters the world of his unnamed protagonist’s dream—or perhaps his nightmare—of being totally alone in a world thrown awry by some unknown cause. The setting, presumably based on the author’s sojourn in Borneo, is a south Pacific island with a warm climate where vegetation grows quickly. The protagonist awakens one day to find apparent traces of a political coup and the ominous aura of death and destruction everywhere. The story ends with a vision of the protagonist dancing madly in the sand with a foreign woman, his identity confused at best, perhaps even lost.10 If this is to be taken as an allegory of the plight of China,
then the *danse macabre* in the arms of an American dream brings no real solution to the protagonist’s search for the meaning of his own existence.

Let us consider briefly the terms of this character’s dilemma. “Y” awakes to find himself physically ill at ease; the astrological signs traditionally observed by Chinese have all been bad recently and an epidemic threatens. Data disturbing because of their unfamiliarity now assault his senses: a faucet drips, the water reeks, the radio receives no stations. Not a single person is visible. The radio station at which he normally works is deserted. Bloody fingerprints festoon a whitewashed wall. Y takes refuge from the imagined insurrection in a lavatory, although only temporarily: it is “hardly a place for a man to be captured in. He wants to preserve his dignity to the end.” The electricity fails, and then the telephone does likewise. He stumbles into a hospital, only to find a leaking corpse, presumably a victim of cholera. In his flight he eventually arrives at a beach, where he is distracted from a pine reminiscent of a traditional Chinese painting by the spectral dancing form of his erstwhile sweetheart. Not even she will answer his insistent questions (“What have we done to deserve a fate like this?”). An approaching storm reminds him of lines by the classical poet Li Ho (791–817) but in the end he joins her dance to the refrain from an American movie theme song.

Clearly Shui Ching’s protagonist is searching for identity in a modernist world, a world gone awry to the point of absurdity. Shui Ching seemingly has replaced the old Confucian sense of social and cosmic order—and even the hope for a new order in May Fourth writings—with the modernist proposition that primal, irrational energies shape human behavior. However, while “Hi Lili, Hi Li...” is modernistic in narrating Y’s stream of consciousness, there remains the question of whether it is Y’s thoughts or his environment that have fallen into a chaotic state. Several clues suggest that the theme is, as C. T. Hsia presents it, “the ultimate relapse of civilization into barbarism” and not the protagonist’s irrationalism that creates the confusion.

Y begins to search for rational explanations the moment he awakens. He notices strange phenomena, both internal and external, but he does not distrust the validity of his perceptions. It is his sense of security that falters; he searches his memory for corroborative evidence for his fears (ominous signs of a change in government, reports of an epidemic). He comments on his physical separation from China, both the “island bastion” and “the land of his ancestors,” and chides himself for leaving. Many of the eerie data he notices as panic seizes him are not unprecedented; instead, it is the concatenation of events (tainted water and failure of electrical power suggest breakdown of civil authority) that further unnerves him. His sense of self-worth, his personal dignity, propels him out of his logically safe hiding place, the lavatory. It was an “an- thero” who was captured there in some foreign story; he refuses to see himself in the same category. It is common sense that brings him to the hospital. What he finds there fills him with nausea, and he flees to the beach (to escape by sea, perhaps?). Each step he takes is directed by conscious choice: his mind retains its own sense of ordered rationality despite the world around him having become unpredictable. He is reminded of traditional landscape painting and poetry of the T’ang period, a reassertion of his Chinese heritage. His problem is isolation from others, for it is the social nexus that gives identity to this individual much as it did in traditional literature. His sense of personal dignity likewise derives from the anticipated reactions of other people; his references to traditional arts demonstrate Y’s undiminished awareness of his own role in China’s cultural continuity. At the story’s conclusion, Y joins the woman’s erratic dance, thereby establishing a tie with her to complete his identity in the present when all attempts to communicate in more conventional ways fail. Shui Ching’s protagonist indeed finds himself in a modernist’s world, but his implicit faith in the continuity and rationality of individual identity betrays the Chinese foundations for the writer’s conception of self. All references to politics here are subservient to that conception.

The experimentation with Western form and tech-
nique visible in “Hi Lili, Hi Li . . .” can be found as well in a work of the later Regionalist (hsiang-t’u) movement. This is Wang Chen-ho’s (b. 1940) masterful “Chia-chuang i-niu-ch’ě” (Oxcart for Dowry, 1967). Although Regionalist writing has been characterized as nationalistic to the point of xenophobia, it is more generally considered a movement based on realism in contrast to the modernist generation represented by Shui Ching. Its writers frequently pit their protagonists, poor working people from rural Taiwan, against the perils occasioned by the urbanization, industrialization, and modernization of the island in recent decades. While certain Chinese critics express alarm at the social and political tendentiousness of representative works, I believe far more of the artistry of Regionalist fiction can be seen in its exploration of the problems of identity faced by individuals caught in the midst of rapid social change. Some of these writers, Wang Chen-ho among them, differ far less in this regard from the modernist writers than their critics often admit.

“Oxcart for Dowry” narrates how its hero came to be cuckolded. This man, Wan-fa, is no young intellectual living abroad; instead he lives a life of alienation from his peers by virtue of his near total deafness. In fact, Wan-fa is nearly as isolated as Y, both of them left to their internal resources as a basis for their ongoing sense of self-worth and identity. But these two stories differ radically. Shui Ching’s was a serious experiment in Westernized writing; while Wang Chen-ho was no less serious in his art, the tone of “Oxcart for Dowry” is comic. While Y refused to consider himself an antihero, Wan-fa is clearly a fool, the butt of jokes from all sides. However, Wan-fa is not wholly pathetic in the mold of Lu Hsün’s K’ung I-chi; instead, he is a man who, like Y, can make choices rationally on the basis of available information. His foolishness consists of his deliberate use of deafness to limit his contact with the world outside his own mind—particularly his relationships with other people.

In form “Oxcart” is reminiscent of “Diary of a Madman,” consisting of an introductory scene for which the rest of the story provides explanatory background. Lu Hsün meant the recovery of his madman to be read ironically; so too is the derision Wan-fa receives from the younger villagers in the restaurant precisely opposite to the attitude the reader is ultimately intended to form. But in place of Lu Hsün’s castigation of the shortcomings in traditional morality, Wang Chen-ho uses this parody of the poor but honest man to examine the economic and personal needs which ultimately inure Wan-fa to the taunts of others.

The cause of Wan-fa’s deafness seems absurd, and yet it has a painful ring of plausibility. During the war years, when American armed forces were bombing Japanese-occupied Taiwan, Wan-fa contracted an ear infection from polluted water. The only doctor he was able to find (a self-styled gynecologist, although in this context he may well have been a quack) treated him improperly, with the result that Wan-fa permanently lost most of his hearing. This handicap caused Wan-fa to be ostracized by those who grew tired of shouting to him; finally he moved his family to a hovel near a graveyard where he hired himself out as a carter.

One of the greatest Chinese novels is Lao She’s Lo’o Hsiang-tzu (Camel Hsiang-tzu, 1936), in part an exploration of the hopelessness of trying to establish oneself solely by means of individual effort. Its hero, an upright country lad, works indefatigably to buy himself the new rickshaw that he hopes will give him financial security and prominence among the working masses of prewar Peking. Hsiang-tzu is tall and strong; initially he succeeds, only to have his dream fade along with his self-confidence as evil forces in society one after the other sap his financial, physical, and moral resources. In certain respects Wan-fa is a parody of Hsiang-tzu. Wan-fa is short and ugly, and his hope is to own a plodding oxcart instead of the smooth-riding, sleek rickshaw of the earlier novel. Both men marry ugly women made even less attractive by advancing years; while Hsiang-tzu’s wife is fat, Wan-fa’s Ah-hao is so skinny that her chest looks like a washboard. Both women have considerable sexual appetites. Although Hsiang-tzu fears that his physical strength may be damaged if he indulges his wife Hu-niu, Wan-fa is already sexually impotent at the start of Wang
Chen-ho’s story, and it is his reputation that falls victim to his wife’s needs. Yet Wan-fa’s self-concept remains intact. He has built it in a traditional Chinese manner on the basis of his relationships with others. For even though he seems not to hear the taunts of the drunken youths, Wan-fa ranks at his situation and relishes being able to disdain someone else in turn. The affair between his wife and the clothing merchant Chien (whose name the author would have translated as “Screw”) leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Even though his conception of himself as husband and father is not altered by being cuckolded, it is by force of will alone that he suppresses his resistance to this indignity.

His wife, Ah-hao, lacks all such moral integrity, however. Despite her name (“Goodness,” or as the author originally translated it, “Nice”), she does not bring prosperity to her husband: she gambles until she has to sell their three daughters to pay off her debts, she is an inveterate gossip, and worse yet, she is unfaithful. By contrast, Wan-fa readily gives his clothing to his son as an appropriate sacrifice for his children’s sake. When a newcomer, Chien, moves into the area, out of concern for the other’s feelings Wan-fa avoids any overt reference to the man’s horrible body odor. Furthermore, he initially considers Ah-hao’s illicit relationship with the man to be an insult to his own lost virility. That is, the challenge is to his sexual relationship with his wife, not to his own proprietary rights to her affections. Even when the interloper moves in with them, Wan-fa acquiesces as long as he is able to maintain his nominal role of head of household: by this arrangement he can support himself and his family while maintaining control of the family finances. Wan-fa suppresses his own objections by deluding himself, but when a neighbor openly jokes about the relationship to their son, Wan-fa’s sense of personal pride forces him to throw Chien out of the house.

When his son falls ill, Wan-fa uses all of his savings to preserve the boy’s life. Then a tragic accident in which a child is killed lands Wan-fa in jail for negligence. Yet Wan-fa’s foremost concern throughout this series of setbacks is for his wife and child, not for his personal loss of occupation and freedom or for any possible shame over being imprisoned. His immediate reaction when he learns that Chien is again living with his wife is relief over their security, not jealous outrage. His personal disgrace over being cuckolded quite simply pales when compared to the gratitude he feels for Chien’s financial help.

While observing, with W. K. Wimsatt, that a reader can never know a writer’s original intention in writing, Cyril Birch finds cause for a social and political interpretation of the story. Even without his doing so intentionally, Wang Chen-ho reflects in his fiction the realities of Taiwan at the time of writing. Thus Birch sees in these characters an unconscious reconstruction of China’s plight: one contender can only acquiesce over his loss of face when compensated by economic prosperity; the other contender mutters some outlandish talk and throws traditional proprieties to the wind; both want the ugly, aging mother figure, symbolic of China, with her huge mouth ever open whether to talk or to eat. In effect, then, Birch sees in this story another “obsession with China.” However, the story’s primary conflict is not between Wan-fa and Chien, as I have endeavored to illustrate. Instead it is within Wan-fa’s own mind. He must somehow reconcile the changes in his relationships occasioned by economic necessity with the conception of himself as father and husband inherited from China’s past. He may delude himself to the extent that he avoids seeing (or hearing) what he knows will upset his calm façade, but his sense of security in his identity can only be assured by clutching tenaciously to received social role. He must provide for the needs of those dependent on him for support; he will do whatever he must to accomplish this end. Wan-fa is an unforgettably comic character: his world may smack of absurdity. However, in the final analysis his concern with identity does not hinge on a political interpretation of the story for its significance. Even though details of his poverty occasion his identity crisis, they are peripheral to it in the concern of the narrator.

The realistic tendency in Regionalist writings is best
exemplified by the early works of Hwang Chun-ming (Huang Ch’un-ming, b. 1939), a native of Taiwan. The characters of his 1960s stories are poor or working people who seemingly reflect the real lives of unimportant individuals native to the island. They are not the “makers of history” through collective action; they are the isolated byproducts, sometimes the victims, of social change. In many of these stories a central theme is the struggle for individual identity in the face of this upheaval. Some of Hwang’s protagonists fail, losing personal dignity and sometimes even life itself in the process.

One of Hwang’s best-loved stories is “Erh-tzu te ta wan-ou” (His Son’s Big Doll), the subject of several Western studies. Recently it was also made into a movie for screening in Taiwan. Its central figure is a poor man who effaces himself for the sake of the child he longs to have. Early in the story he takes the only job he can find to earn the money needed to afford a child; he becomes a “sandwich man,” a disguised nonentity trapped between two advertising posters in a rapidly commercializing society. Despite his wife’s fears for his health, he braces torrid summer heat, the taunts of children, even his uncle’s outrage and his own humiliation over hiding his face behind a clown’s makeup, to walk the streets of his town advertising movies. The story concludes with emotionally overpowering irony: the adman’s baby son learns to recognize him only when his face is made up. Even though he lands a different job, his love for his baby son condemns him to maintain this false identity.24

Poverty has forced the adman into his occupation, to be sure. But this story is not limited to a mere exposure of the sufferings of the poor. Feeding himself is not K’un-shu’s primary concern, nor is providing for his wife. His desire for a son spurs him on in this demeaning occupation; his desire to make the child happy and to develop their relationship occasions his further self-debasement. The depth of the adman K’un-shu’s commitment to progeny in this tale seemingly goes beyond any thought of companionship and support in old age; his identity is inextricably bound up in his profound need for the child. The reader sees his unexpressed love for his wife, his keen sense of responsibility for their relationship. But his willingness to sacrifice himself in the present for a future child exceeds love; it suggests the age-old Chinese hope for a type of immortality through one’s children. His identity can only be assured by fathering a child. Perhaps in this light even hiding his face behind makeup is a small price to pay for this security, this new affirmation of his being, so achieved.

Despite his concern with poor and simple people, Hwang Chun-ming has created stories in which self-transcendence imbues his characters with a kind of heroic stature that approaches divinity. In “Ni-ssu i-chih lao-mao” (The Drowning of an Old Cat, 1967) Uncle Ah-sheng becomes the leader of resistance to the development of a rural spring as a swimming resort for urban businessmen. Normally subdued in manner, the threat to the land and the customary relationship of the villagers to their land inspires the old man to oratory and ultimately to action. But the forces supporting economic development are much too formidable—they include not only governmental influence but also the desire of the villagers to share in the wealth of the city. The old man ultimately drowns himself, an act that goes virtually unnoticed amid the festivity surrounding the pool’s opening. Despite his religious pretensions, the old man’s heroic stature is transitory; his new identity is false, mere self-delusion.25 The pessimistic tenor of this story might be best understood as the implied author’s response to Ah-sheng’s self-aggrandizement. Time has brought inevitable change. Instead of coping with it, Ah-sheng has attempted to hold back the clock and thereby elevate himself in the eyes of his peers. His “self-transcendence” stands condemned as mere self-indulgence.

Quite the opposite mood prevails in one of Hwang’s longer stories, also the subject of a movie, “K’an-hai te jih-tzu” (Sea-Watching Days, 1967), known in translation as “A Flower in the Rainy Night”).26 Its protagonist, Pai-mei, is a prostitute, a country girl sold into the profession at the age of fourteen, who has come to feel self-contempt and anger because she is isolated from normal social contact. The story traces her self-transformation. While riding the train on a home leave, she
encounters a former customer. His lewd comments appropriate to the whorehouse here fill her with disgust; she longs to be "an ordinary woman." Then she encounters an old friend, a somewhat younger former prostitute named Ying-ying who has married and had a baby. Ying-ying's husband is considerably older than she is; he is one of the thousands of men who fled or were brought from the mainland as the Communists advanced. He was a major in the Nationalist army, a man who smoked and drank heavily until he met Ying-ying. Together they had forged new identities for themselves and for each other. Their new son symbolized this momentous change of identity, bringing to both of them an unprecedented feeling of self-worth. This encounter was to change Pai-mei's life as well.

Comparing herself with Ying-ying forces Pai-mei to reflect on the resentment she feels over being used. The money she has contributed to her foster family has made a college education possible for one of them; others have married well and have at least completed senior high school—accomplishments other rural families could hardly afford. Pai-mei hates them all except her stepmother, who has tried to arrange a marriage for her. But marriage is not an appealing alternative to prostitution. "I'm already twenty-eight; and being in this business, anybody who wanted me would either be a dullard or a bum," Pai-mei remarks. However, she realizes that a child could change her life. "Only in the eyes of her own child would she be viewed without cold scorn." To have a child becomes her only reason for living, her mission, her obsession.

When Pai-mei returns to the brothel, she selects a strong and gentle young sailor and deliberately lets him impregnate her. These brief events appear amid a wealth of detail concerning the lives of fishermen and prostitutes, particularly of the boisterous few days each season when the two intersect. This setting allows a sensitive exploration of these two characters, Pai-mei and her mate. Initially each plays a conventional role in relation to the other, but then they step outside these roles for unprecedentedly intimate emotional contact. Their honesty, their warmth, and their embarrass-

ment raise this scene to a level of beauty that catches the reader unprepared—the tenderness of the scene contrasts vividly with the vulgarity around them portrayed so realistically here. Their moment of innocence brings hope to Pai-mei; its unexpected emotional depth frightens the sailor.

Pai-mei never takes another customer. She leaves the brothel and goes directly home to her natal family. There she again becomes what she has not been for many years, the daughter of Sung the capon-maker. The identity that had been taken from her by others she now seizes with determination; she takes the concerns of her family upon herself with totally selfless abandon. She reestablishes ties with family friends and neighbors; with her own money she secures the medical assistance that saves her brother's life. Her unflagging energy and her optimism win respect for her on all sides. After all, she rationalizes, having an illegitimate child is no worse than whoring; consequently she faces the villagers of her home town totally without shame. When her confinement draws near, the villagers happily carry her to the maternity clinic in town.

The birth of Pai-mei's baby is narrated with as much detail as was the scene of her insemination. In both, Pai-mei's combination of strength and vulnerability is the focus of the narrator's attention. Despite her determination and her selflessness on behalf of others, when isolated from them by her pain she worries, she grows fatigued, she endures childbirth only with greatest difficulty. Her passion once concluded, Pai-mei is transfigured. The story closes with her return to the sea, to watch the sea with her newborn son as she had with Ying-ying's infant. She can articulate no rationale for this trip; it alone can satisfy her profound need: she is no longer a single woman while traveling on a train; people now make room for her and her child in the crowded seats. She is a mother; now she possesses in fullest measure the hope for personal betterment that she has inspired in her family and fellow villagers. Through her child she has "ordinary," healthy relationships with people wherever she goes.

Pai-mei achieves dignity despite the odds against her; her faith in her ability to transcend her previous life makes
it possible to redeem herself, to recover the innocence taken from her by the economic needs of first her natal family and then her foster family years before. In C. T. Hsia's apt words, "it is surely heart-warming . . . to read a story where copula
tion for the purpose of procreation and the agony of childbirth are described in all their sanctity as indispensable means for a woman's redemption." Pai-mei created new identity for herself through force of will; she has wrenched herself free from the shackles of habit and economic need to assert her feminine strength in its nurturing, child-bearing aspects. Appropriately, she lives a sexually chaste life after her new course is once set. But her previous life is not overtly described as one of moral degradation; the story refrains from condemning either those who sold her into prostitution or the men who enjoyed her service. Likewise, "Sea-Watching Days" does not demonstrate that other people helped her achieve this redemption.

Thus the story presents a paradox: if Pai-mei's new identity is not only a function of others' response to her, is the child fundamentally necessary? Is not a change in self-evaluation sufficient? Has she in fact become a different person? The answers to all these questions must be negative. Pai-mei has been morally consistent throughout the story. In one of its first scenes she distracts a drunken and physically misshapen customer away from the terrified Yung-ying, then a novice to the trade. Her act is spontaneous and utterly selfless, typical of the "saintly" Pai-mei after she leaves the brothel. But before she leaves, Pai-mei is in her own eyes precisely what she is in the estimation of others: a whore with no control over herself, responsible for—perhaps capable of—only satisfying the more base of masculine needs. She must labor for her redemption; she must sacrifice—these are the obstacles she places before herself. In this regard the pain of childbirth is the final trial in a self-imposed struggle for a new identity. The child itself is perhaps not as essential as is the process of having a child, asserting her right to have a child and to have the new identity that a child entails—that of mother, to Pai-mei the most respectable of all social roles.

Pai-mei’s new identity is simultaneously as old as tradition itself and wholly new. Theoretically she might again happen to meet a former customer, like Wan-fa she would have to ignore his vulgar comments. Wan-fa retreated into the conventional roles of father and husband, at least to the extent of guaranteeing economic support, to preserve his own sense of dignity. The role of mother functions for Pai-mei in much the same way. Significantly, she prepares for that role in the village of her childhood, where other traditional family ties could be reasserted and strengthened. Yet she remains unabashed by her lack of a husband and the means by which the life of her son began. There is no traditional sanction for this attitude; it is a consequence of her individual will, her personal faith in the rightness of being a mother in and of itself. Thus she has achieved a kind of liberation to a realm of self-conception where conventions are irrelevant in the light of pure motivations. Her will to improve her social standing, her personal identity, has become in itself an obsession to reassert her rightful position in the order of things, an order that transcends mere morality. Her quest, like that of the adman K’un-shu, brings a new hope through the possibility of a degree of self-transcendence, of immortality that accommodates itself to time.

Symbols abound in "Sea-Watching Days"; they serve to indicate Pai-mei’s uniqueness rather than the universality of her plight. She is offspring of the land, a rural villager; the land’s eternity gives her the strength she needs for her self-transformation. Yet it is the endless motion of the sea that calls her to return, perhaps to see the biological father of her child, prompting her to sing again of fish (yü, traditionally a word play for the homophone meaning sexual desire). By the sea she had been a prostitute, always sexually active but never fertile; having conceived there she reverts to an association with infertility, becoming again the daughter of a man who sterilizes male chickens. ( Appropriately the talk between Pai-mei and her chosen mate involves another human manipulation of animal sexuality, the collection of hog semen for artificial insemination.) In the countryside her brother loses a leg, while continuing to sire children; her years of service in the
brothel has left her only slightly bowlegged. Her transformation is developed through love, her love for her family, even though it originated in the loveless desire of an anonymous young fisherman.

The list of such images and the often ironic contrasts between them could be continued considerably farther. What these few might serve to indicate is the concern for literary artistry on the part of Hwang Chun-ming. Like the modernist Shui Ching and like Wang Chen-ho, Hwang ensures that his stories admit no single, simple interpretation. This fact is itself most significant for understanding the search for identity in recent fiction from Taiwan.

China is old; the weight of its traditions crush even the most strenuous conscious efforts to change her, in the view of many twentieth-century writers. To Lu Hsün traditional values consumed all individual initiative; to Yü Ta-fu and others of his generation, the hope that Chinese society would change might be vain but it was the only hope one could have. For despite their avowed disdain for them, received traditions dictated the role for educated intellectuals in society: that of spokesmen for the highest level of morality, the catalyst for social harmony and political order. This conception required that all attempts to establish a new identity for the individual involve the creation of a new social and political identity for the state as a whole. This concern became the writer’s obsession when there seemed to be no alternative for self-expression in literature that was not indefensibly self-indulgent by contrast. Thus the historical tendency to address political and social needs in literature continued in China long after Confucianism was replaced by a variety of new creeds and ideas from abroad.

Yet China’s tradition of reading literary works as political allegories remains strong still today. It prompts not only political figures to search creative writing for ideas that support or question official policy lines; even foreign scholars cannot resist reading political meaning into stories that make no ostensible references to political persons or events. The Regionalist stories of Hwang Chun-ming also allow such manipulation. Yü Ta-fu’s apparently autobiographical hero suffered over China’s plight, but his personal malaise was the product of his alienation from fellow students. In a sense this isolation paralleled that of China itself, externally abused by more powerful nations, weak and trembling within. Taiwan’s situation is not without parallels. Despite official claims on China’s cultural heritage, Taiwan was a frontier region, peripheral to the great events of China’s past. The physical monuments of that past are elsewhere; its inhabitants are either the refugees from the mainland or the offspring of humble folk forced there through the centuries by economic necessity. Moreover, for fifty years Taiwan had been cut off from the mainland provinces by alien rule, a Japanese colony. When Hwang Chun-ming writes of poor people who do not embody the Great Tradition—or any tradition at all in any major degree—who are not part of any social movement, who have no prominence in society, who have no sense of historical mission, he may well be consciously or unconsciously allegorizing Taiwan’s situation: waiting for a decades-long civil war to be resolved and for the country to be reunited, filling the time with response to economic needs and concern for reputation abroad. The stories considered here could be seen as examples in a search for identity. That is, Shui Ching’s Y stands for Chineseness, a memory of past glories and a need for order in a world that has gone totally awry; Wang Chen-ho reveals the need for cultural conservativism and moral self-righteousness when reality forces concessions; Hwang Chun-ming’s stories take the search for identity away from the past and into the future, which his tainted but saintly Pai-mei faces with confidence in the rightness of her stand and hope for better things to come—whatever they may be.

This search for identity could be considered allegorically, but its validity does not hinge on this interpretation. Why offer it at all? The Chinese conception of self expressed in literature has seldom been apolitical or aloof from the social needs of its time. The perceptive explorations of personal identity in
writing from Taiwan then should have traces of this tendency if it is to be Chinese. No one would deny that writing from Taiwan is Chinese; the existence of political significance in writing about the individual is hardly surprising, even if the condition of China as a whole is not its “obsession.”
PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AND VALUES IN RECENT CHINESE LITERATURE

Edward M. Gunn, Jr.

1. The notion that literature is an educational tool is so accepted among Communist theoreticians that it is easier to cite instances when this notion was challenged as a reminder of this belief. For example, D. W. Fokkema has written, in summary: "The view that all traditional novels were intended to amuse, as Yu Ping-po reportedly once stated, and the opinion of the Yunnan writer Lan Mang that literature does not in the first place aim to educate the people but to give some pleasure were severely attacked. For the Chinese cultural workers this chapter killed the educative function of literature, its role as a moral stimulus and a political tool." Literary Doctrine in China and Soviet Influence, 1956–60 (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 265. Further, that this educative role should emphasize rationality has been noted by a critic most recently in citing the remarks of the leading theoretician Yao Wen-yuan in 1963. David Pollard has written: "Socialist heroes must be shown to be motivated not by blind courage or dogged determination, but by 'reason' and 'basic knowledge' supplied by the education of the Party and supported by the revolutionary traditions, otherwise 'their heroic actions will appear to lack an ideological foundation.'" "The Short Story in the Cultural Revolution," China Quarterly (March 1978), no. 78, pp. 99–121, quoting Yao Wen-yuan, "Some Problems Concerning the Reflection of the Class Struggle by Literature and Art Workers During the Period of Socialist Revolution," Shanghai wen-hsiêh (1963), no. 10, trans. in Survey of China Mainland Magazines, no. 418.


5. Li Fu reported once compared Communist Chinese literature to coffee: both acted as stimulants. After his fall, critics determined that his comparison was flawed, since anyone could enjoy coffee, but Communist literature should be solely for the workers, soldiers, and peasants. Likewise, he was accused of advocating a literature for "the whole of the People." See, for example, Li Hsi-lin, "K'ai-pei yü ya-p'en" (Coffee and Opium) in Wen-t'ang-lun chu (Short Essays on Arts and Letters) (Shanghai: Shanghai jen-min ch'u-p'an she, 1973), pp. 4–5. Lin Piao was also castigated for stating that a "special talent" and "inspiration" were needed for writing literature and other such "reactionary absurdities." See Ts'ui Ya-pin, "P'uck-tao-tso ch'ien chiu hsieh" (Writing Blind) in Wen-t'ang-lun chu, pp. 60–61.


21. See Wang Chen-ho, pp. 61, 76, 77; Chinese Stories from Taiwan, pp. 80, 95, 96-97.

22. Wang Chen-ho, p. 79; Chinese Stories from Taiwan, p. 98.

23. My statement here amplifies Birch's conclusions, but only slightly; compare Birch, "Images of Suffering," p. 83.


25. The text is reprinted in Huang Ch'un-ming, Hsiao kua-fu (Taipei: Yuan-ching, 1975), pp. 17-39; Goldblatt's translation is in Huang, Drowning of an Old Cat, pp. 12-36.


27. "'K'an-hai,'" p. 80, Chinese Stories from Taiwan, p. 209. Coming on the heels of her reunion with Ying-ying, this remark adds ambiguity to the first few pages of the story. The name Ying-ying is well known to readers of Chinese fiction as that of the protagonist in a classical language tale in the chi lan chi form written by Yaan Chen (79-83). "Ying-ying chuan." In this semiautobiographical account, the young woman—ostensibly of an aristocratic family—is ultimately abandoned by a feckless young scholar named Chang; his given name is not revealed. This Ying-ying's man is named Lu, again without a given name. Does "Sea-Watching Days" stand all major elements of the earlier story on their head? That is, is the whore Ying-ying to be treasured while the young lady was not? Will the rough soldier Lu be steadfast where the scholar was the opposite? By her reference to "dullards" and "bums" does Pai-mei place Mr. Lu in one of these categories, thus suggesting a less than joyous future for them? Clearly the significant element in Ying-ying's new family is not the husband, it is the baby and the change of identity he brings his parents.
which are foreign to European ideas none is more striking than the inadequacy of the hero of love stories. The nominal hero is generally a quite unheroic person who, finding a maiden in distress, sinks into a kind of physical and mental decline under the strain of trying to evolve a plan of rescue.” See Chinese Prose Literature of the T'ang Period (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1938), 2:22.


8. Liu Ta-ch'ien, Chung-chou wen-hsiieh fe-ju-shih (rpt. Taipei: Chung-hua shu-chu, 1972), p. 87. The original title of Liu's book was Chung-chou wen-hsiieh fe-ju-shih (Shanghai, 1935). This observation on Ch'u Yüan's personality, however, has been deleted from the revised editions issued in China and in Hong Kong. See the Hong Kong Ku-wen shu-chu edition of 1964, for example.

9. In the words of Mencius, the ideal human relationships should be: “between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity” (Mencius, 3A:4; trans. James Legge, The Chinese Classics (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 2:281-282. Indeed, human relationships in traditional China is highly hierarchical. As Wm. Theodore de Bary observes: "Man defines his self in relation to others and to the Way which unites them. Thus is constructed the web of reciprocal obligations or moral relations in which man finds himself, defines himself. Apart from these he can have no real identity." See “Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought,” in Self and Society in Ming Thought, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 149.

Unlike the wen-lun relationships cited above, the Four Virtues listed in this article—chung, hsiao, chieh, and i—have to my knowledge not been codified in any Confucian classics. There are the “Four Principles” (tsze-wet) defined by Kuang Tzu: propriety (li), justice (ti), honesty (tien), and sense of honor (chih). However, it is a fact that chung hsiao chieh i have been mentioned in one breath whenever traditional virtues are referred to. Thus Shih Yen in his preface to Ch'ung Yu-ho's T'ang Sang ch'uan-ch'i hsien: “Likewise, the promotion of feudalistic morality and virtues, such as chung hsiao chieh i, can also be found in the pieces [collected here]” (Peking: Jen-min wen-hsueh, 1964; 2d ed., 1979), p. xiv. In similar vein, Hu Shih-yung: “In feudal times, the moral principles promoted by the ruling class were mainly the so-called san-kung wen-lun relationships, and the virtues of chung hsiao chieh i.” See Hua-pan hsiao-shou-lun (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu, 1980), 2:449. San-kung are the relationships between sovereign and minister, father and son, and husband and wife as proposed by Tung Chung-shu (197-190 B.C.) of the Han period.

10. A detailed study of the historical background of this play, its departure from official history, as well as its reception (and distortion) in Europe in the hands of the Jesuits and Sinophiles, can be found in Wu-chi Liu, “The Original Orphan of Chao,” in Comparative Literature (1953), 3:192-212.

11. Yian ch'iu hsien, ed. Tsang Mau-hsin (fl. 1580) (rpt. Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu, 1956), 4:489. The translation is by Pi-twan H. Wang, The Revenge of the Orphan of Chao, in Renditions (1978), 9, p. 122. The orphan is first identified in the play as Ch'eng Po (after his protector Ch'eng Ying), and later as T'zu Ch'eng after he was