



Gérard Siary, Toshio Takemoto, Victor Vuilleumier et Yinde Zhang (dir.)

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Nicoletta Pesaro

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Human/Inhuman/Post-human. Female Bodies in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature: Literary Descriptions of Psychological and Social Unease

Nicoletta Pesaro

- 1 The aim of this paper is to identify the ways in which modern and contemporary Chinese literature has depicted the female body, and how this depiction has been used as a tool not only of artistic expression but of sense-making as well. I will especially focus on disruptive and uneasy narratives of the female body provided by Chinese writers.
- 2 I will develop my analysis of a range of literary texts within a twofold conceptual frame. On the one hand I will stress the importance of close reading and textual analysis in order to detect the linguistic representation of the female body in terms of descriptive and evocative images. On the other hand, I will try to explore the cognitive function played by literary description, in expressing “the mediation of bodily experience”¹ as a tool to know the world and the human self. Recently, new discoveries in neurosciences have revealed “the existence of structures [in the human brain] that get activated both when undergoing certain mental states and when representing them in others”.² Certain literary representations of physical and mental states, therefore, could enable readers to improve their understanding of the human being: “through fiction human cognitive procedures are represented so that readers expand their understanding of the human being through examples rather than theories”.³
- 3 I will argue that, in some cases, the representation of “inhuman” bodily states is a narrative function meant to enact sharing and understanding. Indeed, experiments measuring empathetic reactions found that “areas underlying the experience of physical pain in its affective aspect [...] were also active when participants received a

signal indicating that a painful stimulus is applied to another person”.⁴ This proves that the individual and collective body are connected through a common network of relations. Acclaimed philosophical theories such as those of Foucault and Agamben provide scholars with a variety of approaches, suggesting the existence of a deep connection between body and society, body and politics. However, recently it is the phenomenology of perceptions theorised by Merleau-Ponty that has been rediscovered by the cognitive sciences: his idea of the living body helps us see the body in literature as a powerful means to experience the world. Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “*redécouverte du corps propre*”, or “rediscovery of one’s own body”.⁵

- 4 As far as the research on modern Chinese literature is concerned, one should mention Angela Zito and Tani Barlow,⁶ Li Rong,⁷ and recently Carlos Rojas,⁸ who analyzes the use of the body, especially sick bodies and disease, as a discourse about weakness but also potential transformation, and notes the tendency to signal the inherent contradiction between internal alterity and external community:

Nations, families, and even corporeal bodies are fundamentally heterogeneous collectives, and their imagined coherence is predicated on a perpetual tension with sites of internal alterity.⁹

- 5 Apparently, according to many literary texts, the site of this contradiction is often the female body.
- 6 The bio-political perspective is prominent in studies such as the ones made by Belinda Kong,¹⁰ Yinde Zhang,¹¹ and the abovementioned work by Rojas. As a matter of fact, both in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, writers have shown themselves to be very keen on a body-centred representation of reality. From the “left-wing” writers and the “new sensation school” / 新感觉派 / *xin ganjue pai* of the 1930s,¹² to Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911-1942), women’s condition and, more generally, the representation of a socially tormented China have been represented via the body. More recently, it suffices to recall Yu Hua 余华 (b. 1960), Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955), Yan Lianke 阎连科 (b. 1958), and Bi Feiyu 毕飞宇 (b. 1964)’s recent novels and their emphasis on bodily perceptions, which are often exaggerated or even distorted in order to convey deeper meanings, related to the historical and social tensions they reveal. Likewise, the dystopian vision of reality, which has been brilliantly explored by Jeffrey Kinkley in his latest book,¹³ often refers to the embodied experience represented in the “new historical novels” / 新历史小说 / *xin lishi xiaoshuo*, in which the body has a disruptive power.
- 7 The writers of the “new” or “latest generation” / 晚生代 / *wanshengdai* also present a body-centred approach: I am referring not only to Chen Ran 陈染 (b. 1962), Lin Bai 林白 (b. 1958) and other female writers who apply a bodily view of the world and of writing itself, but also to writers like Han Dong 韩东 (b. 1961) and Zhu Wen 朱文 (b. 1967), who offer a representation of individually and physically perceived reality.¹⁴
- 8 Literature seems to be the best site for expressing the body: “The literary, like the somatic and through its relation to the somatic, opens the path to the unbinding of all forms of fixity – those of individual identity as well as the stereotypes and hierarchies that accompany them”.¹⁵ Besides, as Hillmann and Maude observe, “Literary thinkers have always been particularly interested in concrete, non-conceptual aspects of knowing and feeling”.¹⁶
- 9 In my necessarily limited range of collected examples, I have identified some fundamental categories in the representation of women’s body as a carrier of meanings

and as a constant object of manipulation, tracing a general path that leads the female body from the human to inhuman state.

- 10 These categories are: the allegorised body; the animal body; the maternal body; the sexual body; the sick and disabled body; the raped and mutilated body and the metaphorical body.
- 11 As regards the corpus of texts scrutinised, I have been working on a range of fictional texts, mostly drawn from the May Fourth period, but also the literature produced in mainland China and Hong Kong over the last twenty years. Interestingly enough, most of the examples are drawn either from modern literature of the 1920s and 1930s or from contemporary Chinese literature from the turn of the 20th century. The reason for this apparently uneven selection is that Chinese fiction of the “seventeen-years period” (1949-66) seldom focuses on purely physical descriptions; moreover, the female body is never exposed in such a merciless and revealing way, highlighting its negative or uncanny meaning. In the 1980s, although we find many instances of “sensorial narratives” (for instance in Wang Anyi 王安忆 (b. 1954) and Han Shaogong 韩少功 (b. 1953) etc.), they are not body-centred; only with the “material turn” in Chinese literature, which occurred during the last decade of the twentieth-century, did a new narrative of the body develop which is connected with the growing individualism and the commodification of the human being in Chinese society at the turn of the century.¹⁷

The allegorised body

- 12 If we reconsider the whole history of modern Chinese literature, it is possible to trace the development of the awareness, negation, negotiation or invention of women’s identity through a physical rather than psychological representation. Starting from the early 20th century, the female body has been a vehicle of both “modernity a” and “backwardness”; let’s compare for instance these two kinds of texts:

She was born into a peasant family [...]. *She was no more than a simple animal.* [...] The day after, before dawn, she slipped out quietly, taking advantage of the fact that her husband hadn’t yet woken up. The west wind was blowing, cutting her face like a knife, but she felt extremely satisfied because the pain was lighter than her husband’s palm. (emphasis mine)¹⁸

伊生在农家, [...] **简直是很简单的一个动物。** [...] 明天朝晨, 天还没亮透, 伊轻轻地走了出来, 私幸伊丈夫还没醒。西风像刀, 吹到脸上很痛, 但是伊觉得比吃大夫的巴掌痛得轻些, 也就满足极了。¹⁹

Lying on my bed is a *plaster mannequin* like the one displayed in the window of a women’s merchandise store, the red flowers pattern on her chest [...] exuded a warm scent. Is this an organism or a non-organism? At night the plastic mannequin is also naked... Is this an *organism* or a *non-organism*? It is not a plaster mannequin, nor is it a marble statue or a snowman; it is some flowing lines transplanted from a painting and some *cream* forming *the picture of a humane figure* under my sheets. (emphasis mine)²⁰

躺在床上的是**妇女用品店橱窗里陈列的石膏模型**, 胸脯儿那儿的图案上的红花, [...] **挥发着热香。这是生物, 还是无生物呢? 石膏模型到了晚上也是裸体的** [...] **这是生物, 还是无生物呢? 这不是石膏模型, 也不是大理石像, 也不是雪人; 这是从画上移植过来的一些流动的线条, 一堆Cream, 在我的被单上**绘着人体画。****²¹

Using slender ankles as the foundation, one leg standing erect and the other bent, is a platinum statue of a female nude. She stands there, an inorganic statue with no shame, no moral concepts or human desires. She is so metallic and sleek that his

gaze swiftly glides over the lines of the body. This feelingless, emotionless statue stands there waiting for his order.²²

把消瘦的脚踝做底盘，一条腿垂直着，一条腿倾斜着，站着一个人体的塑像，一个没有羞惭，没有道德观念，也没有人类的欲望似的，无机的人体塑像。金属性的，流线感的，视线在那躯体的线条上面一滑就滑了过去似的。这个没有感觉，也没有感情的塑像站在那儿等着他的命令。²³

A statue of platinum! A female body without complexion and inhuman, what a strange flavour. Her feelings and her biologic structure are unknowable, the new sexual object of the year 1933 with a human shape but not a human nature or flavour.

“白金的人体塑像！一个没有血色，没有人性的女体，异味呢。不能知道她的感情，不能知道她的生理构造，有着人的形态却没有人的性质和气味的一九三三年新的性欲对象啊！”²⁴

- 13 The first text is drawn from Ye Shengtao 叶圣陶 (1894-1988)'s denounce short story "This is a Human Being too", an early instance of critical realism from the "fiction of problems" / 问题小说 / *wenti xiaoshuo* genre, while the other three were written by the New Sensation's writer Mu Shiying 穆时英 (1912-1940), who describes the new style of Chinese life in a "semi-modern, semi-colonised" Shanghai. The female body conveys almost opposite yet very similar meanings in these two texts. In both cases we observe a strategy of externalization and defamiliarisation of the body: through the unfortunate peasant-girl in Ye Shengtao's story embodies a degree-zero humanity, while the body of the "modern girl"²⁵ which haunts Mu Shiying's male characters is but a representation of the individual's reification in modern society.
- 14 In the former example the female body is "socialised" or, rather, "ideologised" as a symbol of the oppression exerted by traditional rural culture on the individual, while in the latter, Shih speaks of "eroticization and objectification of the female body".²⁶
- 15 However, in both cases the representation ends up with a similar deformation or dehumanisation of the female body: the above descriptions, no matter what approach to Chinese society they reflect, are both marked by a shade of glumness, as though women's body bore all the heavy burden of past social inequity as well as the anxiety for an unknown future or an uncanny present. Nevertheless, while for Ye Shengtao and the other writers of the critical realism current,²⁷ the female body conveys a clear social meaning, in the New Sensation School it is rather connected with a sense of "material possession among an array of objects [...] being at the forefront of technological modernity".²⁸ Indeed, the female body in both cases is allegorised and dehumanised, becoming only a sign.
- 16 From this first category we can deduce that in different works within May Fourth literature the female body is a substitute for the individual and the ways in which it is exploited or feared in both traditional and modern China. It does neither represent women's subjectivity nor does it explore their inner reality, it only serves the purpose of expressing the anxieties of male writers of the time.
- 17 Although they belong to two very different literary schools, for both the above-mentioned writers the female body must be de-humanised in order to depict an unstable and troubled society. The scandalous transformation of the woman subject from human to inhuman is only a tool for voicing a critical view of the present,²⁹ and the premise for the utopian desire for a shift backward (or forward in the socially engaged writers' case) from an inhuman to a human condition. In her seminal book,

Ping Zhu also argues that “the feminine is more of a space of negotiation than a natural essence associated with the female body”.³⁰

The animal body

- 18 Within the category of the animal body I place a variety of uses and depictions of the female body in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. The use of the metamorphic body, transformed into an animal or inanimate thing, was adopted and further developed by modern writers, often with opposite strategies and aims. In this sense, the inhuman reading of the female body is a long-standing practice in male-centred cultures; in the New Sensation School, for instance, the writers’ main attitude is overtly based on the traditional view of woman as a dangerous sexual animal, notoriously represented by the rhetoric of the “fox-spirit” / 狐狸精 / *hulijing*.³¹ In the case of Mu Shiyong’s short story [“The Man Who Was Treated as a Plaything”] / 被当作消遣品的男人 (1933), he adopts an animal-body interpretation in order to express the feeling of danger and anxiety conveyed by the modern girl and her sexual attraction:

She is a dangerous animal! She has a snake’s body, a cat’s head, a mixture of softness and danger.

她是危险的动物哪！她有着一个蛇的身子，猫的脸袋，温柔和无限的混合物。³²

- 19 The negotiation between male and female desire in modern Shanghai is represented as a hunting trip, but the narrator of the story is not sure who plays the role of the hunter and who that of the prey:

She is a dangerous animal, but I was not a good hunter. Had I captured her now, or was I being captured by her?

她是危险的动物，而我却不是好猎手。现在算是捉到了吗？还是我被抓住了呢？

[...]不能做她的狩猎物的。³³

- 20 Animals are constantly associated with women by the female writer Xiao Hong 萧红 as well, who nevertheless does not use this association as an allegory or metaphor, but takes it literally as a real image of the woman/human condition. In Xiao Hong’s works, the female body acquires a cognitive function. Indeed, it is through her own body and that of her characters that she experiences the world and brings readers in contact with their suffering.

- 21 The gradual transformation of the female body from human into inhuman is achieved by modern writers by means of either a metaphoric or a metonymic strategy. The latter is prevalent in Xiao Hong. The definition of “humanimal” created by Yinde Zhang³⁴ perfectly suits Xiao Hong’s representational strategy. As others have already noted,³⁵ in *The Field of Life and Death* / 生死场 (1935), women and animals are associated as they share a common fate and life condition: “in their experience of the body, female animals and women have more in common than men and women do”.³⁶ However, we can reach a further level: in Xiao Hong’s works, women are compared to animals in a very odd way, for she uses the literary technique of “defamiliarisation” (*ostranenie*) defined by Shklovsky, but her aim – unlike in the case of the Russian formalist – is not an aesthetic one, namely to reveal the naked literary form, but a cognitive one, insofar as she wishes to make her readers perceive women’s reality in a stronger way. Below are some examples from Xiao Hong’s novel:

Golden Bough is like a sick little chick

金枝好像患者传染病的小鸡一般 (57)³⁷

Fifth Sister is like “a small lively pidgeon”

一个灵活的小鸽子 (66)

Old Mother Pockface “with her hair covering her face, is a female bear! The female bear enters her cave carrying some herbs”

头发飘了满脸，那样，麻面婆是一只母熊了！母熊带着草类进洞 (45)

While Old Mother Wang recounts the death of her little daughter, “she is often described as an ‘owl’ by the children surrounding her”

常常围着小孩子们说她‘猫头鹰’ (47)

- 22 The unexpected comparisons refer to the female body as a strange, almost disgusting creature. I argue that this is not a simple metaphorical transposition, as in the New Sensationists’ adoption of animal metaphors. We can assume that this is a deliberate, cognitive expression of the unbearable dehumanisation of women (and peasants in general) in 1930s rural China: by making the familiar unfamiliar, Xiao Hong seeks to elicit a reaction from her readers.
- 23 The connection between women and animals and the metaphor of the hunting trip has been recently used also by a science-fiction writer, who pushes this image into the sphere of the posthuman. In a novelette released on-line and only recently published,³⁸ Han Song 韩松 (b. 1965) imagines a theme-park for male hunters, a playfield where rich and bored middle-class men can freely hunt beautiful women, artificially created and kept in a sort of original wilderness for this sole purpose. In this dystopian universe where men can arbitrarily dispose of women’s bodies, the author imagines that these prey-women
- have got neither a position, nor any legal protection in the human society, they are simply standard-type organisms, batch-produced by genetic-engineering factories. No, of course they are not robots, they are all genuine goods at a fair price, made of blood and flesh [...]. To draw an analogy, they are like eels raised in a pond with contraceptives.
- 在人类社会其实没有任何地位的，不受法律的保护。简单的来说，她们是由基因工程公司批量生产的标准型号生物。不，当然不是机器人，都是货真价实、有血有肉 [...] 的女人。打个比方，就像是用避孕药养在池塘里鳝鱼一样。³⁹

The maternal body

- 24 As many scholars point out, the maternal body is one of the most recurrent sites of estrangement and manipulation in literature and sociology. “Of all the human bodily processes, reproduction is among the most politicized”⁴⁰, therefore “pregnant women are especially vulnerable to coercion and harm. [...] The reproductive body – almost always framed as a woman’s body – is also a socially marginalized body”.⁴¹
- 25 Many of the literary descriptions and representations of the female body in twentieth and twenty-first century Chinese literature are based on the perception of maternal bodies and motherhood. It is common knowledge that sociocultural control over the body has always involved women more than men – as in the Chinese practice of foot-binding – issues such as birth control and surrogated motherhood are common subject in the works of both early modern and contemporary Chinese writers, who charge the maternal body with a variety of meanings.
- 26 Chinese fiction provides a range of touching and tragic descriptions of motherhood. Interestingly, this depiction is a gendered one, indeed, as it is explained by Clare Hanson: “For female writers, the focus is principally on the subjective experience of maternal embodiment and the difficulty of negotiating the somatic, psychological and

social changes associated with pregnancy and birth”, while “[m]ale writers, by contrast, regard motherhood from a social point of view, with pregnancy seen as a disruptive event that may threaten the stability of family ties”⁴² and – I add here – the stability of social order, as in Ma Jian (b. 1953)’s novel *The Dark Road* / 阴之道 (2012) and Mo Yan’s *Frogs* / 蛙 (2009).

- 27 If we go back to the abovementioned short story by Ye Shengtao, we find that the girl’s young body is forced to give birth to a baby: despite being a traditional custom in old China (and in many other rural cultures), according to modern sensibilities forced or surrogate motherhood is an absurd form of physical and psychological abuse. In Rou Shi’s 柔石 (1902-1931) famous [“A Mother Slave”] / 奴隶的母亲 (1930), the description and the use of the maternal body are completely devoid of any personal identity. In this story, a poor leather-seller “lends” his wife to a rich childless couple who desires to finally have a male heir. Not only does the surrogated mother not have a name (it is never mentioned in the story and when asked by her “borrowing” husband she doesn’t even answer), but the objectification of her body takes the form of a literal synecdoche, a specific case of metonymy in which the part stands for the whole. Throughout the short story the woman’s belly replaces the female protagonist as a subject/object. The husband tells her: “What’s the point of letting you suffer along with me? We’d better think of a way of exploiting your body” / 还是从你底身上设法罢你跟着我挨饿, 有什么办法呢?⁴³ Later, the matchmaker tries to persuade her to accept the deal, by saying: “It suffices that your belly fights to excel, in order to give birth to one or two [children], and everything will be okay” / 只要你肚子争气些, 到那边, 也养下一二个来, 万事都好了.⁴⁴
- 28 The woman’s belly is even compared by the jealous wife of the scholar to that of a female dog: “Perhaps she is like a female dog, her belly filled with puppies” / 恐怕竟和街头的母狗一样, 肚皮里有着一肚子的小狗.⁴⁵ The alienation of the belly (merely used as a means of production) from the woman’s body-mind as a whole is briefly exemplified in this sentence: “The belly kept on growing day by day, as big as a basin” / 肚子一天天地膨胀的如斗那么大.⁴⁶
- 29 We can apply to both cases Mingbao Yue’s analysis of Ye Shengtao’s story: “it exemplifies how the objective mode attitude can become untenable as a revolutionary mode of writing when the narrative focuses on the female body”.⁴⁷
- 30 The female writers adopt a different point of view when depicting motherhood. In Xiao Hong’s case motherhood is neither a common way for expressing women’s potential and the embodiment of a natural function, nor the object of men’s exploitation; on the contrary, the pregnant body is a site of alienation for the woman herself. The pregnant body in her fiction is depicted as unnatural and unfamiliar to the woman herself, in contrast to the deterministic biologic view of the female body as naturally built for reproduction. I will refer here to two of Xiao Hong’s characters: Jinzhi 金枝 (lit. “Golden Bough”) from *The Field of Life and Death* and Qin 芹 from [“The Abandoned Child”] / 弃儿 (1936). The description of Golden Bough’s pregnancy is laconic: “Golden Bough feels a deep pain, she feels her belly has become a fearful monster, there is something hard inside of her” / 金枝过于痛苦了, 觉得肚子变成个可怕的怪物, 觉得里面有一块硬的地方.⁴⁸
- 31 In her autobiographical short story [“The Abandoned Child”], Xiao Hong provides us with a rather detailed record of uncomfortable and weird sensations connected with

motherhood: the protagonist is first introduced as “a woman with a *mantou*-shaped belly” / 一个肚子凸的馒头般的女人.⁴⁹ But later in the story the narrator observes that “her belly does not resemble a *mantou*; it’s a small basin tied onto her belly” / 她的肚子不像馒头, 简直是小盆被扣在她肚皮上.⁵⁰ In the shabby hotel room where the pregnant woman is secluded,

she only feels a gloomy cold on her back. When she enters the single room walking on the dust that covers the floorboard, her legs are just two fake legs made out of wood, or else they are someone else’s legs, forcibly tied to her body, numb, awkward.

只觉得背上有些阴冷。当她踏着地板的尘土走进单身房的时候, 她的腿便是用两条木做的假腿, 不然就是别人的腿强接在自己的身上, 没有感觉, 不方便。⁵¹

32 Eventually,

Qin’s belly becomes bigger and bigger! From a small basin it has become a big basin; from an inanimate thing, an animate one. She can’t sleep on her bed, the mosquitoes are having fun crawling on her legs and that thing is having fun crawling in her belly: she has simply become a circus, a place where everyone can go and play.

芹的肚子越胀越大了! 由一个小盆变成一个大盆, 由一个不活动的物件, 变成一个活动的物件, 他在床上睡不着, 蚊虫在他的腿上走着玩, 肚子里的物件在肚皮里走着玩, 她简直变成个大马戏场了, 什么全在这个场面上耍起来。⁵²

33 Other images enhance the character’s physical estrangement and unease: such as “Qin’s belly is aching badly, on the *kang* she rolls into a clay figurine” / 芹肚子疼得更厉害了, 在土炕上滚成个泥人了,⁵³ and “her breast grows stiff, as if something had been stuffed inside them” / 奶子胀得硬, 里面像盛满了什么似的。⁵⁴

34 One of the most graphic descriptions of unwanted motherhood is the one provided by Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (1920-1995) in her autobiographical novel [Little Reunion] / 小团圆 (2009), where she recounts the tragic episode of the abortion which her narrative alter ego Lili undergoes in the US:

She could feel the string of the suppository hanging down and brushing against her thigh like the fuse of a bomb. After several hours nothing had happened. [...]

That night, under the bathroom light, she saw a male fetus in the toilet bowl. In her terrified eyes it was at least ten inches long, leaning upright against the white porcelain, partly submerged in the water. The thin smear of bloody liquid on its skin was the light orange color of a newly planed wood. Fresh blood accumulated in its hollows and outlined its form distinctly. A pair of disproportionately large eyes protruded and its arms looked like the retracted wings of the wooden bird that used to perch above the door in Shanghai long ago.

In that moment of horror, Julie flushed the toilet. At first she worried the fetus would not flush away, but it soon disappeared into the billowing vortex.⁵⁵

她可以感觉到腿上拖着根线头, 像炸弹的导线一样。几个钟头后还没发作 [...]

夜间她在浴室灯下看见抽水马桶里的男胎。在她惊恐的眼睛里足有十吋长, 毕直的歇立在白磁壁上与水中, 肌肉上抹上一层淡淡的血水, 成为新刨的木头的淡橙色。凹处凝聚的鲜血勾划出它的轮廓来, 线条分明, 一双环眼大得不合比例, 双睛突出, 抿着翅膀, 是从前站在门头上的木雕的鸟。

恐怖到极点的一刹那间, 她扳动机钮。以为冲不下去, 竟在波涛汹涌中消失了。⁵⁶

35 In modern Chinese literature, many authors, such as Rou Shi, Xiao Hong and her first husband Xiao Jun 萧军 (1907-1988), question the very meaning and aim of motherhood, insisting on cruel depictions of babies rejected or killed. The violence exerted on the maternal body (or on the child, as its extension) is a metonymy for the violence embedded in war and life in general; but, again, the description is a gendered one. Xiao

Jun and Xiao Hong's novels both represent the act of killing a new-born baby, but the perspective and the bodily sensations reported are strikingly different. In the former case it is a Japanese soldier who kills the infant, by snatching him away from his mother's bosom, while in the latter, it is the very father of the girl-baby, a Chinese peasant, who pitilessly kills her by dropping her fall into a basin of scalding water. Clearly enough, for Xiao Jun – in his nationalistic drive – the violent death of the baby is but an act of war, an extreme form of political contempt for China, whereas Xiao Hong rather shifts our attention to the social and human meaning of suppressing a girl's life in China's backward countryside, denying at the same time the value of such a neglected motherhood.

- 36 Women writers of the 1980s, such as Zhang Xinxin 张欣欣 (b. 1957), Wang Anyi and Zhang Jie 张杰 (b. 1937) explore new ways of expressing their female identity by means of more physical, down-to-earth, material elements. But owing to their idealistic approach to literature – typical of the “culture fever” era – they mainly subjectivised and “psychologised” the physical perceptions, as in the following scene of a medical abortion:

“...Oh, it's a primipara...”. While the doctor mumbles to himself, preparing the surgical instruments, I suddenly feel scared and wish to escape, but it's too late... The soft and nauseating smell of the chemical disinfectant that permeates the room, the dazzling white light blinding my eyes through the window, the white pillow case beside my head, the white sheet under my body, everything is so ice-cold... the noise of the pedal aspirator pierces my ears then stops. Then it starts again..., it's like I am going to be suctioned out!

“.....哟，第一胎.....”当准备手术器械的医士也嘟囔着时，我突然感到恐惧和想要逃脱，可已经来不及了.....。那股软绵绵的，叫人有些想吐的新洁尔灭消毒剂气味弥漫开来，那直逼眼睛的，窗上炫目的白光，头边白色的枕套，身下白色的床单，都冷冰冰的.....脚踏吸引器刺耳的声音，响了，停了。又响了.....我象是要被抽空了！⁵⁷

- 37 Although the use of the first person in recounting the uneasy sensations of the protagonist enables a more direct representation of the female subjectivity, the descriptions are still quite literary.
- 38 On the contrary, in his latest novel *Frogs*, Mo Yan, adopts a mostly corporeal and sensorial style to describe forced abortions and abused female bodies in the Popular Republic of China. The community of Gaomi – the usual setting of Mo Yan's fiction – is upset by the frequent inspections of officials against illegally pregnant women.
- 39 In his case, however, the narrative focus is not on the female body *per se*: what really matters for Mo Yan is the vivid representation of social tensions due to the clash between the state's demographic control plan and the traditional Chinese vision of motherhood and reproduction.
- 40 In contemporary Chinese literature, it is, surprisingly, another male writer that manages to grasp the maternal body's “alienness” and its cognitive function. In his novel *The Dark Road*, Ma Jian explores the theme of a ruthless China chasing for pregnant women as the most brutal form of social control on individuals. Rather differently from Mo Yan's frantic action scenes, Ma Jian's narration seems to delve deeper into the physiological and subjective sphere of the female body.
- 41 I will just quote one of the last scenes from the novel, which is actually littered throughout with detailed representations of women's bodily perceptions:

With the four fingers of her hand she pushes through the cervix, pierces the amniotic sac, gropes around and finds a foot. As she pushes again with all her strength, *her contorted face turns scarlet and milk spurts from her nipples*. [...] The lament fills every part of her body then bursts in the air. *A rancid, yeasty smell starts to escape from her. After another intense push, blood drips out from her vagina onto the damp deck, forming blossom-like stains, then gushes out with greater force.* [...] she cranes her neck down between her legs and sees it *lying in a pool of blood, its body as green and shiny as an apple* [...].

“Why is he so green?” Meili says. “He looks like one of those *green aliens in the computer games*.” (emphasis is mine)⁵⁸

美黎憋红了脸，乳头滋滋地喷奶，破船在摇抖，她感到所有的软肉都充满了气，她吼着：“……千呼万唤叫着妈妈，想念孩儿死不瞑目，孩儿跪在你面前，不孝孩儿赔罪了喽……”歌声塞满血肉之后就冲到了塑料空气之中才散开，一股浸泡很久的酒酿味流到了枕头和白床单，美黎低头抖着，流淌的血先是如写意梅花般的点线，继而如泼墨般挥洒，美黎吼着：“天堂哟，你就下地狱吧！妈等着你……”一阵撕裂声之后，天堂被母亲的残手掏了出来，躺在血泊里浑身如绿苹果般闪光 [...]看他，像电脑里的太空精灵，……美黎喃喃地又说[...]”⁵⁹

- 42 Such a disturbing and alienating record of physical perceptions – which reminds us of Dai Wei, the protagonist of Ma Jian’s previous novel, *Beijing Coma*, who narrates the “travel” inside his own body’s viscera –⁶⁰ and the visual hallucinations in the ending scene of *The Dark Road* move beyond political accusations levelled against the Chinese government and Chinese traditional culture for their abuse of the female body, to become an experience of “augmented reality” of the female body. Indeed, by means of these powerful descriptions and the adoption of an external viewpoint, that of the unborn baby (Infant Spirit), Ma Jian suggests that the maternal body has a double sensitiveness, for it combines Meili’s with that of the Infant Spirit – indeed, it is as though it possessed a quality of enhanced cognition of reality. At the same time, as was the case with Xiao Hong’s lucid representation of the uncanny feeling a woman gets of carrying another being inside her body, Ma Jian adopts a similar strategy in emphasising the alienness of such an event, birth, that is usually perceived as totally natural.
- 43 Finally, another example of de-familiarisation of the maternal body is provided by science fiction literature: in “Story of a Titan” by the female writer Ling Chen 凌晨, a woman gives birth to her child on Saturn, while the whole scene is recorded by cameras and broadcasted on the Earth: the narrator of the story – similarly to the unusual perspective adopted by Ma Jian in *The Dark Road* with the Infant Spirit – is the baby himself, who comments on the birth process from inside his mother’s uterus in a very scientific manner:

she’d shift her huge body (332)⁶¹

“妈妈便推动她庞大的身体” (15)⁶²

Through the skin of Mama’s belly, I murmured from deep within the womb, relating information obtained from genes and blood – breathing, absorption, excretion, perception, memory. I began from a fertilized egg and developed organs, muscles, skin, and bones (340)

“隔着妈妈的肚皮，我在子宫深处呢喃，叙述从基因和血液中获取的信息—呼吸、吸收、排泄、感知、记忆，我从一颗受精卵开始，发育出器官、肌肉、皮肤、骨骼” (17)

Yes, Mama, don’t worry. I’ll swim smoothly out of the womb and fly into your embrace.

Almost as if the uterus understood me, a strong force suddenly pushed me toward the cervix. (344)

“是的，别担心妈妈，我会顺畅地游出子宫，扑向你的怀抱。好像是子宫听明白了我的话似的，一股强劲的力量忽然将我往子宫口推去。”(17)

“Do they want to play God?” Mama asked with difficulty. She had endured ten hours of contractions and scoffed at the efficiency of the work Papa and the others were doing. Now that my head had slid into the pelvic cavity I was quite uncomfortable. Holes had ruptured all over the placenta that had been protecting me, and the familiar film and fluid flowed on all sides and blocked my exit. I was tired, and I needed to rest a while. (344)

“‘他们想当神吗？’妈妈艰难地问。她已经忍受了十个小时的宫缩，对爸爸他们工作效率嗤之以鼻。而我因为头滑入骨盆腔感到很不舒服，一直保护我的羊膜破裂出一个一个的洞洞，我熟悉的膜液四处流淌，堵塞了我的出口。我累了，得休息一会儿。(18)

44 The father watching from outer space, sighs

“My wife’s childbirth is being broadcast live, and I can’t see it!” (349)

“我妻子分娩直播，我都看不到！”(19)

45 The final, crucial moment of the delivery is dryly described by the baby. All emotions and sensations are recorded in a very impersonal way and while the physical pain is reported, it is as though the mother’s body had been de-humanised.

I had entirely entered the birth canal. It was a narrow and bumpy channel with a faint light all the way at the far end. I was squeezed, and I felt incredibly uncomfortable. My pain passed to Mama, and then her whole body was in pain and she cried out. (352)

我已经完全进入了产。那是一条狭窄崎岖的通道，只在很远的地方有微弱的光亮，我被挤压得非常不舒服。我的痛苦传递到妈妈身上，她也浑身疼痛着喊叫起来。”(20)

46 The female body is treated here as a mere baby-producer. Although the first person narrator is the baby himself and he reports his own birth, trying to recollect the emotions of his mother and father at the time, in general the narrative comes across as a fairly bleak description. In the ending of the short story, the narrator quietly comments about his birth occurring at the very time when his father, a scientist, is carrying out an important bacteriological experiment on planet Saturn:

I and that bacteria would grow side by side in the sky of Saturn VI, and the future was uncertain. (361)

“我将与这些细菌一起在卫六的星空下成长，前景无法确定是不是光明。”(21)

47 We can conclude this section by quoting Hanson again: “Such anxious constructions of the maternal body are surely an index of the inchoate fears that contribute to surround reproduction and the lease on the future which it represents”.⁶³

The sexual body

48 Many authors of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, who were partially inspired by Freudian theories from the 1920s onward, represent women through a sexualised body. Although the New Sensationists’ works are replete with descriptions of this kind, I have chosen two very different texts, one by Lu Ling 路翎 (1923-1994) and the other by Lin Bai 林白. In many cases the sexual body is endowed with an uncommon, almost upsetting quality: Lu Ling’s narrative of female sexual desire emphasises its physicality and the phenomenology of the perceptions, which, at the same time, it is also the expression of a spiritual hunger, as the title of the novelette

suggests: [“Hungry Guo Su’e”] / 饥饿的郭素娥 (1942). The following excerpts are just a sample of Lu Ling’s vivid narrative of the phenomenology of female sexuality:

The emotions of that woman, full of sexual desire and dreams, were so acute...

充满情欲和梦的女人的感觉是那样的敏锐 [...] ⁶⁴

Her cheeks were rosy, shining with a feeling of rich, wild joy. A smile of happiness flashed across her fleshy lips showing traces of lust. When she rapidly moved her arm, looking for the hoe, in the sunlight her teeth shined with a white glow, her bosom heaving fast.

她的脸颊红润，照耀着丰富的狂喜。在她的刻画着情欲的印痕的多肉的嘴唇上，浮显了一个幸福的微笑。当她把手臂迅速地挥转，寻觅短锄的时候，她的牙齿在阳光里闪着坚实的白光，她的胸膛急速地起伏着。 ⁶⁵

Passing by a short tree, he leaned on its trunk and brought his shrinking face down, stuck out his tongue and licked her lips and nose. Guo Su’e, wrapped in his strong male arms, cast away all her worries and melancholy, all her fears and hate. She woke up from the poisoned, silent darkness and laughed uncouthly, lasciviously, impudently.

在经过一株低矮的小树的时候，他把背脊依着树干俯下紧紧收缩的脸，伸出大舌头来舐着她的嘴唇和鼻子。在男人的强壮的臂弯里的郭素娥，这时候摆脱了一切挂虑，摆脱了一切悲愁，惶恐和怨恨，从有毒的黑暗的沉默里醒来，发出了粗野的淫荡的，放肆的欢笑。 ⁶⁶

49 Every single emotion of the protagonist and even her slightest physical reactions to the external world are recorded with accurate, almost morbid precision. The excessive use of adjectives and adverbs – a hallmark of Lu Ling’s style – builds a strongly mimetic image of the woman, whose inner self and body seem to overlap completely.

50 Turning to the contemporary writer Lin Bai’s descriptions of the sexual female body, I will provide an excerpt from [“The Time of Cat’s Passion”] / 猫的激情时代 (2001):

In my dreams Cat uses her lithe, slender fingers to stroke my face. She lowered her body close to me, and in a whisper says: Do you know who I love the most? [...]

Cat’s cool breath sirs the fine hair on my body, arousing a feeling of tender care. I say I don’t know. She lowers her long eyelashes and says: You can imagine me as a man. I say that if you were one, I wouldn’t have liked you. ⁶⁷

猫在我的梦中用她柔软修长的手指抚摸我的脸，她俯身凑近我，用耳语般的声音对我说：你知道我最爱谁吗？ [...]

猫的气息凉凉地吹动我细小的汗毛，使我有一种体贴入微的感觉。我说我不知道。她垂下她长长的睫毛说：你把我想象成男的。我说你当了男的我就不喜欢你了。 ⁶⁸

51 In this delicate but unequivocal description of female same sex attraction, the corporeality of the two protagonists is not a metaphorical one: Lin Bai displays the sexual body in its literal perceptual dimension. In the short story, she extends this dimension further through the contrast with the dead body of Cat, one of the lovers who, as we learn at the very beginning of the story, has been executed for having killed a man after an unpleasant sexual intercourse.

52 Sexual body and dead body are thus placed on the same level: desire and death are both phenomena which only bodily sensations make real.

The raped and mutilated female body: women's controversial agency

- 53 This is an incredibly rich category, in modern as well as in contemporary literature: Xiao Jun, Lu Ling, Xiao Hong, and more recently Mo Yan and Ge Fei 格非 (b. 1964) – to take only a few authors – present the ravaged female body from a variety of perspectives, ranging from an emphasis on its naked physicality to hints at psychological unease. The famous episode of the young bride raped in the sorghum field from Mo Yan's [The Clan of Red Sorghum] / 红高粱家族 (1985) has already been studied and treated as an example of misogyny by the Chinese scholar Lu Tonglin. She interprets Mo Yan's depiction of the raped female body as a sacrificial object representing male desire, deprived of any identity and agency: "the female body, like the landscape with which it identifies, is largely excluded from the world of dynamic movement".⁶⁹
- 54 Similarly, although with very different aims, in a war scene where a young Japanese soldier rapes a Chinese peasant woman, Xiao Jun portrays the violence inflicted upon the female body in order to elicit a nationalistic sense of ire, without really empathising with the character in her physically and psychologically damaged condition. On the contrary, in presenting an analogous episode, where the vicious act is actually perpetrated by a Chinese man on Golden Bough in *The Field of Life and Death*, Xiao Hong enhances the character's pathetic hopelessness and manages to instill a sense of sober desperation in the reader.
- 55 Nevertheless, in other cases the literary representation of abuses on the female body unexpectedly provides women with a strong agency and power. As Kirk Denton has demonstrated, in Lu Ling's novelette ("Hungry Guo Su'e"), it is Guo Su'e's spiritual independence and hunger, and not her body as an objectified sexual target, that is mostly feared and thus violated by men in the final cruel rape and murder scene:
- Guo Su'e was dizzy, her whole body was cold, the parts of her which had been branded dripped blood. But Huang Mao's big hands groped among the blood, over her naked body. With a kind of cowardly wildness he eyed the witheness of her flesh [...] he lowered his body and quietly climbed on the top of her.⁷⁰
郭素娥昏晕着，全身冰冷，在烧伤的地方淌着血水。但黄毛的大手却从血水中间，在她的赤裸的身体上摸索着。他带着一种胆怯的昏狂，注视着她的肌肉的白色，[...]，他就伏下身子悄悄爬到她的身体上去。⁷¹
- 56 Whereas the tragic reality of history offered to modern writers a scary and truthful landscape of rapes – such as those associated with the Nanjing massacre (1937) and the war period – it is undeniable that rape is also the greatest and cruellest form of control over the female body, together with mutilation and cannibalism. This is the case in Han Song's story [The Guide to Hunting for Women], with its island inhabited by artificially created women, brought into being only to satisfy urban men's craving for strong emotions. The story argues that the female body is not only a prey for the hunters, but that these artificial clones – designed to satisfy men's sexual fantasies and stereotypes – also represent the male obsession with the elusiveness of the female body. Han Song offers a reflection on the mystery of gendered bodies and men's essential misunderstanding or ignorance in terms of female organic and bodily life: in one scene of this grotesque hunt for women, one of the hunters, after killing the female prey, eats

her uterus in a final attempt to grasp women's secret and extinguish his own sexual hunger.

The women on the island were just purebred animals provided with ovaries and uterus, they had not been contaminated yet with the vanity of cosmetics and jewels, and money. Their wild nature was their main feature.

岛上的女人，不过就是一种长有卵巢和子宫的纯种动物，没有受到化妆品，首饰虚荣心和金钱的污染，而野性是她们的首要特征。⁷²

Looking blankly at the woman's strange abdomen, Xiao Zhao remembered when, 36 years before, he had lived inside a similar flesh cavity. His relation with women was just the relation between a hosting body and a parasite, but maybe this was precisely the nature of all his relations with them.

怔怔地看着女人奇怪的腹部，小昭记起来，三十六年前，自己就寄居在这同样的肉体 and 腔膛里面呀。他与女人，不过是宿体与寄生的关系，而说不定，这正是这世上一切关系的本质呢。⁷³

- 57 In the horrific scene towards the end of the novel, the man, who during the fight against the female-clone has castrated himself by mistake, thoroughly appropriates the body of the female clone by eating her reproductive organs, like a parasite appropriates the body of its host.
- 58 Indeed, these descriptions of the female body are connected to a post-human, post-socialist view of the individual and of gender, although the scene also echoes the dystopian theme of cannibalism and its long-standing tradition in Chinese literature, from Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) to Mo Yan. The science fiction writer ends the story with a surreal and ambiguous solution to the war between the sexes, envisaging a simultaneously utopian and dystopian society of dis-gendered or post-gendered bodies ("ungendered" / 无性 / *wuxing*).
- 59 Similarly dark and brutal is the description of a female corpse raped by two thugs in Sino-American female writer Yiyun Li's in debut novel *The Vagrants* (2009): set in a Chinese town just one year after Mao Zedong's death, the story features a young woman executed for her counter-revolutionary activities. However, the violence exerted on her body, both before and after her death, is not so much a form of political violence as the physical expression of an existential regression of humankind in one of the darkest phases of Chinese history, where the value of an individual, especially if female, has been thoroughly depreciated or erased.

The sick body

- 60 Modern and contemporary literature mercilessly shows sick and disabled female bodies, the physical disease often being a sign of psychic unease. According to Larson, as Rong Cai puts it, "[i]n stories by female writers, women who write are often sick, weak, or commit suicide. As a result the female body had to be effaced through sickness or death to allow the emergence of the male activity of writing".⁷⁴ Ping Zhu observes that "[i]f the body is the location of socially manufactured desires, a sick body signifies the denunciation of the desires produced by the masculinist society."⁷⁵
- 61 Another critic, Yang Xin,⁷⁶ referring to "Beauty Writers" / 美女作家 such as Chen Ran 陈染 and Annie Baobei reminds us that sickness is a "narrative strategy and imaginative tool for women writers to explore identity in times of rapid social change".

- 62 Contrary to this metaphorical interpretation of the sick body, Xiao Hong exposes the female body in all of its outrageousness: in *The Field of Life and Death*, Yueying, a young and beautiful girl in the village, is mercilessly depicted lying in her bed, paralysed, her body covered with her own faeces.
- 63 This is a screeching, dissonant image which clashes with the “New Woman” vision of feminine beauty in the nationalist discourse of the time, as expressed by the so called Jianmei Movement: “healthy curves and national ideals of health and beauty during the Sino-Japanese war were set; women’s strong physiques were promoted as the science of the normal with manipulated, managed and disciplined workout routines”.⁷⁷ From a cognitive perspective, Xiao Hong again explores sorrowful human existence by means of the embodiment of pain in her characters.
- 64 If we applied here the neuroscientific theories on “shared emotional states”, we could infer that the reader exposed to such sorrowful descriptions can experience similar physical and mental states. On the other hand, the new cognitive sciences have also undergone a narrative turn: it is indeed possible to analyse and describe our perceptions as a narrative.
- 65 Finally, I would like to mention the Hong Kong-based female writer Hon Lai-chu’s (Han Lizhu 韩丽珠, b. 1978) novels *The Kite Family* / 风筝家族 (2008) and *Body Sewing* / 缝身 (2012): this author makes a completely different choice in the use of the sick or deformed female body. Differently from Xiao Hong, she rejects any realistic interpretation of her narrative, deliberately crossing the border into the unreal, the imaginary. In *The Kite Family*, she represents a strong existential and social unease through an “unnatural narrative”:⁷⁸ the women of the family, whose body grows monstrously until there is not enough space in the house to contain them, are the symbol of a more general spiritual unease in contemporary Hong Kong society. Hon Lai-chu refuses to provide any lifelike details, the physical perceptions of her characters are completely detached from their corpo-reality: bodies, especially female ones, are the signs of a new language. By having the novel embodied by a metaphorically sick body – what is more, a female body – the author provides her text with a simultaneously symbolic and cognitive function, representing women’s uneasy and problematic social condition figuratively.

I looked at Mother and said: “Grandmother’s body is like a rainbow coloured balloon, floating up into the sky until it pops.” [...] Together they’d carried her from her hospital bed to the back of a truck they’d hired to take her home. Once home, they shut her up in an empty room. The hereditary family fat had reached its inevitable stage and there was nothing we could do to stop it. It built up rapidly in Grandmother’s body, spreading aggressively and increasing in volume [...] In the days leading up to her death, Grandmother became too enormous for any room to contain, and the family had to find a contractor to break down the wall between two rooms so that Grandmother could stretch out properly.⁷⁹

我看着母说：“她肥胖的身体，像七彩的气球，飘到空中爆破。” [...] 他们合力把她从医院的床上抬起来放进招来的车上，运送回家，然后把她关在其中一个空房间里。当家族遗传的脂肪，在令人猝不及防的情况下，在外祖母的身体内迅速集聚，生机勃勃地不断壮大。[...] 外祖母去世前的一段日子，身体庞大得无法容纳在一个房间内，他们不得不找来装修工人，拆掉两个房间中央的墙壁，外祖母才能顺利地躺下泪。⁸⁰

- 66 The body is at the centre of Hon’s anti-mimetic narrative also in the novel *Body Sewing*, where the long-standing issues of the social recognition of women through marriage and coupling conventions are questioned. Hon describes a dystopian society where

couples are pushed to undergo surgery and have their bodies literally be sewed together, so as to attain a perfect harmony at both the individual and collective level. In this novel, stereotypical social relations and obsolete conventions on marriage and love are placed by Hon within a surreal frame, with an almost Gothic feel to it. In a city reminiscent of contemporary Hong Kong, women are legally encouraged to be physically sewn to the body of a man in order to guarantee themselves a future of socially acknowledged “normality”.

Conclusion

- 67 To conclude, images of distorted, abused and uncanny female bodies dominate Chinese fiction in both the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Metaphorical or metonymical strategies underpin two main literary functions: the symbolic and the cognitive, both of which define the female body as a site of contradiction or negotiation, and a tool for experiencing reality at a deeper level, which deserves to be further explored. This literary practice, strongly based on the corporeality of women’s existence and representation, which links the outer experience (text) to the inner experience (body), can be well explained through Merleau-Ponty’s words:

External perception and the perception of one’s own body vary in conjunction because they are the two facets of one and the same act.⁸¹

The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them.⁸²

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NOTES

1. MERLEAU-PONTY Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 23.
2. GLADZIEJEWSKI Paweł, “Shared Representations, Perceptual Symbols, and the Vehicles of Mental Concepts”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 20, 3-4:2013, p. 103.
3. “Tramite la narrativa si rappresentano le operazioni cognitive umane e che i lettori espongono così, mediante esempi invece che mediante una teoria, la propria comprensione dell’essere umano” (BALLERIO Stefano, “Stefano Calabrese, Neuronarratologia. Il futuro dell’analisi del racconto”, *Enthymema*, 1:2010, p. 270). Here and in other quoted passages all translations into English are mine unless otherwise stated.
4. GLADZIEJEWSKI, “Shared Representations...”, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
5. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.
6. ZITO Angela and BARLOW Tani (eds.), *Body, Subject and Power in China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.
7. LI Rong 李荣, [The Body Explanation of Modern Chinese Literature] / 中国现代文学的身体阐释, Beijing, Zhongguo Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2009.
8. ROJAS Carlos, *Homesickness. Culture, Contagion, and national Transformation in modern China*, Cambridge, Harvard U. P., 2015, p. IX.
9. *Ibid.*, p. IX.
10. KONG Belinda, *Tiananmen Fictions Outside the Square: The Chinese Literary Diaspora and the Politics of Global Culture*, Philadelphia, Temple U. P., 2012.
11. ZHANG Yinde, “The Fiction of Living Beings. Man and Animal in the Work of Mo Yan”, *China Perspective*, 3:2010, p. 128-9.
12. A literary school which flourished in Shanghai in the 1930s, emphasizing sensations and physical perceptions of modern life in the city of Shanghai.
13. KINKLEY Jeffrey C., *Vision of Dystopia in Chinese New Historical Novels*, New York, Columbia U. P., 2015.
14. PIRAZZOLI Melinda, “Breaking Up From What? The Corporeal Politics of Values in the *Duanlie yundong* (Rupture Movement)”, *Annali di Ca’ Foscari. Serie orientale*, 55:2019, p. 363-93.
15. HILLMANN David and MAUDE Ulrika (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to The Body in Literature*, New York, Cambridge U. P., 2015, p. 5.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
17. Many examples of the use and consumption of the human body in China are provided in SHARP Lesley A., “The Commodification of the Body and Its Parts”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 29:2000, p. 287-328.
18. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
19. YE Shengtao 叶圣陶, [“This is a Human Being Too”] / 这也是一个人 / Zhe ye shi yi ge ren, in [The Collected works of Ye Shengtao] / 叶圣陶集 / *Ye Shengtao ji*, Suzhou, Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, vol. 1, 1987, p. 99-100 *passim*.
20. SHIH Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, California U. P., 2001, p. 321.
21. MU Shiyong 穆时英, “Craven A”, in [Holy Virgin’s Love] / 处女的感情, MU Shiyong (ed.), Hangzhou, Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2004 [1933], p. 33-34.
22. SHIH, *The Lure of the Modern...*, *op. cit.*, p. 321.
23. MU Shiyong 穆时英, [“The Platinum Statue”] / 白金的女体塑像, in [Holy Virgin’s Love] / 处女的感情, MU Shiyong (ed.), Hangzhou, Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2004 [1934], p. 82-83.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

25. On the figure and the theme of the modern girl see SANG Tze Lan D., “The Modern Girl in Modern Chinese Literature”, in *A Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, ZHANG Yingjin (ed.), Malden, John Wiley & Sons, 2016, p. 411-423.
26. SHIH, *The Lure of the Modern...*, *op.cit.*, p. 319.
27. This term, similarly to Yan Jiayan’s widely accepted definition (“social analysis school” / 社会剖析派 / *Shehui pouxi pai*), defines a good number of writers who were similarly committed to a critically-oriented writing approach in 1920s and 1930s in China.
28. SHIH, *The Lure of the Modern...*, *op. cit.*, p. 319-20.
29. A negative interpretation of the short story, in terms of paternalism and almost misogyny, has been given by YUE Ming-Bao, “Gendering the Origins of Modern Chinese Fiction”, in *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*, LU Tonglin (ed.), Albany, State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 47-66.
30. ZHU Ping, *Gender and Subjectivities in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Culture*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 158.
31. KANG Xiaofei, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005.
32. MU Shiyong 穆时英, [“The Man Who Was Treated as a Plaything”] / 被当作消遣品的男人, in [Tomb] / 公墓, MU Shiyong (ed.), Tianjin, Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2005 [1931], p. 2.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.
34. ZHANG, “The Fiction of Living Beings. Man and Animal in the Work of Mo Yan”, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
35. GOLDBLATT Howard, *Xiao Hong*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1976; LIU Lydia, “The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: Manchuria in Xiao Hong’s *Field of life and Death*”, in ZITO Angela and BARLOW Tani (eds.), *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, Chicago U. P., 1994, p. 157-78.
36. *Ibid.*, LIU, “The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse...”, p. 165.
37. The page number after each quotation refers to XIAO Hong, *The Field of Life and Death* / 生死场 / *Shengsi chang*, in *Xiao Hong quanji* 萧红全集 (*Complete Works*), vol. I, Ha’erbin, Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, 2011 [1935].
38. HAN Song 韩松, [“The Guide to the Hunting for Women”] / 美女狩猎指南, in [The Tomb of Universe] / 宇宙墓碑, Shanghai, Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2014, p. 275-373.
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40. MOORE Lisa Jean, CASPER Monica J., *The Body. Social and Cultural Dissections*, London, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 190.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
42. HANSON Clare, “The Maternal Body”, in *The Cambridge Companion...*, HILLMAN David and MAUDE Ulrika (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 96.
43. ROU Shi 柔石, [“A Mother Slave”] / 为奴隶的母亲, in [February] / 二月, Hangzhou, Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe 2005 [1930], p. 271-2.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
46. YUE, “Gendering the Origins of Modern Chinese Fiction”, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
47. XIAO, *Shengsi chang*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
48. XIAO Hong, [“The Abandoned Child”] / 弃儿, in [The Complete Works of Xiao Hong] / 萧红全集, Ha’erbin, Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, vol. 4, 2011 [1933], p. 133.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

54. ZHANG Ailing 张爱玲, [Little Reunions] / 小团圆, Beijing, Zuoja chubanshe, 2009, p. 157.
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56. CHANG Eileen, *Little Reunions*, WEIZHEN PAN Jane and MERZ Martin (trans.), New York, New York Review of Books, 2018, p. 173-4.
57. MA Jian 马建, *The Dark Road* / 阴之道, Taipei, Taichen wenhua, 2012, p. 333-4.
58. MA Jian, *The Dark Road*, DREW Flora (trans.), London, Vintage Books, 2014, p. 358-9.
59. MA, *The Dark Road* / 阴之道, *op. cit.*, p. 333-4.
60. MA Jian 马建, [Land of Flesh] / 肉之土, Taipei, Taichen wenhua, 2010.
61. The page number after each quotation refers to LING Chen, "A Story of Titan", *Pathlight*, MARTINSEN Joel (trans.), (Spring 2013), p. 323-63.
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63. HANSON, "The Maternal Body", *op. cit.*, p. 98.
64. LU Ling 路翎, ["Hungry Guo Su'e"] / 饥饿的郭素娥, in [Selected Works] / 路翎文集, LU Ling (ed.), III vol., Hefei, Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1995, p. 27.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
67. LIN Bai, "The Time of Cat's Passion", *Renditions*, TUFT Bryna (trans.), n° 79, Spring 2013, p. 104.
68. LIN Bai 林白, [The Time of Cat's Passion] / 激情的猫时代, Tianjin, Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2001, p. 238.
69. LU Tonglin, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*, Stanford, Stanford U. P., 1995, p. 71.
70. DENTON Kirk A., "Lu Ling's Literary Art: Myth and Symbol in 'Hungry Guo Su'e'", *Modern Chinese Literature* (2:2), 1986, p. 202.
71. LU, ["Hungry Guo Su'e"] / 饥饿的郭苏俄, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
72. HAN, ["The Guide to the Hunting for Women"] / 美女狩猎指南, *op. cit.*, p. 307.
73. HAN, ["The Guide to the Hunting for Women"] / 美女狩猎指南, *op. cit.*, p. 330.
74. RONG Cai, *The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Honolulu, Hawai'i U. P., 2004, p. 219.
75. ZHU, *Gender and Subjectivities in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
76. XIN Yang, "Configuring Female Sickness and Recovering: Chen Ran and Annie Baobei," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 23:1, Spring 2011, p. 170.
77. MAN Eva Kit Wah, *Bodies in China. Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, Hong Kong, The Chinese U. P., 2016, p. 142.
78. Quoting Richardson, Alber and Heinze state: "Unnatural narratives violate the 'mimetic contract' that had governed conventional fiction for centuries' as well as the 'established boundaries of realism'", *Unnatural narratives - Unnatural Narratology*, Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter, 2011, p. 4.
79. HON Lai-chu, *The Kite Family*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong U. P., 2015.
80. HON Lai-chu, [The Kite Family] / 风筝家族, Taipei, Lianhe wenxue chubanshe, 2008, p. 40-41.
81. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
82. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

AUTHOR

NICOLETTA PESARO

Nicoletta Pesaro is Associate professor of Chinese language and literature at Ca' Foscari University Venice. Her research interests include modern Chinese literature, narrative studies and translation studies. She wrote several articles on Chinese literature and translated various works. She recently co-edited *Littérature chinoise et globalisation: enjeux linguistiques, traductologiques et génériques* (2017) and co-authored a book on modern Chinese fiction *Narrativa cinese del Novecento. Autori, opere, correnti* (2019). She is chief editor of the book series *Translating Wor(l)ds*.