The Nietzschean Eternal Return
in Hong Ying’s Novels

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中文摘要：虹影小说中的永恒回归。本文应用尼采的“永恒回归”理论，
以及德勒兹德“重复与差异”观念，来讨论旅英女作家虹影得到最高评价的三
部小说：1997年的《饥饿的女儿》，1999年的《K》和2003年的《孔雀的叫喊》。
文章分析个人与政治和历史之间不可分割的关系，解释虹影的小说中历史永无
休止的循环。受循环压抑的女性，也能通过这种循环得到解放，从历史中超越
出来。

The concept of eternal return is one of the most widely circulated among all
philosophical thoughts. Developed in the modern age by Friedrich Nietzsche, and
the central axiom to his writings, it is premised on a limited universe and its finite
amount of matter, with an infinite amount of time, which leads to the eternal
recurrence of the same state through a cyclical pattern.[1] Inspired by Heinrich
Heine, who speculated that one day there would be a person born with the same
thought processes as he himself, Nietzsche formulated his theory in The Gay
Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra. It would, as he argues, require a sincere Amor
Fati, or love of fate, to endure and wish for the eternal recurrence of all events—
and the pleasure and pain brought by them—exactly as they occurred. In Thus
Spoke Zarathustra 3. 2 (“Of the Vision and the Riddle”), Nietzsche confronts the
inner demon, leading to the self-awakening that man’s courage enables him to
destroy any pain (177); in doing so, he affirms the heroism of the superman, who is
immune to failure in transcending the cycles.

Nietzsche’s idea has been criticized and disproved many times, one example being Walter Kaufmann who refutes the claim that a finite number of states must repeat within infinite time.\[^2\] It is Gilles Deleuze who gives a new interpretation to Nietzsche’s concept by distinguishing three models of time. First, there is cyclical time, or mythical and seasonal time, with such examples as the sun rising daily, the transition from spring to summer, or the elements of tragedy, all governed by external laws (1968: 70-9). Repetition is solely concerned with habit, and time is made sense of as a continually living present. Second, there is linear time, associated with Kant who, in the Critique of Pure Reason, proposes it as a form imposed upon sensory experience, in which events are placed. Nothing returns, but there is an active process of synthesis, which gives meaning to the past (ibid, 81). The final model of time relates the concepts of repetition and difference to each other—Deleuze argues that if difference is the essence of all beings, then it is only when beings are repeated as something other that their disparateness is preserved. Consequently, the eternal return is the repetition of that which differs-from-itself, or in Nietzsche’s terminology, of those beings whose being is becoming: “The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many ...” (ibid, 126) As such, “Difference inhabits repetition,” (Ibid, 76) and the eternal return becomes the time of the future.

Much less attention has been drawn to Nietzsche’s remarks on women, though there are not a few of them. In his Beyond Good and Evil (Random House, 1966), for instance, he claims that a woman’s “prudence and art” consist in “grace, play and lightness,” and they should harbour the highest concern for “appearance and beauty” (163). When a female “unlearns her fear of man,” she surrenders her most womanly instincts (ibid, 199), and there has been much “stupidity” in “the emancipation of woman” since the French Revolution (200). The above might lead one to believe that he is misogynist, but Derrida suggests that the plurality of Nietzsche’s styles eschew adopting stable identities or positing fixed essences (Ansell-Pearson, 33); as such, it celebrates woman as a metaphor for representing the creative forces of life (37). Similarly, both Sarah Kofman (1998) and Kathleen Higgins (1998) referring to the multiplicity of women in Nietzsche’s texts, argue that he indeed refuses to essentialize women, but rather affirms the feminine and gender complexity in his apparent misogyny.

As Jerry Aline Flieger describes, the male realm of Deleuzian criticism might
make his name and feminism sound like an "odd couple" (39), but given Deleuze’s privileging of difference and "becoming," it is not surprising that he makes "becoming-woman" the centre of his feminist criticism. Though it is only understandable that women tend to struggle for "their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity," in short, a "subject of enunciation" (Deleuze 1987, 276), it is equally dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject (Flieger, 40). Flieger emphasizes that Deleuze forms no clear-cut distinction between sexes, as becoming is "not a question of interaction between subjects, but of multiple assemblages" (Deleuze 1987: 242; also Flieger, 42-3); though the history of feminism has struggled for a "becoming-ourselves," "becoming-women" does not aim at "the emancipation of a homogeneous collectivity, but tensile transformation and transgression of identity." (Flieger, 44)

**Chinese History, Chinese Women, Woman Writer**

Chinese history has traditionally been conceptualized as cyclical patterns that comprise the rise and fall of dynasties. In a dynastic cycle, a new dynasty is founded by a morally upright founder who rules under the mandate of heaven, which gradually builds up to a prosperous, golden age; it becomes morally corrupt and unstable over time, as reflected in natural disasters, rebellions and foreign invasions, and eventually becomes so weak that it is overthrown and replaced by a new dynasty. Although the cycle can readily be applied to a number of major empires and dominant societies in the world, such a framework – conveniently used by both Chinese and Westerners – when contrasted with the largely linear view of Western history and coupled with the dichotomization of Western and Chinese literary forms, has somehow served to justify demeaning remarks on Chinese civilization, and even accusations of its lack of progress and its regressive nature.

It is surprising that the eternal return has seldom been used as a conceptual framework in the study of such issues as history, politics and feminism in contemporary Chinese literature, though this idea sounds interesting, and motifs of recurrences are certainly not lacking in the works of writers like Hong Ying. One of the most controversial but also most prolific and most popular contemporary writers in Mainland China, Hong Ying has won multiple literary prizes over the years, and has had her works translated into various languages. Her works follow a long literary tradition in China, where women's struggle against oppression is emblematic of a nation's struggle for liberation (Larson, 1998; Hood, 169);
moreover, her personal revelation, commonly appearing at the close of her work, asserts the importance of the individual voice to China’s reform. The author describes writing novels, especially those with real socio-historical backgrounds, as a very tough task; many can barely stand the tedious research process, which explains why not a few female writers have passed the “grand settings, grand horizons, and grand atmospheres” over to men, and content themselves with what is known as conventional “feminine writing” as an easy way out.

This essay will adopt the conceptual framework of the eternal return, including the paradoxical ideas of repetition and difference, to explore the feminist struggles in three of Hong Ying’s works that have been translated into English, in a chronological manner. Liu Dawen contends that the author has very rarely drawn upon her life experience, but has instead made use of historical episodes to set up a strange and mysterious atmosphere to reveal the mental worlds of her protagonists (245). However, I will demonstrate below how the personal intersects with the political and the historical to such an extent that the cyclical pattern of history does not suppress the female, but rather serves to articulate the theme of female emancipation. Particular emphasis is placed on the female body, its sensations, its paradoxical role in the contemporary art scene, and its role in Taoism and Buddhism. The Yangtze River, which forms the major setting and the central and recurring symbol in all of her novels, will also be explored.

**Daughter of the River: The Return of Disaster**

In *Daughter of the River* (1997), the author-narrator describes herself as the sixth and youngest daughter of a family living in a Chongqing slum by the Yangtze River. Her life as a misfit at home and at school is intertwined with vivid details of the harsh lives of the slum dwellers in China both before and after her birth. The scenes of people drowning in the River, dying of starvation, sharing crowded living quarters, and doing dehumanizing work for a pittance are set against a background of political oppression.

As her eighteenth birthday approaches the narrator resolves to unravel the secrets that have made her an outsider in her own family; at the same time she develops a crush on her history teacher who awakens her sexually. She learns that she is the illegitimate child of her mother, conceived out of wedlock during the great famine in the early 1960s, with the man who has been stalking her for some months. Soon afterward, fearing persecution for what he has committed, the history teacher kills
himself. Left pregnant with his child the narrator has an abortion, then failing her examinations, leaves home and escapes to a life of dancing, drinking and partying. She comes across a poem one night that rekindles her faith in love, and makes her determined to become a writer. Her absence from home also rekindles a sense of longing for her family, especially her mother, and the novel ends with a strong sense of hope for a better China, as well as the narrator's keen feeling of nostalgia for her childhood.

Richard King (2000) remarks that *Daughter of the River* is different from most autobiographical Chinese writings recently published in the West, as it concentrates on the experiences of the author-narrator rather than on the history of the nation (94). King further adds that it is the "dysfunctional family," not the "mismanaged state," that is "the cause of her misery," and that "all three men who might have guided and supported her – her two fathers and her lover – fail to do so." (94-5) Zhou Shandan (2004) nonetheless argues that the book opens up a new, creative way of writing female autobiographies; rather than focusing on extremely personal experiences and desires like others do, Hong Ying articulates a unique, personal story, which at the same time reveals the peculiarities of her place and time. Zhou adds that the theme of hunger includes the desire for food, for love and for spiritual gratification. This hunger is both "personal" and "social," closely tied with the narrator's identity, her life and her nation, and creating a mechanism that fuels her quest of identity and her struggle against her difficult circumstances.

As the author-narrator says, "Hunger was my embryonic education," (41) because the great famine struck China in 1959, 1960 and 1961, and ended only just before she was born. There are long, descriptive passages of her suffering. The desire – even obsession – to grow up "independent" so as to be able to eat meat every night, therefore, is not merely a physiological wish, but is also symbolic of her wish for independence as a woman. The description alerts the reader to the body that feels the sensation of hunger and, as such, the role of the body is again central to the theme of female emancipation.

If the author-narrator's struggle for independence constitutes the main journey of the autobiographical novel, the stories of her mother and sister, which are gleaned through her eyes, are background comparisons. Her mother came to Chongqing in order to escape the fate of an arranged marriage back in the early 1940s, as "a fetching little country girl" who "refused to knuckle under even when she was being whipped, never begging for mercy, and causing the foreman a great loss of face."
She later escapes from her abusive first husband, the headman in the local Triad, and marries her second husband. She could only find work as a coolie labourer and worked at stoking the boiler at the shipyard, yet her fierce nonconformity would lead to the affair during the great famine that resulted in the birth of the narrator. The eldest sister started dating as a student and refused to write self-criticisms (77-8); “tough and hot-tempered,” (79) to extract an agreement for a divorce, she held a knife to her husband’s throat. She like her mother is another active agent of resistance to state and social pressure.

It is not surprising that the relationships between these three women outside the family are portrayed in a more intimate light than those within the family. There is the episode in which the narrator on her eighteenth birthday buys meat-filled buns for her mother, only to have them eaten without her approval by the eldest sister. This incident is of symbolic significance. It fleshes out through the theme of hunger, the dynamics of a reality in which women must struggle to fulfil their desires both by fighting against society, and by competing among themselves.

The prominence of the body, together with the motif of hunger, is not unprecedented, considering the significant role of the body in modern and contemporary Chinese literature. Wendy Larson cites Doris Sommer, who connects Michel Foucault’s sexual body and Benedict Anderson’s national body, to find out “a metonymic association between romantic love that needs the state’s blessing and political legitimacy that needs to be founded on love.” Accordingly, Larson juxtaposes the pursuit of love and nationalism (Larson, 87). Hong Ying’s autobiographical novel, nonetheless, is a stark contrast to the Chinese literary tradition, as the body is not appropriated by nationalist discourse, but is the site where struggles are forged by women and for women. As if expressing the fear of being effaced, as is the case in some modern Chinese literary works, the body yearns to remain visible.

The reclaiming of the female body is the most remarkable in the abortion episode near the end of the novel, in which abortion is portrayed as an isolating experience: the narrator has to hide her name, her age, as well as her real address (254). For other women at the clinic, their men might have become “emotionally peripheralized,” but they are restored to social and interpersonal units, as evidenced by their presence with the women (256); but in the narrator’s case, the father of her unborn child is dead, and hence not only peripheralized, but effaced. The clinic is representative of the state. “No one cares whether you want your child or not; for
the sake of population reduction, the more abortions the better.” Yet at the same
time, they “couldn’t afford to give up time-honored moral standards, and had to
humiliate publicly sex outside of marriage.” (256) As the “standard belittling
comment” goes: “First comes the pleasure, then the pain, so stop shouting!” The
description of abortion indicates that the women are undergoing severe punishment
for violating the chastity of their bodies: “A scream like that of a slaughtered pig
tore into the room. You’d have thought they were butchering people alive in there.”
(256) When it comes to the narrator, the experience is also a cruel experience of
taking away her own flesh, too painful to be described in mere words:

.... But just as my legs moved, something cold and sharp was rammed up my vagina, and a
piercing scream tore from my body. My hair was wet with tears. After the scream died out, I
clenched my teeth and held onto the table with all my might.

.... Pain, swelling, and paralysis all mixed together made it feel as if all my organs were
being ripped from my body, chopped into tiny pieces, then crammed back into me; no amount
of howling and shrieking could make this tearing of flesh go away. (258-9)

Nonetheless, after a few days she goes to a bathhouse for a shower, an experience
that she describes as “satisfying,” like having nutritious food served to her (261). Moreover, the abortion also signifies a juncture in her life. She is now able to
command and control her body: “I couldn’t find the words to describe my peace of
mind as the water ran down my body, which looked beautiful to me, even though I
was skin and bones.” (261) The shower is furthermore a form of baptism: “The
water running over my body seemed to wash away all the bad memories and carry
them down the drain all the way to the Yangtze.” (261)

Zhou Shandan contends that if hunger is the central image, then her eighteenth
year becomes the central time, from which the narrative intertwines childhood and
adolescence. Her eighteenth year, around which all the major events revolve, also
embodies a cyclical structure instead of a linear structure following the
conventional time scheme of narration. This structure is closely related to the River,
after which the novel earns its English title. In the novel, the River means a number
of things. It is a source of life and a symbol of rejuvenation, in spite of the countless
deaths caused by it:

We riverbank dwellers have a special attachment to the River. People who come only to visit
the River enjoy it for a moment, then put it out of their minds as soon as they return and walk off, laughing at how we “foolishly” skim stones on the surface. A river, they say, is fine to look at, but that’s all. Just think of the time you waste trying to cross it, and when a boat capsizes, the river becomes a killer.

But the river flows through our hearts, it’s with us from the day we’re born. If we stop to rest on a hill, we turn to look back at the river, which invigorates us and keeps us going. (136)

It also serves as a symbol of love, which is significant to the narrator: since childhood, she has met no married person who is “truly happy,” and therefore she does not want marriage (192). She initially believes that the history teacher could offer it to her, and visualizes her lovemaking in ecstatic terms. Their love turns out to be illusory, as the teacher was only looking for “physical stimulation to ease his suffering...some easily obtained carnal gratification from his student,” and indeed, she later realizes, both of them are “selfish people who never loved each other.” (240) The River then becomes more ambiguous as it does not only signify passion, but serves as a carrier of diary pages about the history teacher and other bad memories about him before it flows to the underworld (244).

Apart from symbolizing destruction and rejuvenation, passion and death, the River clearly serves as a symbol of continuity, reconciling turbulence with stability, change with permanence:

The river was the same, so were the boats, the rolling hills and the people, whose pale faces had a mildewy cast. A new generation of labourers took over from the old, and life didn’t change one bit.

I heard a voice inside me say: You must turn your back on all that. I spent my days with my face buried in books, all kinds of books, or writing poems and stories. (265)

The juxtaposition of the new generations against the old river becomes a source of fear to the narrator, as it suggests that the drudgeries of her life will be repeated. Earlier, on finding herself isolated by her brothers and sisters, she had rushed to an abandoned air-raid shelter. The Nationalists were said to have buried explosives there, and she imagined that a bomb would go off at that very moment so that she would not have to suffer any more (237). The river therefore serves as the background to the repetitious cycles of the author-narrator’s life, which cannot be transcended, but merely endured. Near the end, she describes her partying life, and
how she came across a mimeographed poem one night after recovering from a hangover. She feels as if it had been written for her, and for all the times she has managed to escape from disasters (267). Yet the poem, contained in the book, suggests otherwise:

Before the disaster struck, we all were children,  
only later did we learn how to speak about it –  
the clamour gasping, like fish bones in the throat.

The knocker trembles at our hammerings,  
we are searching the rubble for those lost ears,  
and howling our thanks, with no one left to hear.

Only after it passed did we feel the terror:  
from wounds that did not bleed, lines emerge  
for yet another scene of escape, acted out.

Under flashing lights. If we knew how we survived,  
by what chance, we would stop shouting, and return  
willingly to that moment when the disaster struck. (267)

Entitled “A Life Whereby One Cannot Scream”, the poem expresses a yearning to return to the scene of disaster and to experience it again, as if it will be survived in a better way the next round. Particularly noteworthy are the run-on lines of the last stanza that reinforce the cyclical pattern, as much as they resemble the flow of the Yangtze River.

At the very end of the novel, the narrator zigzags from the political back to the personal and visualizes herself as a child, hence bringing in a scenario from the earlier part of the work (159). The invocation of the childhood scene, set against the River, is not abrupt at all. As Hong Ying confesses, whenever life is harsh on her, she invokes her memories of the River, claiming that such memories have enabled her to brave and tackle whatever difficulties in her life (Hong 2004b: 214).

The beginning and the end are therefore brought together, as if history has come in full circle; the ending is not overtly optimistic, but these repetitions do spell out a direction by pointing to the future: like the child who does not know the way but
keeps running home, the adult harbours the same attitude as she is still struggling for her life and for her nation.

**K: The Return of Lost Love**

Hong Ying’s most controversial novel, *K: The Art of Love* (1999), is stripped of any autobiographical elements, and indeed set in an era remote from the author’s, in 1935. It tells the tragic story of a woman writer Lin and Julian Bell, son of Venessa Bell and niece of Virginia Woolf, who has taken up a lectureship at Wuhan University in China. While he is hungry for romance in his new environment, and takes the initiative to seduce Lin, it is she who invites him to her father’s house in Beijing, where she schools him in the Taoist art of love. The experience turns what is a casual affair into a serious romance.

Lin’s husband later discovers the affair, and Julian is forced to leave China. Julian subsequently takes part in the Spanish Civil War and is eventually killed. Following his departure, Lin had attempted suicide time and again hoping this would bring Bell back to her, and she finally dies. As the novel comes to an end, Bell’s ghost manages to find its way to Lin’s deathbed, and the two, as the narrator suggests, are finally united.

Although the novel is based on the affair between Ling Shuhua and Julian Bell, which Hong Ying discovered from several sources, such as the correspondence between Bell and his mother, in Hong Ying’s foreword to the novel she claims that her aim was “to write a novel not a biography,” and it was her “prerogative as a novelist” that she had used her imagination to develop her story from its historical basis, instead of providing “a factual account of the lives of the two lovers.” (Hong Ying, 9) Despite these divergences from facts, Ling’s daughter Chen Xiaoying condemned the book for its “pornography,” and filed a lawsuit in China against Hong Ying, charging her with “defamation of the dead” (Jacobson 2003; Wang 2003).\(^7\) Hong Ying was required to make amendments to the book, including the title, the settings and historical background, the female protagonist’s name and social background, before she was able to have the book published in Chinese (Wang 2003).\(^8\)

In one of her essays, Hong Ying remarks that the significance and attraction of sex rely not so much on its offer of “liberation” as on its integration with “love.” Her book aims to alert the reader to the fact that the Chinese are experts in the art of sex, but that the three hundred years of state control during the Qing Dynasty had
oppressed the people with its false moral codes and obliterated this expertise. For this reason she was prompted to advocate sexual practices in order to restore a state of good health – both sexual and mental – to the Chinese, like it had been before the seventeenth century (Hong 1997b: 18-19).

Intertwined with sexuality is the theme of female emancipation, to which it serves as a tool in the book just as it does in Hong Ying’s previous works. Critics have readily identified the clear message of the novel, which is that “sex is female-centred” (Pang 2003), and “woman is not by nature passive in sex.” (Laurence, 29) Nonetheless, the author does not simply aim to depict the “sexual needs and rights” of women (Hong Ying 2004: 206), or to portray a sexually liberated woman, but also a highly complicated and multi-faceted female character. In the foreword, Hong Ying claims that “each and every one of us is an individual made up of a mass of contradictions,” just like Lin, who is “a modern intellectual and also “a mysterious Oriental woman” and “an expert in the Taoist Art of Love”. Hence her novel aims to dispel stereotypes, which “are not only foolish but can actually prove a snare for those who propagate them.” (10)

Laurence does not consider Hong Ying successful in her task in dispelling such stereotypes, contending that the bed becomes the “dominant, surrealist image,” as it “seemed to have expanded to fill the universe, to be actually moving in space,” but what happens out of bed, or in the minds and cultures of the protagonists remain “opaque,” which means that the author has failed in developing the inner life of the characters (29). Laurence also accuses Hong Ying of giving “a pat treatment of East-West romance,” arguing that she reduces Lin to “a stereotype seductress” and “a witch in bed,” practicing her Taoist art of love upon the hapless Englishman, and making him moan about becoming a “sex toy.” (Laurence: 31)

Like Hong Ying’s previous protagonists, the estrangement of Lin the protagonist renders her a social misfit and makes her stand out more as an agent that resists the male domination of that patriarchal society; moreover, the differences between different generations – between mother and daughter – are subtly revealed. In a story which she sends to Bell, she reveals that she is the daughter of an imperial envoy and his fourth concubine, and as a result she can never feel at home in her family (94-5). The “hand-written version of the Jade Chamber Classic, the legendary ‘art of Love,’” that has been secretly kept by her mother, and highly prized by book collectors, was the weapon with which her mother had earned her father’s affection (113). The book had enabled her mother to ensnare her father, but
she had remained subordinate to his authority; for Lin the book had enabled her to use sex for her own wellbeing, as well as for cultivating a passionate and fruitful relationship with a man outside her marriage. As Lin herself states, “the art of love is a form of mutual nourishment, the joining of yin and yang” from which both parties benefit (116), and the harmonizing within the woman makes it a “women-centred sexology” (118).

What makes the character more complicated is that Lin is “raised as a modern woman” and educated at a girls’ boarding school in the British concession in Tianjin, though she also practices meditation and other Taoist self-cultivation methods (114). The latter enables her to transverse both worlds, though also becoming an aspect of her personality that alienates her from her husband, who worships “progress” and despises Taoist superstitions, considering them “a symbol of the most degenerate and reactionary aspects of Chinese feudal culture,” and becomes ill for weeks after Lin has tried to practice the Taoist art of love on him (115). Essentially “two people in one body,” both “a woman of letters with a European-style education” and “a traditionalist adept in an art of life passed down to her by her parents and grandparents” (116), Lin remains an “outcast in her own country” (56). Yet being an outcast points to the very fact that she is unconfined by either cultural tradition, and all the more liberated because of it.

Bell’s impressions of Lin are reflected in his relationship with her, which can never be locked up in stasis. In his previous relationships, the “reality of sex” has always “killed the mystery of romance,” and “the turbulence of his feelings” had lasted only until he had slept with a woman; moreover, “cool-headed” as he is, he has always been able to “manage things discreetly” (64). Lin captures him not only with her erotic art but also with her love. Indeed, he cannot control himself, but keeps being drawn back to her after he has left her, as he admits, not because of sex, but because of “love.” (204) Moreover, even this love cannot strictly be categorized, or even described in mere words.

The ghost of Bell returns to Lin’s deathbed, so that the two are united. During their sexual reunion, the harmony of yin and yang is mentioned again, and their sexual orgasm is set against the Yangtze, “The Great River”:

She closed her eyes in joy. He was beside her. Her clothes fell from her, and her nipples hardened and ached at the touch of his cold fingers. She raised her arms to embrace him, and her lips parted to meet his kiss. Julian embraced her tightly and entered her. Their bodies were
bathed in sweat, glued together. They were locked in the climax of their mutual love, yin and yang revolving one around the other, the glittering Great River surging about them. (277)

The reunion of the couple is described in terms of physical, bodily terms, meaning that the emphasis on the body continues on in this novel.

The author, accused of defamation of the dead, defended herself by claiming that the heroine of her book is not Ling Shuhua, but Lin, and the latter is rather “a combination of several models.” (Jacobson 2003) Interestingly enough, the author’s disclaimer might well provide an explanation for the inconsistency in Lin’s character, which is why a strong character would want to take her life. Indeed, her behaviour is deemed “stupidity” by Bell, hence inconsistent with her personality even within the text (196). If Lin is based on several models, hence made up of different personality traits as identified previously, then the reader is less inclined to treat her as a real human being; instead, we are urged to probe the significance of her actions within the wider social context.

**Peacock Cries: The Return of Ruined Beauty**

*Peacock Cries* (2003) takes the reader back to the contemporary. Inspired by a Yuan play *Du Liu Cui*, the setting is the controversial Three Gorges Dam Project on the Yangtze River which started in 1994. Liu Cui, a genetic engineer at a research institute in Beijing, receives a special gift of a bottle of French perfume from her husband, director of a development company at the Three Gorges. As her mother explains, the perfume suggests that her husband is asking Liu if she has lost her femininity and no longer wishes to be his wife. Realizing her marriage is facing a crisis Liu travels to the Three Gorges where she finds out the impact of the project on the local population: those being poorly compensated would have to move to higher ground where they will not be able to afford houses and where schools and work are not guaranteed; there are other problems, such as the embezzlement of funds for new rural housing, the theft of money designed to ease the suffering of the poor, and the brutality of the police.

During her trip Liu visits an old friend of her mother’s, Aunt Chen, and makes an important discovery about her birth at the site of the Three Gorges: she was born on the same day as Aunt Chen’s son, Yueming; moreover, a monk and a prostitute were executed on that same day for adultery, though the case had been trumped up by Liu’s father, who was then the county governor and eager to find a scapegoat in his
campaign against prostitutes. Aunt Chen’s husband, a military officer under Liu, was reluctant to carry out the orders to execute the monk and prostitute, and was therefore denounced. Aunt Chen believes that her son, who was born on that fateful day, is the reincarnation of the prostitute Red Lotus, who was grateful for her compassion and had turned into her son to repay her for her kindness. As the plot unfolds, Liu learns that her father was later persecuted and committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution, and her mother was one of the many who had written to the authorities against him. This knowledge convinces Liu that she is the reincarnation of the monk who had witnessed the fate of the mastermind behind the killing of the innocent. At the end, the souls of Red Lotus and the priest bring together Liu and Yueming, and Liu decides to join him in his protest against the dam, despite the risk of imprisonment that it would lead to.

Paul French (2004) contends that the story describes how “grand dreams have overridden all other considerations and come to dominate and control people’s lives and actions” in contemporary China: the Three Gorges is a project “so immense that once the wheels had started rolling there was no stopping it,” so that people’s lives and the nation’s cultural heritage all become minor irritants in the name of fulfilling that dream. Likewise, Liang Yinting (2005) suggests that the author is crying for the destruction of beauty, by “the ugliness of human desires, cruelty of power struggle, and the huge abyss covered by the prosperity.” The book’s title is derived from what she calls a “horrible poem” by Wallace Stevens, one which makes her skin creep and her heart thump: the crying of the peacock, as she explains, suggests to us that beauty is easily destroyed (Hong Ying 2004b: 119). She does not intend to save the world through her novel, but she aims to “find some mental peace” in a world which is doomed to destruction (Hong Ying 2004b: 120).

While critics concur on the personal elements of the book (Shao 2003; Liang 2005), the legitimacy of this reading is further reinforced by the author’s childhood experience in the “Preface,” where she describes the days spent in her mother’s hometown of Zhong County, before she entered elementary school (ix-xxii). Her poverty there had always made her wonder and speculate what would have happened if she had spent her entire life there:

... If my mother had left me there, I would be moving higher up the mountain just like they are now, I would have to work in the fields every day just like they do; I’d probably already be making shoes for my grandchildren. (xx)
Unlike the child in K, who is yet to be conceived and born, Hong Ying is now reborn in the character Liu. As Liu, she does not have to imagine herself as a third-class citizen, but instead observes the lives of these citizens as a bystander, before becoming involved in their lives and dedicated to their cause.

The protagonist Liu is a “tomboy” according to her mother, and “not like a woman at all,” (41) and though the novel does not really solve the riddle of the perfume, her mother is probably right in surmising its message. “You shouldn’t be too accommodating before you get married,” but you “have to be accommodating after you’ve got married” because in doing so, she would give up more power to her husband, which is the “only aphrodisiac for the modern man.” (43) Later, Liu reflects on what is expected of her as the wife of the director, that she should look great both “to go up to the banqueting hall and down to the kitchen.” (255) Liu finally does not manage to get herself to enact the “ideal” wife, but she admits to herself that she wants a “home,” which is only too natural to her: “somewhere warm and loving; a home perhaps even as poor as Auntie Chen’s—small and poky and reeking of sweat;” after all, she is “one of the most ordinary women,” who only wishes that she has “someone to understand her.” (298) Her feelings are especially strong because she feels that nobody has “ever made the effort to engage with her soul,” meaning that she has “kept her inner pain carefully hidden,” and gets tormented by “the loneliness, the terrible, terrible, inescapable loneliness.” (310)

Liu, Red Lotus and even Auntie Chen are aspiring feminists. Auntie Chen and Liu’s mother became involved in the Women’s Association that tried to reform prostitutes. Moreover, both Red Lotus and Auntie Chen had run away from their home villages to escape arranged marriages. The former, despite being abducted and sold to a boatman who then sold her to a brothel, critiques conventional marriage by proudly proclaiming that prostitution was her own choice, as it enabled her to earn a living by having sex with different men instead of being tied to a man whom she does not love: “at least as a prostitute you knew why you were sleeping with a man. But if you were forced to marry someone, then you’d have to sleep with him forever—and get nothing in return.” (214) Auntie Chen is astonished by her words, but cannot deny that she had a point, although she makes the comment that it is “immoral.” (214)

Few critics have attempted the difficult task of deciphering the novel’s extraordinary ending. Liang Yinpeng contends that the book spells out the
ephemeral nature of human existence, as well as the sense of isolation borne by all people in a universe where everything is coincidental and unpredictable; all of the characters are depicted as insignificant, and they serve more as symbols than as real humans even in a fictional world. The realization that men are isolated and mortal, as Liang argues, leads Liu to dedicate her life to Yueming, whom she has known for a short time; Liang also points out that Liu is able to see her past, and this knowledge enables her to foresee the future and to be content with it, although the author chooses to leave the ending open and obscure. Bradley Winterton (2005) articulates his views of the novel in more concrete terms. He contends that in Hong Ying’s spirited account of life, “past, present and future are blended together, as are politics and mysticism, personal ambition and collective striving, plus the fate of two families”; at one of the world’s largest construction sites, things usually perceived as contraries meet, including genetics and reincarnation, deference and brutality, anger and forgiveness. Winterton further contends that after Liu and Yueming have discovered about their past lives, the narrative “appears to be toying with the possibility of a real and actual transmigration of souls,” in which Liu and Yueming imagine that they will become peacocks in that “far-off day” after two thousand years. Despite the apparent realism of the story, as well as the pragmatism of the project, the ending suggests something “almost of enlightenment.”

At first glance the Buddhist elements in the novel, including the Buddhist monk and the Water Moon Temple, owe much to the purging of Buddhism at that time, and are therefore naturally part of the story. We do not know whether this is the author’s intention or not, but these Buddhist elements, taken together with the reincarnation and enlightenment, are also pertinent as motifs of female emancipation.

The confluence of Buddhism and feminism is revealed in the novel, not only through Liu, who gives up on being the “other” to her husband to live her own life and be her own self, but through reincarnations which enable the blurring of boundaries between male and female, even to the extent of showing that masculinity and femininity are not fixed. Even though Red Lotus and Yueming are different characters, Yueming seems to contain some of the recklessness of Red Lotus in him, and Liu feels as though she is the monk Yutong who has witnessed the retribution meted out to her own father. The two are mutually attracted to each other, and support others at different points of the narrative. Considering the gender bias and the avoidance of female rebirth in Buddhism, these cross-gender


reincarnations signify the appropriation of Buddhist elements in the articulation of
gender equality. The monk, who is unjustly executed despite his innocence, is
reincarnated as Liu, a female; yet Red Lotus, considered a bad woman by social and
religious standards, is reincarnated as Yueming, a male. While the struggle of Red
Lotus, and to a lesser extent that of Aunt Chen, is carried on by Liu, and the
struggle is not completed, reincarnations allow the reader to see these struggles in a
different way. The Buddhist monk indeed takes part in the feminist struggle in Liu’s
person. Quite ironically, Red Lotus’ role as the prostitute makes her an ambiguous
feminist, and now she has turned into Yueming to take care of her beloved mother,
who in turn fights for the rights of his fellow dwellers at the Three Gorges.

The above reincarnations also suggest a cyclical pattern that, like Hong Ying’s
previous works, corresponds with a number of symbols. The opening chapter sets
the imprisonment of Liu and Yueming against the River. Liu is trapped in a room;
she is “plunged into complete darkness” and “can see absolutely nothing at all,” (25)
and it reminds her of being in her mother’s womb. Moreover, her entrapment is
reminiscent of the moment when the world came into existence, as she has to
“realize that all was one in the beginning.” (26) The feeling of primordial existence
intersects with a keen sense of destiny: at the scene of execution, where the arms
and legs of Red Lotus and the monk are spread out and tied back to back, very
similar to how Yueming and Liu are tied together in the prison cell (216-7); and as
Auntie Chen informs Liu that the old police station where she is locked up was the
place where Red Lotus and Master Yutong were locked up four decades ago just
before they were executed (231). A further instance of destiny, and of “déjà vu,”
happens when Liu looks at the precious relic Peacock Lamp for the first time:

It was as though it had all happened before. Yes, half a century ago she’d been in this same
place, looking at something beautiful, something brought here by fate, something destined to
be crushed and destroyed. (279)

Peacocks are reluctant to take flight even when approached by predators, which Liu
suspects is a comparison to herself (279); the lamp, by its mysterious association
with Liu’s past and present, also allows her to project her life towards the distant
future. As such, the Peacock Lamp becomes a placating force that unifies all times
and paradoxes in the mind of its perceiver.

The Peacock Lamp also serves as a unifier of past, present and future on the
historical level. The narrator informs the reader that it was buried with the dead during the Western Han dynasty, and unearthed only because of the construction project (279). Moreover, as its branches are decorated with cicadas, which symbolize rebirth, it also entices the reader to look to the future that is uncertain. The paradox embodied in the Peacock Lamp – unifying and yet fraught with uncertainty – is no doubt a parallel for the River. The opening episode set against the River is followed by many other references, which create a resonance that is even stronger here than in Hong Ying’s previous works.

Yueming and Liu foresee that they will become peacocks two thousand years later, which indicates not only their enlightenment, but also the possible end to the perpetual cycle of death and rebirth. Yet all of these are envisaged, not realized. The novel’s ending, which is left open, brings the turning of the karmic wheel back to the foreground. As the couple try to ignore their impending arrest, cyclical time nonetheless points to a liberated future.

By making use of the few critical resources on Hong Ying that have been documented to date, this essay has provided a close study of her major works. In her autobiography, River of the Daughter, the body emerges as the central image in its cycles of disasters; K reaffirms the body’s significance through Taoism, and the author reincarnates herself through its protagonist and the imagined child between her and her English lover that is to be conceived. Peacock Cries makes use of an ancient Chinese play and adapts it to a contemporary setting, while weaving in the issue of feminism through Buddhist reincarnations which enable the protagonists to be reborn as their opposite sexes and possibly become sexless after many years.

In all of the above works, the author never loses sight of the present, where the female body is located, and where the River, a unifier of paradoxes, is situated. Nonetheless, their endings all look to things that have yet to happen, and the last work discussed is particularly mystic and visionary in nature. All with cyclical patterns, they confirm Deleuze’s idea that “difference inhabits repetition” (1968, 76), and that the eternal return is not so much about the past or the present, as about the future. In “becoming,” the female subject thereby resists categorization as male or female, and its transgressions cannot be circumscribed.
Notes:

[1] Indeed, it has its roots in ancient Egypt, subsequently taken up by the Pythagoreans and Stoics. It therefore figured prominently in the philosophies of Heraclitus and Anaximander, but with the decline of antiquity and the spread of Christianity, it fell into disuse. The concept of cyclical patterns is also prominent in dharmic religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, where the Wheel of Life represents an endless cycle of birth, life and death, from which one seeks liberation.

[2] Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Princeton University Press, 1974, 327. “Even if there were exceedingly few things in a finite space in an infinite time, they would not have to repeat in the same configurations. Suppose there were three wheels of equal size, rotating on the same axis, one point marked on the circumference of each wheel, and these three points lined up in one straight line. If the second wheel rotated twice as fast as the first, and if the speed of the third wheel was $1/n$ of the speed of the first, the initial line-up would never recur.”

[3] Chapter Ten of Deleuze’ s *A Thousand Plateaus* introduces this notion, though the chapter bears the title “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible.”

[4] This dynastic view of Chinese history is problematic, as it suggests that there can be only one rightful sovereign under the mandate of heaven at a time, but throughout history there were many long periods of disunity with no single ruler. There were also cases when the dynasties changed with no evidence of cyclical patterns, let alone cases where the dynasty fell even though the last ruler was not all that evil.

[5] Zhou cites Chen Yan and Lin Bai in the early 1990s, *A One-Person Battle and Personal Lives*.

[6] Wendy Larson cites from Doris Sommer’ s essay “Love and Country in Latin America: An Allegorical Speculation,” in Margery Ringrose and Adam J. Learner, eds. *Reimagining the Nation*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993, 29-46.

[7] The book, which Hong has promoted as a work of feminist erotica, was published in Taiwan in 1999, in Britain in June 2002, and in the U.S. in November 2002 (Jacobson 2003). The Supreme People’ s Court in China stipulated that the reputation of the deceased and their blood relatives is protected against libel for three generations. Chen Xiaoying therefore demanded that the presses be stopped, and asked for 200,000 yuan (USD 24,000) and a public apology from Hong Ying for slandering her parents in the guise of fiction; on December 3, the court ruled that Hong Ying had “[violated] the reputation of the plaintiff’s ancestors,” and ordered Hong Ying to pay 140,000 yuan (USD 17,000-18,000) to Chen Xiaoying for both “spiritual consolation” and financial damages (Laurence: 29; see also Jacobson).

[8] Its Chinese version is entitled *Yingguo qingren* (The English lover), and was published by Qunfeng wenyi chubanshe in October 2003.

[9] Laurence however does not specify whether it is the bed in Lin’ s room in Beijing, the one in Western Hills Hot-Spring Inn, or the opium room, though the non-specificity probably indicates that it includes all three of them.

[10] Ling Shuhua is also the daughter of the fourth concubine. Hong Ying seems to have capitalized on this fact to render the life of Lin more dramatic and her position more isolated by revealing this in Lin’ s short story, and how it touches Bell (94-5).

[11] Ye Dehui, the book collector, published his own collection called *The Chinese Art of Love* and was executed by the communists (114).
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