Identity of Homosexual Consciousness in the Works of Lu Yin

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Lu Yin 庐隐 (1898-1934) was a leading “new woman”, and she had scaled the heights of her writing profession in mid-Republican China. In her short 36-year life, she published over 200 works in all, including novels, essays, proses and travelogues. As the first May Fourth female writer who touched upon the theme of homosexuality and depicted a lesbian story without reservation, Lu Yin created a short story “The Diary of Lishi” in which she narrated the love between Lishi and her same-sex partner Yuanqing; but this finally ended in tragedy, which implied Lu Yin’s deconstruction of binary gender order. Meanwhile, this paper distinguishes “Old Friends on the Seashore” from lesbian or quasi-lesbian stories and argued that this fiction was more in terms of female same-sex camaraderie instead of lesbian love.

Keywords: Lu Yin, homosexual consciousness, “Old Friends on the Seashore”, “The Diary of Lishi”

Introduction

In the May Fourth era, the theme of sexual consciousness could no longer be subservient to traditional moral rules and existed in accordance with specific modern values in terms of gender issues. Some mainstream magazines published many articles about sexual morality at that time for the sake of reconstituting “the meaning of sexual relations in Chinese culture” (Larson, 1998, p. 88). In 1925, for example, Lady’s Journal translated and published an essay written by Furuya Toyoko on love between women in modern schools. The author of this article argued that this kind of love between girls in schools or in other institutions was actually due to freedom from traditional moral rules of the family, which was non-physical and pure (Furuya, 1925, pp. 1064-1069). In fact, love in such circumstances was “an intimation of heterosexual relations”, with the more “feminine” women attracted to the more “masculine” women in normal life (Larson, 1998, p. 89). As a result, he thought that the romance between women was just based upon spiritual needs rather than homosexuality between men (Furuya, 1925, pp. 1064-1069).

Nevertheless, the Republican woman writer Lu Yin 庐隐 (1898-1934) indeed conveyed the concept of “homosexuality” in her novel and distinguished it from the concept of friendship between girls. Additionally, Wang maintains that Lu Yin tentatively probes the subject of lesbianism in some of her works (“Old Friends on the Seashore” and “The Diary of Lishi”) (Wang, 2009, p. 56). However, in fact, the plot of “Old Friends” should be distanced from “homosexuality”, and this paper will discuss these two novels respectively from different angles and explain them in detail so as to illustrate Lu Yin’s real identity in terms of homosexual consciousness.

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Female Same-Sex Camaraderie

Intimate female-female relationships in Lu Yin’s early fiction, such as “Old Friends on the Seashore” (Haibin guren 海滨故人, 1923), did not appear in traditional Chinese literature. Yet, unlike “The Diary of Lishi” (Lishi de riji 丽石的日记, 1923)—Lu Yin’s lesbian or quasi-lesbian story, “Old Friends on the Seashore” is more about female same-sex camaraderie in which Lu Yin constructs a utopian women’s nation without physical desire.

In ancient China, female same-sex bonding was totally negated in reality and was concealed by literati in their creations at the time, which is because from an androcentric point of view, female life without male involvement is of no significance (Li, 1998, p. 57). Along with the appearance of a new-style middle schools for girls in particular, intimate relationships between two or several girls became regular and the phenomena of “making friends” (Nao pengyou 闹朋友) (Lu, 1993, p. 535) or “artificial couples” (Jia fuqi 假夫妻) (Ibid., p. 535) prevailed in schools. Some critics believed that girls at this age were reaching the point of sexual maturity and needed emotional satisfaction for solace, and thus same-sex love happened (Kai, 1925, p. 728). Indeed, “homosexuality” possibly existed in girls’ schools or in other institutions where every day women studied and lived together in a way that was unmediated by kin relationships and should be taken for granted. Therefore, specific women’s friendships were liable to be misunderstood as romantic love.

In terms of “Old Friends on the Seashore”, created in accordance with Lu Yin’s experience at Beijing Women’s Normal College, it describes a series of stories about Lusha and four other girl students focusing on their in-between sincere friendships. It was due to the narrative about girls’ school life that contributed to a positive reception amongst young female readers.

This short story, or rather novelette “Old Friends on the Seashore”, is Lu Yin’s most well-known literary work, in which there are five female companions-teacher training college classmates: Lusha, Lingyu, Yunqing, Zongying and Lianshang. The protagonist, Lusha, is the most extroverted of all and actually bears some of Lu Yin’s personality as well as sharing her family background. In addition, she always spends holidays with her several friends and they meet at a seaside hotel. As for the other four girls, Lingyu is emotional and meticulous while Yunqing is more rational and thus they are close friends. Lianshang seems popular, and Zongying is a pretty girl but behaves very meanly to others (Lu, 1983, p. 25). They take lectures together, play games together and chat together and always hold hands to sing songs after class. Sometimes they “sit around the stove in a room and talk about everything without disguise” (Ibid., p. 34) and at night they “put their beds together” (Ibid., p. 34) and chat all the time. It can be said that these five girls are together from morning to night, as Sister Du, Miss Zhang and Miss Li in another novel, Irony Ring (Xiangya jiezhi 象牙戒指, 1930), are best friends and get along with each other just like sisters.

Nevertheless, we should be aware that this bonding relationship between several girls is more of a utopia friendship with mutual trust existing in their minds due to spending too much time together rather than same-sex love (Tongxing ai 同性爱) or homosexuality. First of all, they constitute a women’s nation where they expel the desire for men, which in essence represents their “sexual anxiety”; meanwhile, Lusha is in love with Ziqing and the other girls still encounter the marriage issues. Therefore, they do not regard females as their partners from the perspective of sexual orientation. As Lusha says, “the marriage affair should be arranged by a male and female
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Moreover, apparently, their relationship is different from one of homosexuality in the sense of gender inversion or sexual inversion (Crozier, 2008, p. 3); rather, “Lu Yin seems to want to oppose the unfeeling, irrational feudal laws of social decorum with this innocent nation of sisters where feeling (Qing 情) exists in harmony with reason (Zhi 智)” (Meng & Dai, 2004, p. 44).

In a sense, the supportive camaraderie between women is also a female alliance for the sake of rebelling androcentrism and enables men to be incapable of being involved in it. Lu Yin’s texts reconstructing female-female relationships exclude men and express women’s antipathy against the opposite sex, which is a rejection of male desires through denying women’s own desires. Men were located in a dilemma of sexual anxiety and experienced a kind of spiritual castration.

**Image of Lesbianism**

Many scholars identify “The Diary of Lishi” with “Old Friends on the Seashore” and consider both of them as quasi-lesbian or as special women’s friendships. Yet, in fact, “The Diary of Lishi” involves a real lesbian subjects, while as mentioned above, “Old Friends on the Seashore” is distinguished from the subject of homosexuality.

“The Diary of Lishi”, the first lesbian novel amongst May Fourth female literature, was originally published by Short Fiction Monthly in 1923 and constitutes sixteen diaries by a female student, Lishi, before she died. Compared with the other two May Fourth lesbian stories by women writers, Ding Ling’s “During Summer Vacation” (Shujia zhong 暑假中) and “There is One Thing” (Shuoyou zheme yihuishi 说有这么一回事) by Ling Shuhua were published in 1926 and in 1928 respectively, “The Diary of Lishi” engendered fierce controversy when published and has been considered a great challenge for orthodox ethical heterosexuality (Ding, 1972, p. 45). The protagonist, Lishi, is dissatisfied with the monotony of school life, and with her hypocritical male teacher, and meanwhile she feels upset for the miserable marriage life of her friend, Yunwei. Accordingly, she intensely repels the opposite gender and gradually finds herself not willing to get close to males. “I never want to seek comfort from the opposite sex because it makes me feel unfree to be together with them” (Lu, 2001, p. 55). Lishi has a girlfriend, Yuanqing, with whom she enjoys romantic love and they plan to live together, and even to marry in the future. What distinguishes Lishi from Lusha of “Old Friends on the Seashore” is her intense emotional desire as well as involvement with each other’s marriages as well as Lishi’s sexual inversion of tribadism (Crozier, 2008, p. 3). From the perspective of Lishi’s characteristics, she seems like a tomboy and indeed plays a masculine role in the lesbian relationship with Yuanqing. Meanwhile, Lishi explicitly clarifies that “thus we two have become same-sex lovers rather than mere friends” (Lu, 2001, p. 55). Then, Lishi and Yunqing submerge themselves in the world of imagining their idyllic future life:

Indeed we have a long-term plan and last night we were so excited when talking about our future life! I dreamed that there would be a thatched cottage standing by a crystal stream and we would plant two willow trees in front of our house…We rowed it (the boat) in the clear ripples deep into bushes of reeds… Until night I and Yuanqing would hang out in that Crystal Palace. (Lu, 2001, p. 55)

As if far away from social conventions and institutions and located themselves in a hermitage, their dream is symbolic and prophetic with imagery that particularly indicates a reminiscence of female sexual arousal. Furthermore, according to Sang, the imagery such as rowing a boat in water, a bush of reeds and others suggest
“exploration of female erogenous zones” (Sang, 2003, p. 140). As a result, their physical desire exists in a veritable fairyland rather than in reality, although it seems a rupture with sex violating the consistency of body and soul, which accordingly creates “plastic sexuality” (Giddens, 1993, p. 38) with physical self-sufficient identity.

Yet, “we will always awake from our dream one day” (Giddens, 1993, p. 34), and Yuanqing’s parents eventually oppose the love between Lishi and Yuanqing, and Yuanqing’s mother wants to leave for Tianjin with her to attend a relative’s wedding. Thereafter, Yuanqing leaves, Lishi pines away since she gets lovesick. Several days later, Yuanqing calls Lishi and asks her to come back. “Today I (Lishi) received Yuanqing’s telephone call and she will arrive tonight. Oh, my heart is relieved now, and then I must instruct servants to cook” (Giddens, 1993, p. 48). When Lishi arrives at the train station so as to pick up Yuanqing she finds that “I have still an hour in hand before the train arrives” (Ibid., p. 48). Lishi runs straight towards Yuanqing as soon as she sees Yuanqing and they smile together. Then, they stay overnight at Lishi’s home. The following day, Yuanqing comes to see Lishi again and begins to wail that “life is too much for her” (Ibid., p. 49), which is the very last time they meet each other. Yuanqing then is forced again by her mother to move to Tianjin and to date her cousin as a prelude to their marriage (Sang, 2003, p. 139). Before departure, Yuanqing writes to Lishi:

…And we have to break up now... Ah, Lishi! Why didn’t you plan ahead! Why didn’t you dress up in men’s clothes, put on a man’s hat, act like a man, and visit my parents to ask for my hand? Now they know you’re a woman, and they would not let you marry me. They have found a ‘capable youth’ for me! (Lu, 2001, p. 55)

What Yuanqing says reveals that homosexuality cannot be accepted by society unless it is camouflaged with heterosexuality. In other words, normally women failed to subvert conventional gender orders in the process of deconstructing a two sex-based relationships with self-consciousness. Attitudes towards the “Other” could not be prepared to break through the dualistic ethical imperative within traditional morality, as it would destroy Confucian kinship structures and separate spheres of gender and would infringe on a series of ethical ideologies. Additionally, it would be impossible to establish the patriarchal cultural system in an incomplete modern society. In people’s eyes, those who were opposed to heterosexual culture and were identified as “abnormal” should be at the same stage (Butler, 1990, p. 96). A few weeks later, Yuanqing is compelled to marry her cousin and Lishi loses her will to live and soon dies of melancholia.

In the story, the neologism same-sex romantic love (Tongxing de ailian 同性的爱恋) is used to indicate Lishi’s awareness of the concept of homosexuality and physical lesbian desire “gains a highly symbolic visibility” (Sang, 2003, p. 140) in her dream to reveal how lesbianism envisions their common married life. Therefore, even though apparently Lu Yin advocated spirituality in lesbian love, she has nonetheless conveyed her idea of inter-attraction between female bodies as well, and she sought a reasonable existence for female physical desire in lesbian relationships. Lu Yin combined lesbian spirituality and lesbian sex closely; these two seeming antitheses are in essence related to deconstruction of the conventional gender order. As Butler points out:

The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire... When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. (Butler, 1990, pp. 135-136)
When realising the customary gender order is being broken and the heterosexual mode is being disrupted, the individual’s gender identity in terms of the inner truth of gender will progressively turn into “integrity” or cause self-disavowal. For example, Yuanqing in this story plays a role with personal anxiety and is inscribed with exterior impacts. Although she realises her real sexual orientation, she is still able to “act” as a “real woman” (Butler, 1990, p. 140) at the end. Through “stylised repetition of acts” (Ibid., p. 140), her gender is instituted in outer space, which in essence leads to the final failure of her lesbian love with Lishi. Her mother repeatedly stresses that she should be a real woman and is absolutely supposed to marry a man rather than a woman. Compared with Lishi, Yuanqing receives more limitation and instigation of behaviour in terms of what to do and how to “act” as a female being. Therefore, even though Yuanqing admits her love for Lishi she does not totally exclude the opposite sex and even accuses Lishi of being a woman rather than a man (Lu, 2001, p. 56). Eventually, she writes a letter to Lishi and advises her to abandon lesbian love, “Lishi, our previous thoughts are indeed juvenile and immature. The same-sex love eventually cannot be accepted by the public and I hope you can come to your senses and correct your mistake!” (Ibid., p. 57).

Eventually, she reaffirms binary gender relationships as well as heterosexual ethics. In this sense, Yuanqing’s gender identity is more established socially and temporally, which in essence fails to transcend the opposed gendered sex. By contrast, without too much kin interference, Lishi claims her exhaustive disavowal of heterosexuality and breaks through the binary two sexes. For the sake of comforting Lishi, Yuanqing introduces another male youth, Liwen, to her, which annoys Lishi a lot. She expresses her deep resignation about it—“How could Yuanqing do this to me?” (Lu, 2001, p. 57)—and feels she is being insulted by her pure love. In the final diary, Lishi says, “why doesn’t God treat human beings equally when creating us and why does there exist a difference between men and women?” (Ibid., p. 58). That Lishi’s love for Yuanqing does not transform with the involvement of the opposite sex suggests that the inner truth of gender cannot be found “in the arbitrary ground” (Butler, 1990, p. 141) and reveals that most real lesbians avoid men and “there is a feeling of resentment” (De Beauvoir, 1953, p. 443). Moreover, the characterisation of Lishi implies the author’s perception in terms of gender difference. Lu Yin always emphasised that “they (women) must be not merely women but also people” (Lu, 1995, p. 256) and believed that the difference between men and women would only be based on the person rather than on two-sex characteristics. In other words, as Butler advocates, the gender difference is not natural and can be constituted (Butler, 1990, p. 145).

**Conclusion**

As the first May Fourth female writer who touched upon the theme of homosexuality and depicted a lesbian story without reservation, Lu Yin created a short story “The Diary of Lishi” in which she narrated the love between Lishi and her same-sex partner Yuanqing; but this finally ended in tragedy, which implied Lu Yin’s deconstruction of binary gender order. Meanwhile, this paper also distinguished “Old Friends on the Seashore” from lesbian or quasi-lesbian stories and argued that this fiction was more in terms of female same-sex camaraderie instead of lesbian love.

Overall, without voluptuous women’s bodies and straying far from vivid sexual description, Lu Yin’s lesbian story deconstructs the conventional binary gender order with the angle on female ideological
transformation. Lu Yin’s response to the issue of homosexuality is to immerse her heroines in a vacuum world in which females are able to thoroughly examine their own emotional status.

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