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FRAGMENTED ENCOUNTERS, SOCIAL SLIPPAGES: LIN HUIYIN'S "IN NINETY-NINE DEGREE HEAT"

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The article reads Lin Huiyin's short story "In Ninety-Nine Degree Heat" (1934) in relation to the context of 1930s China, as an innovative literary work which combines elements from both the Chinese and the Western traditions, and as a text which informs readers not only of the problematic of class and gender issues in 1930s Chinese society but also of the context of the *liuxuesheng* who returns to China –like Lin Huiyin herself. Focusing on questions like otherness, representation, and encounters, the essay analyzes how the episodic narrative structure of Lin's short story echoes social and representational discourses in post-May Fourth China, at the same time that it explores issues such as social inequality, otherness and alienation, which were crucial to the *liuxuesheng*, and which reflect Lin's own experience as a returned and alienated *liuxuesheng* at the time.

KEY WORDS: 1930s China, Chinese literature, modernism, Lin Huiyin, *liuxuesheng*, discourses of representation, otherness, social class.

Lin Huiyin (林徽因; 1904-1955) was one of the most important members of the Beijing School, a group of writers who, in the late 1920s and 1930s, opposed and problematized the legacy of the May Fourth project (1917-1927) in China¹. During the previous decade, writers and intellectuals such as Lu Xun (迅; 1881-1936), Chen Duxiu (独秀; 1880-1942), Hu Shi (胡适; 1891-1962), Guo Moruo (郭沫若; 1892-1978) or Yu Dafu (郁达夫; 1896-1945) had vehemently argued for a Western type of modernity, based upon a fast, radical and iconoclastic renovation of Chinese culture. This project –later established as the birth of modern Chinese literature– developed hand in hand with the creation of a new literary language, *baihua*, which was

¹ The canonical study of the May Fourth movement still remains Chow (1960).

conceived to be closer to the oral parlance in order to reach the masses and facilitate the modernization of society. By contrast, a decade later, the Beijing School members tried to create a more integrative notion of modernity by critically conjugating elements from the Chinese tradition with elements from Western modernity². They were still cultural translators of Western discourses; but the specificities of history in 1930s China changed their positionality and, therefore, the implications of their cultural production within Chinese society. Until recently, the latter canonization of the May Fourth writers by the dominant discourse of socialist realism kept the Beijing School circle scholarly unconsidered, even if their vision on modernity, language and literature was, in fact, more critical and reflexive³.

Born in a traditional Chinese elite family, Lin Huiyin received a Western education in China and also studied in England (London, 1920-1921) and the United States (Pennsylvania, 1924-1928). Following a similar trajectory to the one undertaken by previous intellectuals from the late-Qing and the May Fourth periods, Lin had a crucial experience as *liuxuesheng* (student studying abroad), which provided her great insight into China's state-of-affairs and struggle for modernity. Similarly, when she returned to China, the experience abroad alienated her (or continued to keep her alienated) from the masses of Chinese society. As Shu-mei Shih has observed, this particular biographical path had implications for Lin Huiyin and many other returned *liuxuesheng*, whose subjectivity remained placed in an in-between position:

This is not a self-Orientalization or an emergence of cultural nationalism, but rather the discovery of the self in an alien terrain, matched by an equal identification with and alienation from the familiar terrain of China itself, thereby unsettling both the unmediated West and the pure China in their claims upon subjectivity. (Shih, 2001: 210)

Published in 1934 in the first issue of *Xuwen Monthly* (学文月刊), Lin's short story "In Ninety-Nine Degree Heat" (九十九度中 *jiushijiudu zhong*) is an excellent example of how different elements from both traditions, Chinese and Western, can be combined and give shape to an innovative literary work⁴. But to restrict the reading of "Ninety-Nine" only to this attempt at fusion between the dichotomy Chinese tradition vs. Western modernism would not do justice to the complexity and richness of this literary piece. As I will try to show, "Ninety-Nine" contains a multiplicity of issues that are interconnected

² For an exhaustive analysis of the Beijing School see Shih (2001: 151-228).

³ The paradigm of this marginalization is the critical consideration that has traditionally been assigned to a writer such as Zhou Zuoren (周作人; 1885-1967), Lu Xun's brother. See Daruvála (2000).

⁴ I am using the version from Lin Huiyin (1999). Hereafter I will refer to this piece as "Ninety-Nine".

within its fragmented and episodic narrative structure and that, all together, can inform us about a new context for returned *liuxuesheng*, about the particular dynamics of what could be called “embodied translation” (Prado-Fonts, 2005), as well as about the problematic of class and gender issues in 1930s China.

By making use of several theoretical notions such as *otherness*, *encounter* and *representation*, this article, then, tries to dissect some of these threads and topics underlying the fragmented narrative style of “Ninety-Nine”. By unveiling these points I suggest that Lin Huiyin’s masterful use of this specific narrative architecture can tell us a great deal about social and representational discourses in post-May Fourth China. On the one hand, this narrative structure provides a suitable textual geography for the depiction of issues like social inequalities, otherness and alienation, which were crucial in the reality of returned *liuxuesheng* and, therefore, highly influenced the process of cultural translation. As I will show, whereas these discourses circulate, juxtapose and/or slip under the narrative structure of the story, they rarely clash or collapse. On the other hand, “Ninety-Nine” and its narrative structure clearly show the problems of representation at different levels: from the impossibility for the subalterns (workers, lower-classes) to speak, to the failure of encounters and dialogues among characters from different social classes; from the limitations of alienated writers to go beyond the aporia of representation, to the tension between Chinese and Western discourses. This problematic of representation depicts none other than the social context in which the *liuxuesheng* were embedded after their return, and informs us of the *imperatives* of position and representation implied by embodied translation.

Narrative structure: juxtaposition and mis-encounters

The action of “Ninety-Nine” is set in Beijing during a hot summer day. The piece is structured in nine sections of irregular length (less than ten lines for the shortest, more than six pages for the longest) and describes about a dozen scenes that criss-cross through the nine sections. Without the direct mediation of an omniscient narrator, more than forty characters appear and re-appear, pass and cross each other at several points of the story.

Shu-mei Shih has noted how this episodic structure is reminiscent of traditional Chinese narrative forms, such as the Qing-dynasty classic *The Scholars* (儒林外史 *rulin waishi*) by Wu Jingzi (敬梓; 1701-1754): “The fragmentary nature of the narrative harkens back to the traditional episodic narrative, where events are frequently merely juxtaposed or connected as if by coincidence and form a vast «interweaving» and «reticular» relationship rather than a linear, causal one” (Shih, 2001: 213). Similarly, the random nature of the action can also be traced back to traditional Chinese literature, especially

to classical poetry, even to stories of knights-errant in which randomness and chance played a crucial role⁵.

In “Ninety-Nine” this narrative structure with traditional reminiscences is suitably combined with a set of (Western) modernist features. The action seems to be observed through a camera and has a remarkable cinematic style⁶. Shu-mei Shih has already mentioned a couple of these film analogies (Shih, 2001: 212). Here I would like to add two more. First, in section 2, the bustling atmosphere of the Jia’s kitchen is described in a fast and visual style through the eyes of Young Master Sun. A second example of the filmic, visual style is the fact that when the characters re-appear, they are described objectively, as if they hadn’t appeared before. In section 5 we re-encounter the three delivery men who had earlier appeared at the beginning of section 1, but they are described again metonymically as six muddy shoes, without acknowledging any previous appearance (35). This filmic narrative language, which was also used by other modernist writers⁷, is pertinent to depict the dynamic slippage of subjects: the camera does not need to explain, nor to psychologize, it only sweeps the scene and shows how the characters pass by, cross and contrast.

I am arguing, then, that this particular narrative structure, as a fusion between the traditional Chinese episodic narrative and the (Western) modernist filmic techniques, is an essential producer of meaning in “Ninety-Nine”. Thanks to this episodic, disrupted narrative –in terms of structure and also as a combination of dialogue, monologue, indirect speech, stream-of-consciousness style and so on– Lin Huiyin is able to suitably depict a set of social contrasts and juxtapositions.

Above the narrative, “Ninety-Nine” has the sun as the element that somehow embraces all the scenes and episodes, as it derives into a multitude of related objects and sensations: heat, sweat, thirst, umbrellas or irascible moods interact throughout the different episodes and sections. Having the sun as a particular demiurge gives the illusion of a homogenized space (under the sun) and time (morning to dusk), through which the characters seem to develop at random. Their movements, however, are structured by a pattern of repetitive contrast and juxtaposition between social classes. This is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable features of the piece.

⁵ One of the most famous examples of what is called “random writing” is the poem “Casually Written Upon Returning to my Hometown” (回偶hui xiang ou shu) by the Tang poet He Zhizhang (知章; 659-744).

⁶ At this stage, I want to point out that, in spite of the fact that there is no omniscient narrator, there is undoubtedly someone behind the camera: Lin Huiyin herself. I will expand on this in the second part of this paper.

⁷ For example, New Sensationist pieces by Mu Shiyong (穆英; 1912-1940), Liu Na’ou (欧; 1900-1939) or Shi Zhicun (施存; 1905-2003), inspired by Japanese New Sensationism and the figure of Yokomitsu Riichi (横光利一; 1898-1947). The clearest literary example would perhaps be “Shanghai Foxtrot” (上海的狐步舞 Shanghai de hubuwu) and examples of pastiche in Tao Jingsun (陶晶孙; 1897-1952) or Guo Moruo.

The narration is structured in numerous evidences of class contrasts and develops through continual shifts between scenes of upper social class and scenes of lower social class. The transition from one scene to another is imaginatively produced by contiguity of space, of sensation or through *liminal characters*, and often has a poetic effect in the narrative. The clash between the actions described is nevertheless abrupt. “Ninety-Nine” begins with a detailed description of three unnamed delivery men at work. The attention is focused on their labor. They are not approached as organic individuals, but only by paying careful attention to their muddy shoes, their sweat and their effort: the means and result of their labor (21). Just in the following paragraph –only one line below– the narration jumps from the delivery men’s bodies to Lu Erye’s mind. This character, whose name is mentioned right after his first appearance (by contrast with the unnamed delivery men), is comfortably sitting on his rickshaw, as he crosses the delivery men. The view of the basket they are carrying, which contains food for a banquet, causes his meditations about food to start rambling (21-22). In contrast with the delivery men’s labor and fatigue, Lu Erye’s main concern is to decide where to have a good lunch.

Descriptions of food and drinks are maintained throughout the story, this being an appropriate theme in order to contrast social classes, especially taking into account the dominating heat that embraces all of the actions. In the Zhang household, during the preparation for the banquet to celebrate Lao Taitai’s seventieth birthday, the abundance of food turns the place into something that resembles “one dish market” (25). Only a few lines below, this image of luxury and abundance is juxtaposed, firstly, to the image of wine (the object of the delivery men’s thirst) and, secondly, to the image of a rickshaw puller’s thirst in a completely new scene, the beginning of section 3. Being the element that makes the transition possible, thirst is, again, in sharp contrast with the abundance of food and ice described in the Zhang kitchen.

During the celebration of Lao Taitai’s banquet, which we re-encounter a few pages later, a maid is terribly hungry. She wishes the banquet were finished, because the servants would then be allowed to eat (37). While she is sitting waiting for Lao Taitai to wake up from her nap, she overhears a silly sentimental argument between You Lan and Yu in the house library (38). Her reaction –she does not really understand the conversation (38)– is a clear example of how the concerns of each social class are radically different. This brings up another contrast: whereas the lower classes suffer from hunger, the higher classes can afford the luxury of being sentimental. Her physical proximity to the members of the high class does not favor any sense of dialogue, nor any interaction based on equality. Again, it is important to note that the maid is initially unnamed, just like the delivery men mentioned above; we only know her name when her master calls her and orders her to do something: “Shou Er, go and bring me the washbowl” (38). The upper classes, then, have the power to name the lower classes.

Finally, as another example of abrupt social contrast, in section 7 we find Zhang Tuzi, who is running and looking for a doctor in order to save the life

of his neighbor (who is one of the three delivery men we encountered earlier in the story—still unnamed). A fast rhythm in the narration transcribes the urgency and anxiety of the situation (39). All of a sudden, there is a collapse of expectations: Zhang Tuzi discovers that the doctor is not at home, whereas the reader discovers that that doctor is none other than Dr. Ding, who is attending Lao Taitai's banquet. Interestingly, a clash of family and friendship values is subsequently portrayed: whereas Zhang Tuzi is running to save his neighbor's life, Dr. Ding—a brief but close portrait of a returned *liuxuesheng*—is completely alienated from his own family at the Zhang family celebration (40).

These are just a few selected examples of the many contrasts that the story continually throws at the reader. We could argue, then, that these scenes of contrast and juxtaposition depict a situation of social slippage, without a real interaction between members of different social classes and without any real encounter despite occasions of physical proximity. Otherness is the dominant factor in the social interaction between classes and, as a structure that puts into place these contrasts, we could consider the fragmented narrative as an othering tool.

At this point, I believe that a couple of concepts examined in Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (2000) can illuminate this analysis further. First of all, we can look at the structure and the characters in "Ninety-Nine" through Ahmed's concept of *asymmetrical encounter*. She defines encounters as

meetings [...] which are not simply in the present: each encounter reopens past encounters. Encounters [...] also involve conflict. The face-to-face meeting is not between two subjects who are equal and in harmony; the meeting is antagonistic. The coming together of others that allows the "one" to exist takes place given that there is an asymmetry of power. (2000: 8)

In other words, Ahmed directs our attention towards two circumstances related to the moment of encounter. On the one hand, encounters are nothing but re-encounters, re-cognitions of differences set up in the past and prior to the physical meeting face-to-face. On the other hand, these differences—constructed by history, culture, economy and many other factors—govern those encounters and inevitably attach to them an unbalanced political weight.

Secondly, Ahmed's notion of *stranger fetishism* is also pertinent here. For her, stranger fetishism is a procedure by which a stranger becomes a fetishized figure and, as a trope of representation, gets his or her image fixed: "I suggest that it is the process of expelling *or* welcoming the one who is recognised as a stranger that produces the figure of the stranger in the first place" (2000: 4). This, she argues, displaces or masks the inequality of

social relations. She therefore questions the so-called *ethics of alterity*, challenging the idea that just by tropes like proximity and totality or love for the stranger, the figure of the stranger will become integrated into the community: "The stranger does not have to be recognised as «beyond» or outside the «we» in order to be fixed within the contours of a given form: indeed, it is the very gesture of getting closer to «strangers» that allows the figure to take its shape" (*ibid.*)⁸.

Now, returning to "Ninety-Nine", we can take Ahmed's concepts over two dimensions marked by two different encounters (or mis-encounters): the encounters produced within the narrative (the story) and the encounter between the reader and the text (the act of reading itself). On the former level, taking into account the fragmented narrative structure of "Ninety-Nine" as well as the contrasts and juxtapositions continually displayed, Ahmed's contribution makes clearer the political asymmetry in the social encounters between characters. In spite of the close (both geographical and textual) proximity, the characters cannot hide the inequality of their social relations. Taking these slippages a bit further, we could even argue that "Ninety-Nine" problematizes Ahmed's notion of encounter itself: the fact that all the encounters are by contrast and juxtaposition creates an overlapping in which not even a face-to-face encounter takes place (not a real encounter by seeing and touching). The stranger fetishism suggested by Ahmed is also present in the narrative, given the contrasts and juxtapositions and the filmic structure: the characters usually have a fixed, determined condition, and are unable to engage in social dialogue. As Ahmed claims, proximity here does not imply integration. I will expand this by taking the figure of the *liminal character* in the next section.

On the second level, focusing on Ahmed's idea of "encounter[ing] the other as text" (2000: 147), when the reader makes use of this fragmented narrative structure, the encounter with the action is already marked by a specific understanding of the social relations of inequality that the text implies and exposes through this narrative of contrasts. Applying Ahmed's idea of *stranger fetishism*, prior to the encounter, those depictions presuppose the reader's conception of a specific social power relation, while, at the same time, the relationship between the characters themselves does not exist despite proximity in the geography of "Ninety-Nine", as I have suggested above. The juxtapositions and contrasts produced by the structure are, in a certain sense, the materialization of the stranger fetishism of the reader. This can be related to Lin Huiyin's positionality, which I will develop further below, and, in more general terms, to the specific historical background of the cultural translators of the time.

⁸ This is a similar argument to Naoki Sakai's notion of translation as a marker of differences (rather than a cultural connector) as it is governed by the regime of co-figuration. See Sakai (1997).

Liminality, voice and lack of communication

Now I want to take some issues from previous section further by examining some of what I call the *liminal characters* in the story. By *liminal characters* I mean those characters who are placed (by profession or by chance) in a geographical position within the text that keeps them close to both social classes, upper and lower. It is my contention that these liminal characters exemplify the boundaries and non-communication between upper and lower social classes, and, to a certain extent, reinforce (or work in coordination with) the othering, asymmetrical encounters produced by the narrative structure that I have analyzed above. As embodiments of the encounter –in the same way as the returned *liuxuesheng* were the embodiment of translation– these liminal characters channel the reader's *stranger fetishism* and, at the same time, exemplify the slippage and lack of interconnection within society⁹.

Shou Er and Dr. Ding, mentioned above, are clear examples of liminal characters. At the end of section 3 we find another instance of liminality. The narration focuses on the frustration of one of the waiters who is working at Ah Shu's wedding banquet. Many of the upper-class girls he is serving are gazing at him, smiling, flirting, but his social position does not allow him to approach them and socialize with them. This causes him a certain uneasiness that impedes his sleep (31). Yet he has no other option but to bow his head and continue his work. As we see, although he physically moves along the edge between the two social classes, he cannot cross the social boundary that separates them, not even by physical contact: he almost bumps into Li Li (31) but not even by chance is he allowed a physical contact and he has to make do with just the lure of Li Li's perfume. The difference between the waiter (again, an unnamed lower class character; 31) and Shou Er, the maid, is their reaction facing this impermeability between classes: whereas Shou Er simply does not understand the other's preoccupations –because she probably does not see any social boundary– the waiter, who does see and understand those boundaries, reacts with frustration. Significantly, at the end both assume their roles as subalterns.

The clearest example of liminality appears almost at the end of the story, in section 8 (42). Following the events of the newspaper editor, this brief section summarizes three of the main thematic actions of "Ninety-Nine" in a very interesting way. As the limit of slippage or juxtaposition in physical terms, these three narrative threads appear on the pages of the newspaper: the Zhang family party, the quarrel between the rickshaw pullers Yang San and Wang Kang, and the death of the delivery man because of cholera. All three events converge on the pages of the newspaper but in strict juxtaposition: one report beside the other. The liminal figure in this case, the newspaper editor, cannot really make them interact among themselves, since they are fragmented realities for him.

⁹ Here I am not simply equating returned *liuxuesheng* with *liminal characters* only on the social level. There are other dimensions that go along with the social one (cultural, literary, identity, representational) in which this liminality is also expressed.

We can argue, then, that the *liminal characters* of the story are placed on the edge between the two social classes, but they do not serve as bridges or integrators. They only serve as narrative connectors, sites for the narrative structure to pass, cross or re-appear. Paradoxically, their close distance to both social classes is not a guarantee of communicative engagement. Imprisoned by this fragmented narrative and far from being dialogic, they embody the boundaries and the failure of communication. In relation to the narrative structure of the piece, the *liminal characters* would complement what Shu-mei Shih has noted, quoting Andrew Plaks: “The aesthetic coherence of the Chinese episodic narrative is said to be perceived in the «interstitial, rather than the architectonic, dimension», because Chinese narrative emphasizes the «interweaving» or «dovetailing» of the episodes and smaller units” (Shih, 2001: 213). In our case here, whereas it is true that aesthetic coherence and beauty is found in this liminality or interstitiality, those alienated subject positions also transmit a powerful message of otherness and class slippage.

My point here is to show that beyond –or, perhaps, more specifically, at the root of this liminality that appears in the narrative– is the subject position of returned *liuxuesheng*, such as Lin Huiyin, who were placed in this liminal angle within the Chinese society of the time.

The effects of the combination between the narrative structure and the liminal characters acquire an interesting significance when understood through Gayatri Spivak’s notions of voice and representation. It is worth quoting at length her reference to Pierre Macherey regarding silence and voice and their relation to ideology:

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation “what it refuses to say”, although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of *measuring silences*, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence. (Spivak, 1994: 81-82)

Pertinently, Spivak directs this to the question of the subaltern: “When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work cannot say becomes important” (1994: 82). In spite of the differences in the historical and geographical context between Spivak’s focus (India) and Lin Huiyin’s “Ninety-Nine”, there are certain similarities that should be taken into account. If, as Spivak argues, “[w]ithin the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced”, and “[i]f, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1994: 82-83), the examination of several of the

woman figures of “Ninety-Nine” gains a new perspective. Characters like Shou Er or the wife of the dying rickshaw puller are not only bounded by their social status, but also by their condition as women. In this situation, they remain silenced, deprived of a voice. We never get to listen to the voice of the puller’s wife and the only thing we can hear is her crying (40).

Spivak’s deconstructionist demonstration of the text’s inability to fix meaning and the subsequent failure of representation is also pertinent here¹⁰. On the one hand, at the level of the characters themselves, several instances of failure appear throughout the story. Upper-class characters don’t understand the reasons for the quarrel between the rickshaw pullers, the newspaper editor is unable to grasp the events as a social totality, Shou Er does not understand the upper-class petty dilemmas and so forth. On the other hand, the limits of representation of the text as a whole are demarcated by Lin Huiyin’s specific positionality as cultural translator of modernity in 1930s China, which I will analyze in the next section.

Positionality and the problem of representation

After having discussed the meaning and implications of the narrative structure in “Ninety-Nine” on the textual level, perhaps we should direct our attention to the piece as a work of representation. By taking a closer look at Lin Huiyin’s positionality and exploring the conditions under which she created this literary work, I hope to offer a more substantial analysis not only of “Ninety-Nine” *per se*, but also of the theoretical openings that this fragmented narrative allows. In this sense, I want to supplement the reading of “Ninety-Nine” provided so far by reflecting on three interrelated factors: the legacy of the May Fourth ideology, Lin Huiyin’s condition of returned *liuxuesheng*, cultural translator and embodiment of translation, and the asymmetry of the transnational encounter between Chinese and Western discourses.

The contrasts and social slippages analyzed in the previous sections can certainly be interpreted as a melancholic lamentation over the failure of the May Fourth project of modernity. Published in 1934, “Ninety-Nine” reached the Chinese audience more than a decade after the formative days of the May Fourth movement. Disguised among the poetic elegance and the fragmented narrative structure of the piece, we can find dramatic and ironic glimpses of a critique of the radical search for modernity that had dominated Chinese society in the first two decades of the twentieth-century (and that were later canonized by socialist realism). Interestingly, the explicit examples of this critique come from characters at both ends of the social scale.

In section 3, we encounter Li Rong, the (only) rickshaw puller who “is able to recognize the written characters and can read the newspaper” (26) and therefore “can use new vocabulary in his comments” (26). There is a

¹⁰ Spivak analyses the different interpretations given to the suicide of a young woman in North Calcutta in 1926 (Spivak, 1994: 103-104).

clear tone of sarcasm when Li advises his fellow pullers that the most discussed words of the year are “freedom” and “equality” (26). The remark is pronounced in the middle of a conversation among rickshaw pullers and just beside the location of a luxurious upper-class banquet. This remark allows us to infer a critique of the ideals for a progressive society, coming from the rickshaw pullers, who take the radical intentions of the intellectual elite as pure fashionable expressions, which will not help change their lower-class condition¹¹.

The conversation between the rickshaw pullers turns to the topic of marriage. Then we discover that, in spite of the fashionable terminology (i.e. “freedom” and “equality”), marriages are still arranged in the Chinese society of the time. We encounter Ah Shu, a young woman belonging to the upper-class, who is about to get married by arrangement. She also criticizes the concepts inherited from the May Fourth ideology. As Shu-mei Shih points out, “the distance between the May Fourth theory of free love that she has been inculcated with through books and magazines and the reality of arranged marriage makes her fate even more devastating” (Shih, 2001: 213-214). Again, as in the case of the waiter, she is bound to accept that devastating reality: “she clearly knew that she had absolutely no opportunity to choose” (28)¹². These critiques show that, more than a decade after the May Fourth movement, the radical ideology of progress and modernity promulgated by the intellectuals of the 1920s had turned into mere rhetoric only. Significantly, Ah Shu mentions that “theory and practice are almost never related” (29).

Now I want to relate this failure (and Lin’s critique of it) to the more abstract issue of the limits of representation. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s differentiation between unconditional hospitality and the laws of hospitality in *Of Hospitality* (2000), we can distinguish the obstacles faced by both the May Fourth project and “Ninety-Nine” itself, as a text. We should understand the meaning of hospitality here from a broader, epistemological perspective. Hospitality can be seen as the reader’s intention to host the other’s meaning, the desire to understand the other’s position, the ambition to grasp the other’s reality. Bearing this in mind, what Derrida does is to problematize the tensions and limitations “between an ethics of (infinite) hospitality and a politics of (finite) hospitality” (Rosello, 2001: 11). More concretely he observes that

¹¹ Interestingly, these issues of irony, sarcasm, comicity and narrative structure seem to be spread into different works that appear after the legacy of the May Fourth agenda. See, for instance, Ling Shuhua’s (凌叔; 1904-1990) “Temple of Flowers” (花之寺 *hua zhi si*) in *Ling Shuhua xiaoshuoji* (1986). See also Qian Zhongshu’s (钱钟书; 1910-1998) *Fortress Besieged* (城 *weicheng*): *Weicheng* (2004). Regarding the latter, C.T. Hsia has related it to *The Scholars*, but, in this case, arguing that *Fortress Besieged* had a superior quality in as much as it had “greater comic exuberance and a structural unity” (Hsia, 1961: 441-442).

¹² Again, this sad obedience is also present in some of Ling Shuhua’s stories. See, for instance, “Embroidered Pillows” (枕 *xiuzhen*) (Ling, 1986: 11-15).

there would be [...] a non-dialectizable antinomy between, on the one hand, *the* law of unlimited hospitality (to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfillment of even the smallest condition), and on the other hand, the laws (in the plural), those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional [...] across the family, civil society, and the State. (Derrida, 2000: 77)

This antinomy, as Mireille Rosello points out, is “doomed to cohabit, unhappily, chaotically, because that *tension* is what hospitality is precisely all about” (2001: 11 [*italics mine*]).

Going back to “Ninety-Nine” and the two explicit critiques against the May Fourth legacy, we could understand the failure of the modernity project of the 1920s as precisely similar to the aporia of hospitality. The inability of the May Fourth ideology to unify theory and practice is equivalent to Derrida's notion of the contradiction between unlimited hospitality and the laws of hospitality. The former would be equal to “theory”, that is the May Fourth intellectuals' desire to reform society and so on, whereas the latter would be related to “practice”, that is the several social, cultural and political obstacles that make their project impossible. The irresolvable tension produced between these two opposites is what creates the sarcasm and sadness embodied by Li Rong and Ah Shu, respectively.

At the same time, we can also take “Ninety-Nine” itself as an aporia of representation, embedding a similar pair of contradicting poles at the representational level. As an attempt to depict the unequal social reality and launch a critique of the inequalities that underlie it, “Ninety-Nine” is nothing but a gesture of unlimited hospitality towards the lower social classes. Simultaneously, this drive is restrained by certain social, cultural and political obstacles that keep that hospitality finite.

What are those obstacles? A brief survey of Lin Huiyin's personal background and professional trajectory should help to contextualize her positionality within the China of the 1930s and, therefore to outline some of these limits¹³. Coming from a wealthy family, Lin Huiyin received a Western education in China and in London (1920-21). Afterwards she studied at the University of Pennsylvania (1924-1928) and married Liang Sicheng (梁思成; 1901-1972), the eldest son of perhaps the most influential intellectual leader of that time, Liang Qichao (梁超; 1873-1929). Back in China in 1928, she was another of the returned *liuxuesheng* who were part of the Beijing School¹⁴. Her career as a writer (fiction and, especially, poetry) was short, due to

¹³ For a more detailed biographical sketch, see Fairbank (1994).

¹⁴ Other members of the Beijing School who had also been *liuxuesheng* in the West (including Japan) were Zhou Zuoren, Zhu Guangqian (朱光潜; 1897-1986), Ling Shuhua. Others, like Fei Ming (名; 1901-1967) were well-trained in Western literature (Shih, 2001: 151-189).

different factors, mainly sickness and dedication to household tasks. In a certain sense, her positionality is very similar to that of the character of Dr. Ding in “Ninety-Nine”. Both are returned *liuxuesheng*, with prestige and a relevant position, but living in a relatively separated social circle –so close and so far away from the masses at the same time. In this sense, we should remember that Dr. Ding fails to save the rickshaw puller’s life, precisely because of that alienation from the masses.

Similarly to what happened with the returned *liuxuesheng* in the 1920s, the paradox of the returned *liuxuesheng* also applied to Lin’s case: her experience and education abroad provided her with great insight but, at the same time, her new symbolic position alienated her from the rest of Chinese society. That positionality did not allow her (and many other returned *liuxuesheng*) to engage in an equal dialogue with the society they were trying to heal (Dr. Ding and, for instance, Lu Xun) and reform (late-Qing and May Fourth intellectuals in general) or, simply, depict critically (Lin Huiyin herself). But, whereas the cultural translators of the late-Qing used alienation for projecting the lure of the West and the cultural translators of the 1920s used that alienated position to launch a modernity project that took literature to be an unproblematized mediator, Lin, with the perspective of more than a decade, used that same alienating experience to offer a more complicated vision of things. Apart from the cruelty and pessimism that dominate the contrasts, liminal characters and social slippages of “Ninety-Nine”, the best example of this more mature (or more skeptical?) vision is the problematization of representation and literature itself in which the piece engages.

This situation of aporia of representation can also be informed by the analysis of the collapse of the two shifting distinctions of “representation” observed by Gayatri Spivak (1994: 70): on the one hand, representation as depiction (equivalent to the German *darstellen* [to portray]), on the other hand, representation as representativity (equivalent to *vertreten* [to act in place for]). Thus, when Lin Huiyin’s story tries to commit to a particular criticism of the social inequalities, it is at the same time inevitably subjected (in a very Foucauldian sense) to a specific positionality –marked by her condition as a member of the elite class, her role as a returned *liuxuesheng*, her limited social circle and audience and so on– that blocks the dialogue between the two and therefore produces the failure of representation. We could argue, then, that, since she is also a victim of the failure of representation, Lin Huiyin’s piece follows the same path as that of projects envisaged by the May Fourth intellectuals she is trying to criticize. But she goes even further: by making use of a fragmented narrative and numerous social contrasts, her greatest contribution to this tension is her *awareness* – actually, a poetic awareness– of that limitation.

All of these reflections open another perspective if we go back to Sara Ahmed’s notion of encounter, mentioned earlier. Not only are the characters in the story victims of an asymmetrical relation, but the relation between the writer/reader and the story is asymmetrical as well. Given the fact that the readership for this specific literature was quite limited (the low-class masses

could barely read, as in the case of the rickshaw pullers analyzed above), the encounter between this story and its readers (mainly people able to decode these references because they were also returned *liuxuesheng* or had the ability to “translate” them) is already marked by previous assumptions about the lower-social classes and the social problems of the time. The lower classes, then, are encountered under the specific definitions of a particular *stranger fetishism*. And by taking this asymmetrical gesture of hospitality from the writer/reader of the story, we reach a similar conclusion to that of Mireille Rosello’s: “if the guest is always the guest, if the host is always the host, something has probably gone very wrong: hospitality has somehow been replaced by parasitism or charity” (2001: 167). That is, in spite of the hospitable gesture of the writer who wants to represent (here as both “depict” and “act on behalf of”) the socially unfavored masses, the charity of this act does not solve the unequal situation.

At the end of the day, the failure of hospitality-as-representation in “Ninety-Nine” problematizes the Levinasian notion of ethics and his ideal of approaching the other without appropriating the other¹⁵. The portrayal of the reality of the other-as-worker in “Ninety-Nine” is similar to Lévinas’s conception of “[t]he Other who dominates me in his transcendence” as “the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated” (1969: 214). As Sara Ahmed –among others– has noted, this relationship to the other is always asymmetrical, and, thus, “this weakness is constitutive of what the other, in some sense, is” (2000: 141-142). What “Ninety-Nine” shows us is that the Levinasian (mystic) ideal of responsibility for the other (Lévinas, 2002: 9-11)¹⁶ is always complicated by the political violence inherent in the very act of approaching, being hospitable and representing the other, which, at the end of the day, only “protect[s] or preserve[s] the otherness of the other” (Ahmed, 2000: 140).

The importance that Lévinas attaches to the face in the ethical relation with the other (“the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge” [Lévinas, 1969: 198]) is also problematized in “Ninety-Nine”. After examining this literary piece we are left with the question: What happens if there is no face? What happens when there is no encounter? The figures that clearly embody such an impossible encounter in “Ninety-Nine” are the rickshaw

¹⁵ For Lévinas, ethics can be characterized in terms of alterity: “The Other occupies a space that is radically different from mine, and the metaphysical desire for the other is concentrated upon the existence of a personal Other: a being who escapes the mastery of the self, and who is desired all the more because of that” (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2002: 136). This relationship between self and other, which is performed through language and is always encountered by way of the face, assumes a major respect and equality between subjects (self and other). Thus, my point here is that, although Lévinas’s key concepts of ethics (*alterity, Other, face, language*) resonate in Lin Huiyin’s story, the unequal relations described in her narrative put into question –or, at least, complicate– the validity of Lévinas’s conception of ethics and the Other. See Lévinas (2002) and Irigaray (2002).

¹⁶ For a critique of Lévinas’s religious mysticism, see Badiou (2001).

pullers: always in front of their master, always at his/her service, but without encountering them face-to-face¹⁷.

Finally, I want to briefly mention the interplay between Chinese and Western discourses as another important tension that should also be taken into account as a supplement to what has been said so far. This is not a completely separate issue from the rest (i.e. representation, ethical responsibility and so on), but it is embedded in the same problems, criticisms and failures discussed above.

A perfect example of the impact of Western influence on Chinese society and its subsequent problems takes medicine as a trope. When the puller is dying of cholera, his neighbor, Zhang Tuzi, tries to get help from Western medicine, since he has confidence in it (39). Yet, in spite of all the good characteristics that are assigned to Western medicine (quoted by Dr. Ding himself at the banquet, 36), it does not help to save the puller from death. This anecdote exemplifies the complexity of the encounter between China and the West: it is not an encounter open to everybody, but is also marked by certain boundaries of class, as was the possibility to receive an education and to be a *liuxuesheng*. Thus, again, this encounter between China and the West is nothing but another slippage, a failure, something that casts doubts on the simplified equation between modernity and Westernization proposed by the May Fourth project. In this sense, this problematization is representative of the Beijing School's critical conception of modernity¹⁸.

Conclusion

By offering a reading of some of the multiple levels of interpretation that Lin Huiyin's "Ninety-Nine" allows, I hope to have shown the richness and significance of a piece that can be taken to be a representative example of both the modernist literary production of the 1930s *and* the position of the returned *liuxuesheng* as cultural translators at that time. Constructed through the fusion of traditional Chinese episodic narrative with modernist style, Lin's text not only "arrives at a distinct Chinese modernism of its own" (Shih, 2001: 213), but also displays a specific narrative structure that problematizes otherness, both at the level of the characters themselves, between the reader and the text, and at the level of representation. The social slippage implied by this narrative mechanism and the contrasts and liminality depicted in the text are clear examples of the problems and failures of representation. These problems, contextualized in a specific time and space (1930s China) still circle around the heritage from the May Fourth Movement and are influenced by Lin Huiyin's positionality as an alienated returned *liuxuesheng*, inevitably alienated from the lower classes.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Second Master Lu's rickshaw puller (21-22) and Liu Taitai's rickshaw puller (35).

¹⁸ For a complete analysis of this issue see Shih (2001: 151-189).

The main value of “Ninety-Nine” is the capacity of its narrative structure and poetic modernist style to embed and interlink all of these failed and asymmetrical encounters: between the characters within the geography of the text, between the author/reader and the story, between representation and reality, and between China and the West. These aporias are, after all, beautiful failures, since they are expressed in the careful language of poetic narrative. Most remarkably, this fragmented narrative structure acts as a trope for that very same failure of representation. Lin’s major contribution is, precisely, the use of this sophisticated metalinguistic reflection, which brilliantly supersedes and casts doubts on realist convictions and conventions.

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