

〈Response 1 to Rey chow〉

**“Autumn Hearts” / 「愁」, or, Poetics of Memory and Oblivion:  
A Response to Rey Chow’s “Autumn Hearts”**

**Keiko Nitta**

The nature of literary imagination, which flows across singular and unique origins of diverse individual texts, probably allowed me to remember the following appeal of one mother figure appearing in a literary text somewhat distant from our film, *Song of the Exile*: “Who had pity for you when you were sad among the strangers?” This is the question the ghostly hallucination of Stephen Dedalus’s mother in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1923) presents to her son in the chapter 15, “Circe.” I guess this outlandish association of mine seems to be neither really illogical nor coincidental. This novel, a modernist master text, quite uniquely represents a pathetic positioning of mother that enters into the questions of love, loss, identity and otherness. The novel’s Odyssey—Telemachia plot is usually considered to prioritize the story of father’s and son’s mutual searching for one another. Yet actually, the figure of Stephen’s mother motivates her son to return to Ireland from his self-imposed exile to Paris and continues to haunt him after her death, as if reminding him of the impossibility of filiation without a memory of estranged members. The mother—who begged her son “with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her” only to be refused (“Telemachus”)—continuously occupies his psyche as the source of grief and self-accusation. Her persistent return requires Stephen to recognize her as the untranslatable internal alterity, whereas his desire for his father is supplemented by the encounter with Leopold Bloom.

Joyce has correctly articulated a mother with the pity for someone being estranged from her kinfolk. The position of outsider inscribed in a mother in a patriarchal institution informs her particular compassion for a stranger. It is a mother who embodies a secret fissure in the solidarity of kindred. Even though the fissure also discloses an inevitable inclusion of exteriority in every patriarchal family and thus anticipates its innate possibility of reconfiguring inside and outside, that essential exteriority is often forgotten. Such a forgetting finishes the surface homogeneity of members of a household, including the mother herself. Her double status of the mother/daughter-in-law is indeed perfected through forgetting her origin. Furthermore, this forgetfulness has to entail the oblivion of her forgetting itself. A mother/stranger in general, accordingly, rarely grieves for herself in an actual everyday life; after making her wedding ritual a glorious ceremony of mourning for her past, she spontaneously starts participating in sustaining and reproducing her in-law lineage. In contrast with Stephen’s dying mother who incessantly demands her son to remember her and throws him into melancholy with the abject image of “the green sluggish bile,” the stigma of a general mother/stranger is secretly accumulated.

I am sure that an attempt to recollect mother’s forgotten sorrow of and for a stranger shall formulate a “feminine drama” as Professor Rey Chow demonstrates through her analysis on *Song of the Exile*. As Professor Chow emphasizes the significance of the cinematic flashbacks as a device for shedding light on the clandestine psychological theater of Hueyin and Aiko, juxtaposition of different pasts, or artistic reversion of the times in real life irreversible, is indispensable in the process of recollection. Besides, insofar as self-conscious women creators and artists reformulate those lost experiences as the feminine dramas, their representation takes the shape of something different from the uncanny and abject figure as represented by Stephen’s mother. Confusion of the present and the past as well as repetitive returns of the past will, as the Freudian psychoanalytic theory explains, necessarily accompany the horrifying experiences on the part of the subject who commits the psychological labor. The filmmaker Ann Hui has perhaps centralized the autumn hearts—or a pathos the Chinese character 愁 (meaning a general quality that evokes sadness or pity) represents—as an alternative poetic medium for portraying the concealed grief of a mother as outsider. The motif of autumn hearts that Chow illustrates as a privileged subject matter in the tradition of Chinese women’s writings may have enabled women authors to extract a “heavy sense of melancholy and loss,” while disarticulating its path to abjection. If sentimental, its lyricism and poeticity provide them with an advantage in their witnessing of women’s “psychic interiority.”

One of the major significances of *Song of the Exile* seems to me to be found in its presentation of individual women’s—a mother’s and a daughter’s—“psychic interiority” as the process of spontaneous search for the ways to survive in the dynamics of history and institutional inevitability. This search is certainly sentimental, but the sentimental eventually turns out to be a poetic (creative) tactic to reconcile with a political difficulty. For the part of the daughter, Hueyin, the process functions as more like a delayed tracing of the secret identity of her mother. As I have argued in the beginning, that secret intrinsically concerns the outsider status of the mother; yet in this mother Aiko’s case, her alienness is still magnified for her closet fact of having come from the imperial Japan. Through the knowledge of her mother’s origin or otherness, Hueyin becomes somebody who obligatory takes on a secret larger than herself. Indeed, the secret is not simply a reason for the conflict between her mother and grandparents, but a more significant political background that causes the basic trouble in securing a footing for her family; this is the trouble with which Hueyin’s grandparents have, analogous with Aiko, been faced secretly.

In the beginning of the film, the spectator and Hueyin recalling her childhood events may both understand the problem of her family as that of “the unyielding domination of Chinese family life” having marginalized and rejected Aiko. This confrontation, however, cannot be concluded as the powerful kinship structure’s exclusion of the powerless stranger. Despite the grandparents’ ostracizing Aiko the foreigner, they themselves have actually no stable national background; thus in that sense, the term “exile” designates not only Aiko, Hueyin (a returnee from England) and her sister (an emigrant to Canada), but also the grandparents.

In this regard, the director of the film quite suggestively intersperses symbols of the grandparents' foreignness in Hueyin's homey memory of her dependence with them. First, each of the two scenes Hueyin is given her grandmother's Chinese snacks is highlighted by an airmail envelope in which a portion of snacks is enclosed. The grandparents' address of affection to the granddaughter in the form of food, hence, implies that their kinship bond should be dispersed abroad. Next, in probably one of the most impressive scenes, in which the grandfather gives little Hueyin a suggestion that she would study hard to become a medical doctor and serve China, he mentions the achievements of Sun Zhongshan (孫中山). If Sun is the great precursor upon whom Hueyin is supposed to model herself, Sun's career in exile to Japan, the U.S., and England, at the same time predictably endorses her later life in passage as well as the centrifugal trajectory of Aiko's personal history. Finally and most significantly, the direct cause of grandfathers' stroke in the last scene turns out to be a tough interrogation by the Red Guards about his possession of an anthology of poems of the Song Dynasty (宋詩選). Actually, the grandfather attempts to obtain the book as a gift for Hueyin. If a structure of national literature can represent a character of a nation, as Johann Gottfried von Herder envisioned, this incident at the close of the film signifies the possibility that the grandfather's sense of belongingness is in a peculiar way frustrated even in the mainland China.

Let alone Portuguese Macau, Guangdong in the era of the Cultural Revolution does not become a home for the grandparents' peaceful life. This depressing episode whose underlying causes include the colonial domination and the subsequent political dysfunction in a modern Chinese history, nonetheless, possibly constitutes the most meaningful as well as ethical aspect of the film. That is to say, the narrative progression in the film unfolds Hueyin's awareness of her mother's struggle for life in the Chinese kinship family and of grandparents' disillusionment about China as the stronghold of the familial unity in a same historical horizon. When the spectator perceive the common vulnerability that interlocks the fates of Aiko's and her parents-in-law's, they will also recognize an interest of the film—not merely directed to affirming the tradition of Chinese family. While observing the kinship's power of absorbing people's cravings, the film seems to me to disclose various acts of remembering and forgetting that operate the sense of belonging.

Even the seemingly authoritative grandparents' family that cannot automatically guarantee a sense of stability, therefore, requires an active mnemonic commitment. As the grandfather's instructions for Hueyin not to forget her origin (through the literary lessons), to serve her nation, and not to lose hope for her country, demonstrate, a conscious remembering advocated in the family strongly connects up with the memory of national culture and history. On the other hand, the specific backgrounds for Aiko's personal condition urge her to forget her origin as the prerequisite process for assimilating into her husband's foreign kindred. Although some personal causes, including the frustrated love for Arakawa, primarily determine Aiko's mindset that compels her to forget, her realization of inability to fantasize her native country Japan as her permanent

homeland eventually enhances the political intentionality of effacing her memory. Her elder brother’s decision to sell her parent’s house—which means the termination of her future possibility to return to her native place—and her younger brother’s antagonism with her still inflaming due to her marrying a Chinese man, while he has failed to die in a suicide attack unit, conjointly inform her disillusionment that accelerates her identification with the Chinese family despite its exclusiveness.

Benedict Anderson argues that not only remembering but also forgetting is indispensable for normalizing one’s sense of belonging to an imagined community. As if testifies to the practicality of this procedure, Aiko and her parents-in-law respectively exercise their creative agencies for locating themselves in certain communalities. Although the national boundary has earlier distanced them irreconcilably, Hueyin’s consciousness finds a connection between the two parties in terms of their common disillusionment over the secure existence of homeland in addition to experiences of exile. Hueyin’s sensitivity to autumn hearts recuperates the sense of sorrows and sufferings both Aiko and the grandparents have secretly endured. Insofar as Hueyin brings their disparate experiences together under the common grief of strangers, the poetics for recognizing their survival inevitably entails a mournful expression. Aiko’s and Hueyin’s journey to Japan is closed with the symbolic bon dance for commemorating the dead, while Hueyin’s flashbacks to her happy childhood with grandparents are filled with lotus blossoms (the symbol for Nirvana).

Autumn hearts, accordingly, provides the cinematic characters with a resource of inventing a new way of imagining the bonds of affection between the self and the other. The assumption of the community of strangers or exiles who share such a pathos as Autumn hearts, 愁, as the reminder of one’s vulnerability, solitude and dependence sounds a way too much sentimental. The very final shot of a bridge that literally concludes the film, however, appears to signify an active and creative potential of a mournful sentiment. Does the recollection of exteriority of a mother revitalize the susceptibility to and responsibility for the sadness of a stranger as idealized by the film’s sentimentality? If affirmative, we may be able to envision a profile of kinship that is no longer a mere institution for the exclusive as well as selective affiliation on the imaginative extension of the film’s sentimental fabrications.

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