

“Do You Want This Life of Yours?”—Quest for Identity in *Chenmo Zhi Dao*

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The novel *Islands of Silence* by Wei-chen Su, a female writer from Taiwan, explores the identity and roles of women by portraying two characters with the same name, Chenmian, who struggles with her unbearable reality from her family, desperately trying to build a “solid” identity for herself. The character is so eager to have ways out that she imagines another totally different self, with a happy marriage in a lovely family. In the novel, the single Chenmian travels around the world while the alter ego lives a stable life in Taiwan. Through the intertwined story lines of both Chenmians, Su challenged our traditional understanding of female identity; attempted to destabilize the traditional concepts of womanhood. This concept starts with Chenmian’s quest for an essential womanhood, but ends with her realization of its indefiniteness.

Keywords: Wei-chen Su, *Islands of Silence*, womanhood, female sexuality, maternity

Introduction

The title comes from a line most frequently appearing in Wei-chen Su’s novel *Chenmo Zhi Dao* (*Islands of Silence*, 1999), a question the protagonist Chenmian asks herself again and again, which is in fact a paradox for her because she does not know exactly where her life lies. With those frequent self-examinations during her struggles through heterosexual experience, maternity, and family, she tries desperately to constitute a “solid” identity for herself, only to find that all those labels could not guarantee a stable identification.

Quest for Womanhood

As the title of the novel indicates, “island” is an important metaphor that signifies the little feminine space. Critic Iping Liang argues in her article that “the island is a woman, and the novel is about the story of a woman” (2005, p. 345). But exactly how many women are we dealing with here? The Chinese language does not have a manifest distinction between the singularity and plurality of nouns and there is no uniform translation of the title¹. More than that, the plots also challenge our reading expectation for a unified story because in the novel, there are two paralleled story lines, where characters with the same names have different genders, nationalities, and social experiences. The single Chenmian (A) travels around the world, loses virginity to Danny, gets pregnant, and ends up marrying the bisexual Xing, while the married Chenmian (B) stays in Taiwan, steals the virginity of Zu, (whose English name is also Danny), gets pregnant, and aborts their child.

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¹The three English journal articles that I cite here have totally different translation of the title. Liang’s article uses “The Isle of Silence”, and Li-ling Huang translates it into “Islands of Silence”, while Jana Benesova uses “An Island of Silence”.

Such complicated setting receives very controversial responses. Cai Yuanghuang, one of the judges of the first China Times Million Dollar Novel Prize, critiques the confusing split of the protagonists Chenmian, and the unfixed genders of her sibling Chen'an. Another judge Yao Yiwei however considers such writing style a way to blur the boundaries between race, nationality, and gender (Su, 1999, pp. 237-239). The author tends to agree with the second point of view. As Li-ling Huang argues, Su's modernistic narrative language displays her ambitious refusal “to be pinned down to an essential meaning” (2000, p. 2). Beyond linguistic level, Su also tries to challenge the “oneness” that we often ascribe to human identity. Although Chenmian's gender remains female, it is indeed this stable identity that Su wants to draw our attention to through the creation of Chenmian (A) and her alter-ego. Through the totally different experiences of both Chenmian, Su attempts to destabilize the concepts of womanhood. This concept starts with Chenmian's quest for an essential womanhood through her imagination of two versions of herself, but ends with her realization of its indefiniteness.

Chenmian's quest for womanhood is connected with the two deaths of her mother and her sibling respectively. These two incidents produce shocking results in Chenmian. Before her imprisoned mother kills herself, Chenmian imagines another self during her last visit of her. That happened before she continued her study abroad (Su, 1999, p. 12). The second death happened to her sister/brother Chen'an eight years later. Although the ways of their deaths differ in two versions (the sister commits suicide while the brother dies a sudden death), in both versions, Chenmian suffers an unexpected loss as part of herself is destructed. Chenmian (A) feels that “the whole world disappears, leaving her as an incomplete person” (p. 220), while Chenmian (B) feels that she is degraded into “a unicellular plant” (p. 204). The result of the two deaths of her mother and her sister is that Chenmian questions her integrated identity because she is haunted by the loss of her only two family members, her beloved persons. This refusal or incapability to let go the loss of the love-object reflects her melancholic condition.

Melancholia is defined by Sigmund Freud in his 1917 writing on “Melancholia and Mourning”, as “‘a pathological disposition’ that reacts to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (p. 243). This lingering attachment to the loss creates a series of splitting and ambivalence. In melancholia, the patient's ego displays “countless separate struggles” over the lost object, “in which hate and love contend with each other” (p. 256). This love-hatred struggle over the object is also projected into the ego, which could result in, on the one hand, critical activities of the ego, including self-reproaches, self-criticism, shame; and on the other hand, an alter ego split off from the ego, which “might also show its independence in other circumstances” (p. 247). The altered ego establishes “an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object” and such melancholic identification means that “the ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it” (pp. 249-250).

The splitting of the ego and the struggle between the self-critical ego and the altered agency are well displayed in the double storylines that are imagined by Chenmian. Nevertheless, judging from the classical Freudian perspective, there is a vital divergence in *Islands of Silence*. Freud points out that one of the most outstanding characteristics of melancholia is “dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds” (1917, p. 248). In other words, morality to a great extent affects, if not determines, the process of splitting and later incorporation. Freud's theory is based on the assumption that there is something called “solid morality” that human beings can cling to. In Chenmian's case, this would mean the essential morality of being a woman. And if Chenmian's

melancholia is connected to the death of her mother and her sister², then that surely points to the essence of womanhood. But is this “moral womanhood” that Chenmian is searching for? Not really. Jana Benesova points out that the writing style of this novel is “limited-modernist” (2009, p. 397). By “limited-modernistic”, Benesova means that *Islands of Silence* has overall modernistic techniques and a modernistic ending, together with some postmodernist characteristics. The difference between these two techniques lies in the fact that the former mainly deals with “epistemological poetics” while the latter is within the “ontological domain” (p. 397). While the author does have some different reading of the ending—and she will discuss that in the last part of this paper, she does agree that this novel bears a strong modernistic feature. Therefore, the question Chenmian, and maybe the author Wei-chen Su want to ask is not “what counts as a moral woman” but rather “what is a woman”. And obviously, her melancholic imaginations give her some clue to trace the “true” womanhood.

The suicide of Chenmian’s mother initiates her quest for womanhood and there are at least two characteristics of womanhood that her mother represents. Chenmian’s mother, according to her, has lived two lives. Her first life is dedicated to her husband, and their connection is “solely sex” (Su, 1999, p. 12). Her second life, which is “a more depressing one”, is devoted to her children (p. 14). Therefore, on the one hand, Chenmian’s mother symbolizes sexual pursuit; and on the other hand, she represents motherhood. But both sexual pursuit and motherhood are imbedded with two layers of meaning. As Freud analyzes, the melancholic ego is always in conflict struggle between the one that wants to identify with the lost love-object, and the other that detests such identification. Therefore, her mother’s interest in sexuality is projected onto Chenmian as one of the many features that define a woman. This female sexuality however also signifies the limitations of womanhood because women are always the victims of polygamy. Chenmian’s mother’s rebellion against this paternal law leads to her murder of her husband and the loss of her own freedom. This first feminine characteristic is inevitably linked to the second one—her maternity. Although Chenmian’s mother lives her second life for her children, she is at the same time responsible for their loss of father. In other words, while she should be loved by her daughters for her compensation, she is nevertheless hated for her deprivation of their complete family. Such ambiguity towards womanhood is displayed in the duplicative structure of Chenmian (A) and Chenmian (B), which illustrates both sides of the coin, namely, the productivity and danger of sexuality, and love-hatred towards motherhood.

Sexual Quest for Emancipation

If the image of island symbolizes female sexuality, is there a way out of this confined space? Chenmian (A) and Chenmian (B) provide two trajectories of female quest of sexuality. Chenmian (A), the de facto narrator, is a virgin. Her barren sexual experience makes her feel that her life has always been in “stasis” and she compares herself to “an island that has not been explored” (Su, 1999, p. 20). To mold herself after her mother, Chenmian (A) starts a journey around different islands including Hong Kong, Guam, Bali, Singapore, and Taiwan, attempting to find a love relationship that derives from “only primitive intuition and desire” (p. 28). Chenmian (A) does not need a marriage because such a legal alliance does not prevent her father from having sex with other women. Nor does it legitimize her mother’s murder of her father. Instead, what she needs is “a kind of love like that between her parents, a kind of physical need. This kind of love is free from marriage and exterior environment” (p. 32). Her journey on these islands, from this perspective, witnesses her search for physical sexual pleasures.

²From my above analysis, I would consider the “real” Chenmian is the single one, who has a sister. The married one, who has a brother, instead, is only a fantastic imagination, or in Freudian term, an altered ego.

Chenmian (A)’s journey starts from Hong Kong, where she meets a German student Danny, who makes her a woman. Their love extends to other islands, but islands only. As if their relation was a myth that only happened on islands, “their story would continue only when they meet on another island” (p. 45). On those islands, they are engaged in nonproductive sexual activities until one day Danny finds out that Chenmian (A) does not take contraception. In fact, the idea of contraception is a blind spot that never occurs to Chenmian (A). On the one hand, she seems to agree with Danny that “their love does not include marriage and children” (p. 97). This insistence on purely physical pleasure is a lesson that she learns from her mother. But on the other hand, physical pleasure itself is not complete. Chenmian (A) “has missed her father and an integrated love, and she desires a whole family” (p. 109). Her dilemma between love and marriage finally destroys her relationship with Danny. Even within Chenmian (A) herself, it seems that she is split between a fetishization of physical love, and a sense of insecurity that such love is inevitably connected to. Thus, to Chenmian (A), her physical awakening does not provide her a definite concept of womanhood. Rather, she feels that “love is nothing special; it is also very limited” (p. 117). At best, Chenmian (A) now dares to depart the island—the location of her physical pleasure, because her destiny does not lie there anymore.

The married alter ego that Chenmian (A) imagines takes a different approach towards sexual quest but ends with a similar result. Chenmian (B) has always been very practical in the sense that she does not believe in purely physical love. She has been courted by many men but she picks her husband Feng Yi because he is the only one with “sincerity”, or more specifically a marriage proposal (p. 75). Her father often compares her to “an island for tourism”, which has been explored decades ago (p. 48). Chenmian (B) starts having sex at quite an early age but she never feels anything special, not until she meets the virgin Zu/Danny, a Taiwanese American. Zu’s passionate love for her is a brand new experience to Chenmian (B), although physically, she has so much experience that she never thinks that her body would be made into a brand new one due to Zu’s inspiration. She always thinks to herself, “my life has settled, and it is impossible for me to change”, until she has sex with Zu, “the explorer of her body, the one she is waiting for till this day” (p. 68). It is Zu who makes Chenmian (B) realize the importance, or even essence of physical love and desire. But their relationship stops, almost in a sudden, because of her encounter of Zu’s monstrous mother and her abandonment of their child. She loses to Zu’s mother in their fight over Zu, and she has no intention to keep Zu’s child either. In the end, Chenmian (B) “has to return to her family, and she is destined to remain there” (p. 206).

Love-Hatred Towards Motherhood

Identified with her mother’s physical quest, Chenmian does not seem to find a definite womanhood. But there is another female characteristic in her mother that Chenmian is aware of. The second life of her mother symbolizes maternity. As Chenmian (A)’s melancholic splitting goes, this mother figure could turn into a “beautiful, inconsiderate, and thoughtful” one, as that of Chenmian (B) (Su, 1999, p. 14). Or it could turn into a monstrous one, like that of Zu, who defeats Chenmian (B) and “devours” her sons.

The ideal mother of Chenmian (B) remains in the shadow most of the time. The second time she appears in the novel—besides her first appearance that the author described above, she weeps for her dead son. Therefore, her image is a stereotypically passive one. She is indeed a silent island, albeit that she nourishes two children wholeheartedly. If this mother figure is what Chenmian (A) also tries to identify with—although in real life, the maternal care is dislocated by her imprisonment, this identification also generates hatred towards the mother that Chenmian (B) has to fight against with.

The mother of Zu represents the monstrosity of maternity. Indeed, her life is dedicated to her sons, but such dedication also means her pathological grasp onto her sons. Zu confesses that, “My mother knows only one thing in her entire life—occupation. Many years later did I begin to believe that she has never loved me or my brother” (p. 60). His postulation is confirmed by his mother, who reveals her inner secrets to Chenmian (B) that she will never let go of his sons, not to their lovers. Zu’s mother is irreversibly in love with her sons, because “she feels a sense of security if she can make love to them. Such security is missing in her intercourse with Zu’s father, and his step-father” (p. 141). Her life is her best weapon and her continuous suicidal attempts, and finally her death drives Zu away from Chenmian (B). When Chenmian (B) asks Zu whether he chooses his mother or her, she is destined to lose, because her alter ego is so desperate to identify with the mother. Zu decides to leave Taiwan, with his love-hatred towards his mother and Chenmian (B). After Zu’s departure, Chenmian discovers that she is pregnant but she is afraid that this baby will certainly carry “an innate hatred towards the mother”, just as Zu does (p. 204). Her decision to abort this baby finally cuts off her connection with Zu and her maternity. As the author’s previous analysis reveals, she returns to where she was.

Chenmian (B)’s story ends on a silent island. This version of her story is not only a melancholic fantasy that Chenmian (A) imagines, but is also based on what happened to Chen’an, her sister. Unlike both Chenmians, who, through quest of physical love and maternity, try to overcome the loss of the mother, Chen’an’s life is fixed long time ago. Chen’an does not have the ability to love because the type of love she has received is “from females such as her grandmother and her mother. She has never received any male love, not even in her marriage”, as Chenmian recalls. Sometimes, Chenmian feels that “if she [Chen’an] was a homosexual, she might have enjoyed a happy life” (p. 99). That explains why in Chenmian (B)’s version, Chen’an is turned into a homosexual. Sadly, in this version, both sister and brother fall in love with Zu, who has already given his life to his mother. Chen’an cannot find a way out because she is denied access to both sexual love and maternity. She does not even start a melancholic identification before she kills herself.

The death of Chen’an crushes Chenmian’s splitting ego in a constructive sense. Chenmian (B) disappears because of her failed quest for sexual love and maternity. Chenmian (A) instead decides to keep the baby, because that is the only way to incorporate both losses of her mother and her sister. “When the doctor announced her pregnancy, she once again hears a clear splitting. The world surrounding her collapses quickly: first Chen’an, and then ‘that real Chenmian’ also fall down accordingly. A new realm is under rebirth” (p. 228). For the first time, Chenmian feels she is integrating because she incorporates Danny, who brings her sexual pleasure, and Chen’an, who is reincarnated as her baby.

Performativity Within the Family

The ending of the story once again provokes very different readings. After readers are bothered by the fictionality and reality of both Chenmians, the novel ends with the single Chenmian taking over the narrative: “Now she knows exactly where she breathes, and it is not the abstract sexuality; she no longer has any relationship with ‘the other Chenmian’” (Su, 1999, p. 233). Chenmian (A) decides to keep Danny’s baby, and marries the homosexual Xing. After her journey for love and womanhood, she finally finds one within a family. This ending seems quite frustrating to some critics. For instance, Benesova argues, “Wei-chen Su does not present us with a promising solution to Chenmian’s situation... It is as if the only way left in Wei-chen Su’s quest for the true love is a gradual descent into *silence*” (2009, p. 398). Chenmian, according to Benesova, ends up in silence because she falls into the institution of family, where her quest for womanhood ceases. I have a different interpretation of

this ending because to me, Chenmian’s marriage and her incoming motherhood are not her surrender to the fixed female identities but rather her subversion from within.

As Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, there is no so-called “exterior subversion” that can transcend or overthrow the paternal law.

The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law’s self-amplification and proliferation... If subversion is possible, it will be subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. (2004, p. 119)

If we examine the family that Chenmian establishes, it indeed signifies her subversion within the law. Although at first glance, Chenmian’s marriage and pregnancy testify both the deployment of alliance and deployment of sexuality (Foucault, 1978, p. 107), her marriage and maternity actually are not related to sexuality or reproduction. Chenmian marries the homosexual Xing because he, like Danny, has “a Western ancestry”, which could ensure the legal birth of the baby. And this baby, as the author discusses above, symbolizes Chenmian’s melancholic incorporation of Chen’an. As Chenmian recalls early in the novel, “She and Chen’an owe their mother, who lives for them. But Chen’an does not want a child and she is not sure whether she wants marriage” (p. 35). Therefore, Chenmian’s decision to stay in the familial institution reveals her final incorporation of her mother and Chen’an, and the fatal womanhood they symbolize. This decision also reveals Chenmian’s performativity which “destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire” of womanhood (Butler, 2004, p. 177). Chenmian could be labeled as a wife and mother, but these are just two of the many naturalized gender roles that she chooses to perform. Indeed, after her journey of quest for womanhood, she only discovers that it can be performed within.

Regardless of the author’s positive reading of this ending, she is not so positive whether Wei-chen Su has provided women an as promising solution as the one she provides Chenmian. Chenmian’s quest and successful play with her identity start with loss and fantastical imagination. As Butler argues in *Undoing Gender*: “fantasy is essential to an experience of one’s own body, or that of another, as gendered” because it “allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (2004, pp. 15, 29). If that is the case, then maybe our fantasy starts with our reading experience and imagination that goes beyond our real lives.

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