

Forbidden Imaginations

Three Chinese Narratives on Mother-Son Incest

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of incest in contemporary Chinese fiction. Specifically, it looks at three short stories by Chinese woman writers, focusing its discussion on their relation to psychoanalytic models, the significance of trauma and causality and the arising discourses on incestuous desire. It asks the following questions: To what extent do incest narratives challenge or reinforce extant norms on sexual relations? What are the ethical implications of these stories for (de)situating incest within the popular erotic imagination? The analysis indicates that in articulating the occurrence of incest, different narrative trajectories project divergent discourses on consanguineous sex. The various guises in which the Oedipal narrative is replayed also reveal the tensions and anxieties involved in representing the culturally tabooed.

Introduction

The status of the incest theme in Chinese literature, traditional or modern, may at best be described as ‘shady’. A minor motif in seventeenth-century vernacular fiction, it figures in Chinese urban tales on irregular kinship structures and erotic excursions. Where it does occur, it is usually treated obliquely, that is, in the guise of “certain second-degree relationships of special relevance to traditional Chinese society” (Plaks 1994: 125), such as those between cousins and sworn-siblings. Such relationships are “‘pseudo-incestuous’ entanglements based on ties by marriage and adoption, figural substitutions and retroactive changes of status” (Plaks 1994: 126), readily observable in such vernacular novels as *Jin Ping Mei* and *Hong Lou Meng* as well as many shorter stories. Some of these entanglements may have been construed consciously as part of an erotic tradition in popular writing;¹ others may have been covertly present in genres far removed from the erotic, and therefore need to be invoked through a gendered reading. It is not immediately obvious, for instance, that incest taboo is at work in the classic novel *Sanguo yanyi* between Guan Yu, the quintessential Chinese hero, and the wives of his sworn brother Liu Bei.

¹ For example, Mc Mahon (1988: 96) cites the story “Laopozi jiu pingui zexu” (The Mother Who Saves Her Sex by Luring a Son-in-Law), seen in the erotic collection *Yipian qing* (Expanse of Passion), where a mother seduces the prospective husbands of her daughter, who suffers from the bizarre condition of a sealed hymen. Here the incest taboo arises from the substitution of the mother for her daughter in sexual acts with potential sons-in-law.

As Kam Louie argues, Guan Yu distances himself from his quasi-sisters-in-law in order to emphatically project his allegiance to sacred brotherhood, which is accorded a higher social value than sexual relationships in the novel. A Freudian reading of his dreams, however, reveals his repressed desire to breach sexual proprieties with Liu's wives, with possible implications for power struggles (Louie 2002: 31-32).

Indeed the occurrence of incest in Chinese literature is seldom taken on its face value. This potential to be extrapolated beyond the narrative plane is also what makes the incest plot intriguing. It could, for instance, be interpreted as symptomatic of a destabilized social and political order. Tina Lu's (2008) account of stories of 'accidental', mostly unconsummated, union among family members separated in a time of dynastic upheaval demonstrates how incestual relationships have come to take on larger, analogical meanings beyond the individual and the immediate familial structure. Here aberrant relationships point to the breaking down of kinship order, hence the Chinese term for incest: *luanlun* or "confusing the normative relations" (Lu 2008: 68), "the overturning of kin or, more precisely, of hierarchically arranged social relations" (Chow 2004: 135). Such confusion/overturning, in turn, is often parallel to fundamental changes in the socio-political realm, such as the collapse of a political regime. Thus, disruptions to the moral and political orders are mutually implicated via a "cross-reflection between the microcosm of the family and the macrocosm of the Empire" (Plaks 1994: 136).

The same line of interpretation has proved relevant even for modern fiction, where incest is seen to embody an anti-patriarchal stance in accord with the counter-tradition master narrative that is operative during the May Fourth era. This leads on to Oedipal readings that privilege gender politics, according to which stories about amorous sons and their surrogate mothers set in early modern China invariably stage 'progressive' young men against tyrannical, feudalistic fathers (Lieberman 1998: 51-75). Incest thus turns into a politicized gesture fused with the impassioned protagonists' double desire for older women and youthful modernity. In this regard Cao Yu's classic dramatic piece *Thunderstorms (Lei Yu)* is exemplary. Its portrayal of complex dalliances between step-relatives in a traditional Chinese family evokes inter-generational rife in a modern China inflected with ideological tension. The correlation between family order and social stability observed in classical literature thus persists in the works of this period, except that within the political economy of modern China, tabooed relationships are invested with a 'progressive', anti-establishment ethic. In this context, fictional incest is imbued with the (positive) values of defiance and non-conformity, and mediates the dialectic between individual and society, freedom and oppression.

There are several other cases in Chinese literature where incest surfaces either as a central theme or more tangentially as a subplot.² But the general rubric of 'incest literature' encompasses literary works that represent varying kinship configurations and degrees of proximity. Many of the incestual relations represented are those between people who are related not by blood but by virtue of the institution of marriage. These are mitigated forms of quasi-incest that can be seen as attempts to represent the tension between romance and blood ties

² See Chapman Chen's article (Zeng 2000) for a brief history and commentary of 'kunisexual' literature stretching from traditional to contemporary China. 'Kunisexual literature' is a term coined by Chen (2002) in place of 'incest literature' to avoid the derogatory connotations of the latter term. This coinage is motivated by Chen's agenda to defend 'kunisexual' behavior against the incest taboo. It does not seem to have gained currency in the research literature.

without having to confront “the most extreme possible affront to the foundation of moral order” (Plaks 1994: 123): consanguineous incest. Some contemporary writers have begun to take a step deeper into the tabooed territory and address sexual relations between blood relatives. I have in mind not the erotic desire between brothers and sisters – considered “least reprehensible” in the modern incestual imagination (Ford 1998: 3) – but that between real mothers and sons.

It was earlier mentioned that the sexual misadventures between young men and their step-mothers are a visible trope in May Fourth literature that expresses anti-feudal sentiments. By contrast, stories about sexual entanglements between real mothers and sons display a rather different dynamic. Otto Rank (1912/1992: 301) observes that the mother-son union is seen as “a more serious infraction” than the father-daughter union (not to mention brother-sister union) because of the “internal, physical blood relationship” that underlies the bond between mother and son. The son, after all, originates from the mother’s vagina and so to perform incest is to return, even imaginatively, to the mother-body, to perform a life-producing act in the body that produces him. It is this flesh-and-blood tie – in Chinese, it would be a ‘bone-and-flesh’ tie, as embodied in the equivalent word *gurou* – that causes such union to be inscrutable and therefore culturally unrepresentable:³ it raises the question of how incest can/should be narrated. Conceivably the prohibition is intense in Chinese literature, where Confucian values work, albeit to varying degrees, against the violation of moral order and the “horror of excess” (Plaks 1994: 137). This is what makes their literary representation an interesting subject of study.

Oedipalization and Contemporary Chinese Fiction

Fictional incest may be described in terms of two degree categories: *consanguinity* (whether the parties involved are related by blood, and, if so, to what extent) and *overtness* (whether the incestual passion is explicitly addressed or merely hinted at, and/or whether the sexual act is consummated). The two vectors form a matrix, from which various configurations can be derived, namely: consanguineous incest treated overtly; consanguineous incest treated covertly; non-consanguineous incest treated overtly; non-consanguineous incest treated covertly.

If one attempts to find textual examples to claim the thematic presence of incest in contemporary Chinese fiction, one will invariably be successful, so long as we maintain a flexible definition that covers most of the above configurations.⁴ A well-known Chinese example is Liu Heng’s novella *The Obsessed (Fuxi Fuxi)*, where a young peasant engages his step-aunt (in effect, surrogate mother) in a sexual relationship after the death of his uncle. An allegorical reading would ascribe to this incestual event the values of equality, anarchy and individualism in rural China (Huot 1993: 94).⁵ In the film adaptation of this story by acclaimed director Zhang Yimou, however, the incest motif is ‘oedipalized’, where the Freudian logic of incest is

³ I borrow this expression from the Taiwanese scholar Chang Hsiao-hung (Zhang 2000), who uses the term in her intriguing study of the sexual politics of Tsai Ming-liang’s film-text *The River*.

⁴ This is testified in two surveys of the incest theme in Chinese literature: Zeng (2000) and Chan (2002).

⁵ However, the protagonist’s renouncement of his transgressive act for economic reasons leads to his eventual suicide. The lofty implications of incest for the individual may thus be undercut by factors beyond the ethical-moral. In a regime where community ensures survival, a violation of patrilinear conventions through incest, together with its perceived quality of individualism, can only lead to violence and death.

intensified and showcased as an exotic display of Chinese “primitive passions” (see Chow 1995: 146-148).

But only rarely do we encounter fictional works that belong squarely to the first configuration above, even in the Western tradition. This is especially so when we further zoom into the mother-son dyad under the consanguinity dimension; as mentioned above, sexual intimacy between mother and son is more sensitive and prohibitive than that between father and daughter and between brother and sister.⁶ Works that deal with mother-son incest in direct fashion are therefore unique in both their choice of participants and their treatment of the problematic relation. In the following sections, I attempt a close reading of three such stories by contemporary Chinese woman writers: “Near Dusk” (*Jin huanghun shi*) by Ouyang Tzu (b. 1939), “Gluttony” (*Tao Tie*) by Wong Bik-wan (b. 1958), and “The Son” (*Erzi*) by Chen Xue (b. 1970).

The three pieces were written at different times and in different milieu. Ouyang Tzu was among the ranks of the first generation of modernist writers in Taiwan to emerge in the 1960s, which includes Pai Hsien-yung (b. 1937), Wang Wen-hsing (b. 1939) and Chen Ruo-xi (b. 1938), all canonical authors in contemporary Chinese literature.⁷ Though more renowned as a literary critic than a fictional writer, Ouyang was one of the first (woman) writers to experiment with the form of the psychological novel. Her representative collection *Autumn Leaves* (*Qiuyue*) contains 14 short stories, many of which portray psychological states that would appear bizarre at the time of their publication.⁸ Her representative work “Demon Girl” (*Monü*), which depicts a motherly figure who reveals her sexual depravity for a most irresponsible man, is touted by Pai Hsien-yung as one of the best works that intricately explore human psychology in contemporary Chinese fiction (Bai 1978a). It is for the same reason that *Autumn Leaves* was severely criticized on ‘moral’ grounds for its at times extreme portrayal of human emotion.⁹ In this light, the incest plot in “Near Dusk” must be seen as contributing to the overall thematic thrust of the collection.

Also from Taiwan but belonging to a much younger generation than Ouyang, Chen Xue is a prolific novelist best known for her explicit depictions of the female body. Due to this writing disposition, it is not surprising that her novels exude intense female subjectivities and readily offer gendered interpretations. The sexually graphic nature of “The Son” is therefore in accord with Chen’s sensual style, even though it is to date the only piece in her oeuvre to deal with mother-son incest. Although the male protagonist assumes the role of first-person narrator in the story, his Oedipal gaze directs readers’ attention to the mother’s body, which becomes the site of sexual tension in the narrative.

⁶ The most prohibitive incestual dyad is, of course, that between father and son, which, on top of sexual involution, is further compounded with a homoerotic dimension. Occurrence of this type of incest is extremely rare. Tsai Ming-liang’s film *The River* presents an example of this case, see Zhang (2000) and Chow (2004).

⁷ Ouyang was part of this team of young writers at the Department of Foreign Languages, National Taiwan University, who started the journal *Xiandai wenxue* (Modern Literature) in 1960. The journal aimed to introduce Western literary theories and promote Chinese modernist writing, and became an important landmark publication in the development of a radical and new aesthetics in Taiwan.

⁸ The collection was first published under the title *Na chang toufa de nühai* (That Long-Haired Girl) in 1967 (Taipei: Wenxing), then extended and republished as *Qiuyue* in 1971 (Taipei: Chenzhong), and finally published in a second revised version in 1980 (Taipei: Erya). This article uses the latest edition.

⁹ For one such critic and Pai Hsien-yung’s response, see Bai (1978b).

Wong Bik-wan is a veteran Hong Kong novelist whose early works are often read in relation to the historical-political context of the ex-colony's 1997 handover to China. Her works of fiction are seen to invoke Hong Kong's nostalgia for the past in the face of an uncertain political future (Ng 2008); they have also been interpreted as constituting an *écriture féminine*, a distinctively women's writing voicing out within the interstices of male hegemony (Wang 2002). Wong's penchant for gory death, unmitigated violence and convoluted passion marks her best works, through which she "has carved out a unique place for herself in Hong Kong literature by representing what hitherto has appeared to be the unrepresentable" (Lau 1999: 162). The last comment by critic Joseph Lau is relevant here, because incest is one of those unrepresentable events in modern culture. "Gluttony" is the first installment of the 'seven sins' series of short stories,¹⁰ a designation that has unmistakable religious overtones. While "Gluttony" has incest as its central theme, each of the other stories works on one of the remaining six 'sins': lust, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

Given that the three stories are written by women authors with very different backgrounds, it would be interesting to see how they represent the sensitive theme of mother-son incest in their own ways, as well as the theoretical implication of such representations. What function, allegorical or otherwise, does mother-son incest play in such fiction? What kind of sexual imaginary is invoked by such a highly prohibitive relationship? To answer these questions, this article focuses its discussion on three aspects: the degree to which the story plots subscribe to the classic oedipal narrative, the role of trauma and causality in the justification of incest and the ensuing sexual discourses that arise from these texts.

(Anti-)Oedipal Narratives

The Oedipal narrative has become the universal conceptual method for all discourses on incestual relationships of the mother-son variety. Like all other narratives, it operates on its own logic and assumptions, three of which are salient for our purposes. The first concerns the role of the father: he is, by default, the obstacle to mother-son union and must therefore be removed before such union can materialize. He must be absent, either physically by way of death (as in the mythical version), or metaphorically by way of symbolic castration, in order to create a vacuum in the familial structure and allow a reconfiguration of kinship relations. Second, incest can occur only when the participants involved are unaware of their consanguineous relation at the time of the sexual act, leading to an eventual 'shock of recognition'. The assumption is, of course, that a mother-son pair does not engage in sexual activity when consciously aware of their blood ties – the hypothesis of natural aversion (Arens 1986, chapter 5). A conscious union between mother and son is seen to be heretical beyond cultural imagination and therefore unutterable in literature. Third, the transgressive act leads to punitive outcomes.¹¹

Starting out as a myth, the Oedipal drama forms the basis of one of the most powerful theories on human sexuality. As classic psychoanalytic reasoning would have it, the son

¹⁰ These stories published under the title "Seven Sins" (Qizong zui) in Taiwan but as "Seven Kinds of Silence" (Qizhong jingmo) in Hong Kong.

¹¹ Note, however, that while the version of the Oedipus tale used by Sigmund Freud has the protagonist blind himself after the shock of recognition, the Homeric version has a non-tragic resolution, where Oedipus is crowned king. See Ford (1998: 10).

inherently fantasizes the mother and seeks to displace the father's position so as to fulfill his incestuous desire.¹² At the same time, as the son poses a potential threat to the father, he feels constantly at risk of being denied his manhood by his father, thus leading to a siege mentality called 'castration anxiety'. Both myth and theory are premised on heterosexual male-centredness: it is the son who is afforded the sexual libido and who inflicts it on the passivized mother. An Oedipal reading is adopted here not because it is a 'standard' frame of reference, but because the three stories we will examine here take up different positions vis-à-vis the classic Freudian pattern. It is such deviance that is of interest to us.

Chen Xue's "The Son" observes the basic Oedipal plot, where the first-person narrator's hatred of his defunct father and longing for his subservient mother constitutes the central conflict in the story. The tale is replete with stereotypical elements of a broken Chinese family: a father irredeemably mired in gambling and alcohol, a languishing mother irrationally attached to her husband and a rebellious and handsome young son who seeks to protect his mother from the tyrannical father. With these stock elements in place, the Oedipal tale as we know it is set to roll out, and so it does. The first formula to be enacted is the son's patricidal desire. Eventually the son does not kill his father, but has such an intense hatred for him that when the father does eventually die of illness, he responds in such a way as one would when his/her arch-enemy is destroyed: "That fellow has finally died! ... That fellow, he must have had his limbs amputated, eyes blinded, kidneys failed and all his organs malfunctioned before he died... How long have I waited for this day! It's a shame I did not get to see the way he breathed his last" (Chen 2006: 11).¹³

The father as antagonist serves a critical role in the story, as he both blockades and facilitates the narrator's desire for his mother. His failure to perform the traditional masculine role creates a space for the son's later usurpation of this role. But his very presence as the senior male member of the family also frustrates the narrator's attempt to gain the desired attention of his mother. In a recurring memory sequence, the narrator recalls how his mother would take him on an aimless search of his father on the streets on late nights, during which she would be so engrossed in locating her husband that it was "as though she had forgotten [her son's] existence" (Chen 2006: 21). The father would, of course, gradually lose his symbolic position due to ailing health. The amputation of his right leg is readily a symbolic castration of his maleness and his eventual death is crucial in producing an absence for the son to fill. The narrator, however, finds himself unable to fill the gap immediately, as the figure of the Father remains a haunting specter in his mother's imagination:

But I am in such sorrow that I feel like howling. I hammer hard on the walls of the shower room. That fellow is better off than me even when he's dead. I can't destroy him no matter what I do. The worse off he becomes, the more compassionate Mother is toward him. And when he dies,

¹² This is one out of two possible options, usually referred to as the 'positive' Oedipal complex, its 'negative' counterpart being the case where the son/daughter identifies with the parent of the same sex. The bipolar designation here already implies a heterosexual (constructed as the 'positive') inflection to Freud's theory. Thus, according to Butler (1990: 64), the taboo against incest is preceded by that against homosexuality, such that the sexuality of the child is predetermined by the taboo institution before he or she enters the Oedipal stage. See also Butler (2000) on how the incest taboo de-legitimizes or 'derealizes' non-normative forms of sexuality.

¹³ All translations from the Chinese texts are my own.

she will long for him endlessly and imagine him into a better person: she will remember only the young, perfect Father and forget all the pain he inflicted on her in the past. (Chen 2006: 12)

At the end of the story, the narrator finally consummates with his mother. But it is important to note that in the build-up to this climactic scene, his psychological tribulations revolving around the Oedipal triangle point toward the pervasive threat of the father, whose very presence defines the incest taboo. That explains why the narrator's actual quest for his mother begins only *after* the father's actual death – prior to that, he leads a self-exiled existence at the margins of the family, shutting his mother out of his life for eight years. This period of exile is indicative of the incest taboo at work: the father, even though in dire straits, holds such symbolic power over the son that the latter is deterred from transgressing, due to an innate fear of being castrated. This is the very source of the narrator's long-term sexual frustration. To this extent, the narrator's sexual preoccupation with his girlfriend can simultaneously be read as an attempt to divert his libido energies away from his mother and as an attempt to vent his castration anxiety.

Just as the mother's absence or incapacity often lays the ground for father-daughter interactions in incest narratives (Ford 1998), so the demise, or otherwise nonappearance, of the father is often the precondition for any transgressive possibilities between son and mother. In Ouyang Tzu's "Near Dusk", the father/husband Yong-fu is absent from the start of the story (supposedly on a business trip) and appears only intermittently in the streams of consciousness of the mother/wife Li-fen and through the housemaid's monologue. Indeed Li-fen often convinces herself that she has no husband (Ouyang 1980: 126, 135), which means the latter is *de facto* absent in her mental world. The son, Ji-wei, faces a different problem in fulfilling his incestuous desire from the protagonist in "The Son": his mother hates him. Worse of all, it is an irrational hatred bordering on the schizophrenic. Through multiple, limited points-of-view, we are told that at the time Ji-wei was born, Li-fen started hating him for resembling her husband instead of her, and for no apparent reason at that. She instead doted on her elder son Rui-wei who happened to resemble her. The young Rui-wei was killed in a car accident partly due to the negligence of his father. This traumatic event haunts Li-fen for most of her life, causing her to marginalize both her husband and Ji-wei, who is the husband's double by virtue of resemblance. The sexually frustrated Ji-wei then projects his persona onto his friend Yu-bin (with whom he has a homoerotic relationship), persuades Yu-bin into seducing Li-fen and then voyeurs on them. Li-fen, on her part, sees Yu-bin as the double of her beloved dead son Rui-wei and devotes all her emotions on him to compensate for the loss of her son. When Yu-bin decides to leave the malfunctioned family, he is pierced with a knife by Ji-wei in vengeance.

The extensive use of doubles is unmistakably Freudian here, so it is unsurprising that some of the complex psychological operations at work are amenable to procedures of psychoanalysis. Indeed, as one of the pioneers in Taiwan's literary modernism in the 1960s, Ouyang Tzu intentionally pursued Freudian theories and applied them to the design of her works (Lee 1996: 184). As an incest story, "Near Dusk" boasts an ambitious concept, particularly in the Chinese-literary context, where no one prior to Ouyang had attempted to combine incest and homosexuality within a single narrative (even today, such an enterprise is arguably still daring). Two points are worth highlighting here. First, incest is realized overtly but obliquely, with Yu-bin serving as a surrogate on two sides. While Ji-wei performs imaginary incest with his mother by having a sexual relationship with her young lover Yu-bin, Li-fen fulfills her erotic yearning

for her dead son Rui-wei through her rendezvous with Yu-bin, who is imagined to be of the same age and height as Rui-wei, should the latter still be alive (Ouyang 1980: 122). Second, the mother figure here has a much stronger subjectivity with intense erotic (and neurotic) sensibilities, as compared to her counterpart in “The Son”. She is at once the object of desire of her younger son and his nemesis: “Let me tame him. I have my way to deal with him.” (Ouyang 1980: 124) In the face of Yu-bin/Rui-wei, by contrast, she is reduced to total weakness. In the final analysis, therefore, we still have a senior male member standing between Ji-wei and his mother, and this time instead of the father, it is the dead elder brother, in the incarnation of his double. The sexual relationship between Li-fen and Yu-bin establishes Rui-wei as the symbolic father of the family. In this sense, Ji-wei’s knifing of Yu-bin fulfills the ‘patricidal prophecy’ – the son kills, albeit only as a gesture, the symbolic father. Despite the added complexity in kinship-erotic networks, the main characters do not eventually escape the basic Oedipal configuration.

Wong Bik-wan’s “Gluttony” offers an alternative paradigm, with all its implications for gender politics. Here it is not the sexually active son who craves for the mother’s body, but the other way around: the wife/mother Ru-ai is the predator, the sexual ‘glutton’ who preys like “a beautiful, insatiable animal” (Huang 1997: 130) on men, including her adolescent son Dong-dong. Significantly, the husband/father Zi-han has a strong presence; indeed the story is narrated from his point-of-view. But just as in father-daughter narratives, mothers may be “physically present, but absent as effective agents for change” (Ford 1998: 21), Zi-han is symbolically absent as a fatherly figure, despite his pivotal role in the story: he is sexually impotent. Here again the symbolic castration signifying the loss of masculinity is the protagonist’s central problem. The castrated father thus remains central in the *inverted* Oedipal triangle, and the story unfolds as he tries in vain to frustrate his wife’s sexual advances toward their son. When Zi-han refuses to share the bed with Ru-ai, preferring rather to sleep in the living room:

Ru-ai covers his [Zi-han’s] face with the magazines. With a frail tone she says to Dong-dong, “Your father wants me no more. Do you want me?” Zi-han listens on stealthily. “Sleep with me, I’m scared.” He hears not Dong-dong’s reply, but the sound of Ru-ai caressing Dong-dong with her fingernails. Dong-dong has now the hairy legs of a grown-up man. Zi-han can’t bear to listen to all these. He turns and buries his head in the pillows. (Huang 1997: 136)

Throughout the story Zi-han is subjected to a perennial identity crisis, the analogical counterpart to the nuclear crisis with which he is coping as an engineer at the start of the story. Ru-ai is the primary antagonist in this regard, as it is she rather than the son who constantly threatens Zi-han’s masculine existence. Just as Zi-han is relegated to the status of a puppet husband deprived of sexual functions, the son is infantilized by being subject to his mother’s obsession. Interestingly there is little resistance on the part of the son – in more conventional narratives, he would have been an angst-driven teenager breaking out of parental control; by the close of the story, he quite willingly succumbs to Ru-ai’s possessive shelter. It is rather Zi-han who struggles to disengage Dong-dong from his mother on the pretext of saving his son: he encourages Dong-dong to date girls and cautions him to lock the door to his room when he sleeps at night or changes his clothes (Huang 1997: 139), presumably to prevent his mother’s sexual exploitations.

But ultimately, Zi-han does these to protect not his flesh and blood but his own sense of self. This explains why after instigating Dong-dong to bring his girl friends home to challenge Ru-ai's obsession, he "feels safe for the first time, as safe as one who awaits a blood-sucking vampire with a cross and garlic in hand." (Huang 1997: 140)¹⁴ When his son is unconscious with a high fever, "for an instant he wants Dong-dong dead, which would leave Ru-ai with nothing." (Huang 1997: 146) Thus, instead of coupling incest with patricide as per the Oedipal model, we have the case of a quasi-prolicide, wherein a father desires to kill his son, with the aim of avenging a mother/wife's incestuous desire and resolving the father/husband's identity crisis. A feminist reading would work well here, but equally interesting is how the reversal of Oedipal roles and a narrative focus on the incapacitated father reveal the circulation of erotic energy surrounding social and gender roles within the 'nuclear' (with a phonetic pun on the nuclear reference in the story, which also works in the Chinese language) family.

This circulation of erotic energy is central to understanding the dynamics of mother-son incest narratives. As we have seen, variations on the Oedipal pattern hinge on the direction of this energy and the role of the fatherly figure. In "The Son" and "Near Dusk", the son's sexual impetus is directed toward his mother, only to be blocked by an intermediary, senior male member (father and elder brother respectively) of the family. These roles are reversed in "Gluttony", where it is the father rather than the son who undergoes sexual frustration. The father is by no means always the dramatic nexus – in "Near Dusk", he does not even appear in his own right. In "The Son" and "Gluttony", he functions as the necessary obstacle between mother and son, and in each case he is dephallicized through amputation or impotence to generate turbulence in the patriarchal structure. In all three stories, the removal of the father, physically or metaphorically, is essential to the unfolding of the incest drama. The different paths of sexual desire and varying roles of the father point to the complex ways in which these incest narratives appropriate the Oedipus constellation to foreground certain discourses relating to the family. In this regard, "The Son" is most conservative in its invocation of the patricidal motif and the active son/passive mother dyad. It thus reinforces gender hierarchy at the same time as it attempts to destabilize the familial order. This hierarchy is subverted in "Gluttony", where both father and son are compromised on their perceived masculine qualities, hence offering a cynical perspective on established relations among gender, sex and the family.

Trauma and Causality

Causality is one of the essential ingredients of fiction. This is largely attributed to our embeddedness within cause-effect narratives in real life, which in turn affects our horizon of expectation in reading literature. As neatly summarized by Booth (1983: 126),

our desire for causal completion is one of the strongest of interests available to the author. Not only do we believe that certain causes do in life produce certain effects; in literature we believe that they should. Consequently, we ordinary readers will go to great lengths, once we have been

¹⁴ The vampire metaphor used here is revealing in light of James Twitchell's imaginative reading of gothic novels with an incestual twist. According to this reading, blood is symbolic of semen, and blood-sucking is "a displacement of other more overtly sexual acts" (Twitchell 70).

caught up by an author who knows how to make use of this interest, to find out whether our demands will be met.

When it comes to transgressive actions of such extremity as incest, there is a strong impetus to subject them to the cause-effect frame of explanation. This is exemplified by pathological, Freudian-influenced perspectives on actual incest occurrences, invariably seen as motivated by some traceable psychological trauma experienced by abused or neurotic individuals (see, for example, Saradjian and Hanks 1996). Fictional representations of incest too employ the buffer of psychological justifications. This could be due to a perceived need on the part of authors to rationally explain deviant behavior so that, in the spirit of fictional realism, it comes across as something that *can happen*. Supplying the psychological foundation of incestual acts further mitigates the appalling force of such acts, rendering them culturally thinkable – hence representable – in the erotic imaginary.

In the Chinese literary context, where the tolerance threshold for sexual aberrance is relatively low, the perceived demand for causal explanations is likely to be strong. This is testified by the correlation between traumatic personal experiences and incestuous motivations in the fictional construction of abnormal individuals. The centrality of trauma is most evident in “Near Dusk”. The author traces the origin of Li-fen’s obsession with young men to the loss of her beloved son in a freak accident. In particular, her lover Yu-bin evokes in her the (imagined) image of her late son, which easily corroborates the theory of transference in psychoanalysis (Anderson and Berk 1998). We are also told that Li-fen’s husband Yong-fu is twenty years her senior (he is sixty years old at the time of the story’s present time), is often away from home and remains in Li-fen’s mind wholly responsible for Rui-wei’s death. The wide age gap, the frequent absence of the husband and Li-fen’s grudge against him converge to create the narrative conditions that ‘facilitate’ Li-fen’s adulterous/quasi-incestuous act in the story. In other words, justification for incest manifests in some form of *lack*, or ‘hollowing-out’ in Li-fen’s emotional world: the premature death of her elder son and the virtual non-existence of her husband (one could also say she banishes her husband out of her mental world as his punishment for allegedly causing Rui-wei’s death). Here Li-fen takes on the double role of woman and mother, and it is this doubling that generates her incestuous drama with Yu-bin. In her encounter with the young man, she is at once a woman with sexual needs (she has an ageing husband whom she cannot forgive) and a mother tortured by fond memories of her dead son.

On the other hand, the younger son Ji-wei’s erotic fervor toward Li-fen is premised on his perpetual lack of motherly love – recall that he has been abhorred by Li-fen since his birth and emotionally marginalized thereafter. This childhood trauma motivates Ji-wei’s desire for the motherly figure, which he gratifies obliquely through the mediation of Yu-bin’s sexual body. But how do we reconcile Ji-wei’s obsession with his mother and his sexual act with Yu-bin in this apparently trans-sexual negotiation of desire? To achieve this, the narrator remains ambivalent about Ji-wei’s sexuality throughout the story. We are told that he makes wooden human carvings that are dismembered and that look neither male nor female and that he has no girlfriends (Ouyang 1980: 133). Insofar as this might be a clue about Ji-wei’s bi-sexuality, it provides support to his complex sexual engagements with Li-fen and Yu-bin. But as I will argue later, this fusing in of homosexual sensualities also dilutes the intensity of incest in the story.

The apparent logicity of the behavior of the two main characters – that is, a distinct cause-effect chain is traceable – is undermined by Li-fen’s polarized attitudes toward her two children. We are told through the perspective of the housemaid that “when Ji-wei was born, [Li-fen] took a look at him and disliked him. [She] said: ‘He does not look like me. He is not my son. He is Yong-fu’s son.’” To start with, how conceivable is it for a mother to dislike her child at its birth, simply for the reason that this child does not resemble her? We must remember that at this point, Rui-wei’s tragic accident has not yet happened, so Li-fen is not the schizophrenic that she would later become. Apart from the resemblance issue, no further explanation is given as to why Li-fen loves Rui-wei but hates Ji-wei. In keeping with the spirit of causality, we might be forced to conclude that her motherly disposition is inflected with narcissistic desires, motivating her to favor the son who resembles her. But still her extreme dislike of the younger son, which is one of the key triggers in this incestuous drama, appears to be innate, unmotivated and hence unexplainable. To my mind, the enigma of this misopedic drama, specifically its lack of causality, is the most intriguing element in the story. It hints at the possibility of some inexplicable human mentality that may not be fully encompassed by the psychoanalytic toolbox, even as the narrative operates largely within this conceptual box.

In “The Son”, psychological trauma is at the heart of the protagonist’s sexual anxiety. In a distinctly Freudian style, the story begins with a nightmarish dream. In the dream, the protagonist and his mother walk along a desolated street. The mother is rejuvenated to her twenties, while the protagonist finds himself a twenty-nine year old man (which he is in the story’s real time). In other words, he projects his present image onto a reconstructed childhood scene, where his mother is a young woman. We thus have an achronological fusion of childhood and adulthood images: like when he was a little boy, he holds his mother’s hands as they walk, though clearly he is a grown-up man in the dreamscape, where he even smokes. He complains to his mother of thirst, and she enters an Indian store¹⁵ to buy him something to drink. It is here that the dream takes a gothic turn. The mother disappears somewhere in the dark store; a woman then approaches the protagonist with an acrylic box, in which he finds his mother unconscious, shrunken and encased in a fetal position. He hammers on the box so hard that blood oozes profusely from his hand. He then wakes up feeling the extreme pain he felt in the dream.

This dream sequence is so richly laden with symbolic references that a psychoanalytic reading is both attractive and inevitable. If the protagonist’s thirst symbolizes sexual desire, would not the acrylic box represent the moral barrier separating him from his mother? By attempting to remove this barrier, he inflicts physical pain on himself, and, according to this reading, his blood emission must symbolize his ejaculation of desire. Pain, indeed, characterizes the psyche of the protagonist throughout the story and is symptomatic of the emotional tension involved in incest. To attenuate this pain, the protagonist invests his (sexual) energies into

¹⁵ It is interesting that an element of race appears in this dream, where symbols of incest are also present. Scholars have pointed out that race and incest are etymologically intertwined and originate in a concern with purity of blood. In colonial discourses, for instance, incest is often associated with race (non-white) and class (non-middle class) to construct the privileged status of the white middle class (Wilson 1995). See Yoshikawa (2002: 360-364) for a concise treatment of the links between race and incest. In the dream sequence in question, Indian-ness seems to be construed as an exotic other that hints of alienation and danger.

intense jogging exercises and toward his girlfriend, who becomes a surrogate for the mother.¹⁶ And ultimately, he breaks the pain (and barrier) by consummating with his mother. But to start with, what is the source of such pain? It is at once the presence and absence of the father, and the intense psychological pressure that is consequently thrust upon the protagonist. While the father's presence as a symbolic figure frustrates his Oedipal desires, his absence as a functional member of the family motivates him to usurp the position of the mother's lover:

Since I had come of age I was preoccupied with a belief: I will become a better man than he is. I will never let Mother feel sad. From my childhood to my adolescent days and right into my young adulthood, this belief supported me through the most difficult of times. Diligently I studied, exercised and worked. I trained myself in every conceivable way. I listened attentively to every word that Mother had said and observed every nuance of her expressions. For everything that Father had done wrong, I wanted to make it up to her. By the age of fifteen, I could cook a table of dishes and do all the housework. Every day I played basketball, practiced jogging and did a hundred sit-ups and a hundred push-ups. In no time I became tall and strong. I wanted to become someone my mother could rely on (Chen 2006: 24).

There are several 'flashbacks' like this one that invoke the stereotypical 'unhappy childhood' formula, complete with an irresponsible father and mistreated mother. The purpose of layering the plot thickly with such memory sequences is to trace the protagonist's desire to protect his mother from the pain and trauma caused by the broken family. Conventional wisdom has it that unhappy childhoods are one of the triggers for so-called 'perverse' actions, including incest, in one's adult life. Chen Xue clearly taps into this well-attested narrative as a convenient recipe to account for the protagonist's actions by recourse to the dysfunctional family.

By way of contrast, "Gluttony" seems less concerned with conforming to conventional notions of unusual sexual behavior. The mother/wife character Ru-ai has an aura of bestial irrationality, as underscored by the animal metaphors used repeatedly to describe her.¹⁷ As the ultimate *femme fatale* unseen elsewhere in contemporary Chinese fiction, she is at once sadistic toward her husband, erotically possessive of her son and sexually promiscuous with other men. What is striking is that as a fictional character Ru-ai is deliberately 'thinned out'. The story does not devote a single line to her mental world, such that there is no easy reference point by which we can make sense of some of her most scandalous actions. Whereas in the "The Son", readers have access to the mother's mentality via the inflection of the son's perspective, and in "Near Dusk", an entire section of the story is told from Li-Fen's point-of-view, the husband's point-of-view in "Gluttony" blocks out any glimpse into Ru-ai's psychological processes. This narrative strategy alienates readers from the central character and affords her a degree of inexplicability. It is therefore not possible to conveniently adopt a typical psychoanalytic approach here and attribute Ru-ai's appalling behavior to any trauma that she might have experienced. We simply

¹⁶ Near the beginning of the story, we are told that just after waking up from his nightmare, the protagonist-narrator shuddered with the realization that Qing-mei, his girlfriend, resembles "that woman in the dream" – his mother (Chen 2006: 9).

¹⁷ For example, the protagonist-narrator more than once describes Ru-ai's presence as "a beastly smell", see Huang (1997:130)

do not know enough of her personal history to make any such deduction. Or perhaps that is a wrong premise: there is possibly no such trauma to start with.

Rupture in causality gives rise to a potential challenge to interpretation. The narrative's rootedness to surface-level events rather than in the private memories of its characters signifies a concern not with the scientific justification of disturbing behavior, but rather with the sensual manifestations of such behavior. Indeed, even though mother-son incest is left unconsummated in "Gluttony", its erotic-incestuous atmosphere is pervasive. Witness Ru-ai's outrageous act of tasting her son's sperm after his wet-dream:

The three of them lie in bed, giving Zi-han a strange sense of vertigo. It must have been ten years ago when the three of them last slept together like that. Dong-dong, now a teenager with long hands and legs, is placed between the man and his wife [...] Upon waking up Zi-han feels a little better. He doesn't know when Dong-dong vacated the bed, leaving behind a moist impression, a non-trespassable zone. Ru-ai wakes up too. She stretches out her hand and caresses the residual warmth and the little patch of wetness left by Dong-dong. She fingers it, smells it, licks it. And she smiles. Zi-han is flushed with embarrassment, as if it were he instead of Dong-dong who experienced the wet-dream (Huang 1997: 138).

I suspect conservative readers will have trouble digesting this scene, as it does not cohere with normative sensibilities; they are bound to be as embarrassed as Zi-han is in the story. Why would Dong-dong agree to sleep with his parents at this age? As mentioned earlier, he is a willing party vis-à-vis his mother, so the usual narrative of parental sexual exploitation does not work here. What does Ru-ai's act *signify*? In asking these (to my mind, wrong) questions, readers are intuitively searching for a rational, explanatory route out of their reading complex because, using Booth's (1983: 126) terms, the "desire for causal completion" is simply too compelling, particularly for lay readers. "Gluttony" presents a case where this desire for causality is deliberately deprived and the perceived need for causal explanation rejected. One is tempted to interpret Ru-ai's hunger for sex with reference to her husband's impotence. This reading would do well toward explaining her adulterous acts, but still it cannot account for her sexual interest in her son, which is the nexus of dramatic action in the story. The scene above thus stands as an enigma.¹⁸ Recalling that this story is part of a 'Seven Sins' series, it seems that incest is construed here as part of an imaginary of monstrosity that lies beyond human ethics, and which we do not yet have the conceptual tools to describe. As Der-wei Wang (2002: 335) observes, Wong Bik-wan displays a certain ambivalence in relation to the notion of 'sin'; consequently, "her works cannot be interpreted on the basis of commonplace ethical logic". It is therefore characteristic of her fiction to "seek out the bottom-line of diabolism, imagine the depths of sinfulness" without "proposing any possibility of redemption" (ibid.: 328). Insofar as an extreme act by Ru-ai such as that described in the above-quoted passage is devoid of traceable and utterable psychological motivations, it gains in erotic intensity and pushes at the limits of sexual taboo. In exquisite and minimalistic prose, the tale outlines Ru-ai's excessive acts without

¹⁸ I borrow this formulation from Rey Chow, who describes the father-son sex scene in Tsai Ming-liang's *The River* as 'an enigma'. According to Chow (2004: 123-125, 134-136), the scene in question is normally described as portraying 'incest'; but in fact, it does not fit comfortably into prevailing definitions of incest, which has a heterosexual basis that categorically precludes the homosexual act as a 'valid' form of sexual relation.

providing a viable and logical account for such excess. This collapse of causality denies the possibility of a ‘redemptive reading’, that is, one that is rehabilitative in channeling the enigmatic forces of monstrous psyche into prescribed pathological narratives. As a result, incest stands in a decontextualized psychological vacuum, registering itself forcibly – by virtue of its non-accountability – in the minds of traumatized readers.

Discoursing the Un-representable

Contemporary Chinese depictions of incest differ from their predecessors in at least two respects: first, they are better positioned to treat incestual emotions between actual rather than pseudo kins (in our case, mothers and sons), possibly due to the increased visibility of actual incestual cases in public discourses; second, they seem more committed to exploring the nature of the event itself than to exploiting its metaphorical-analogical value in signaling a breakdown in the patriarchal familial/socio-political order. This is not to say that there is no allegorical element in these contemporary stories. What I am suggesting is rather that contemporary fiction is more centripetal: rather than referencing a more or less explicit socio-political milieu, it seems to place greater emphasis on the emotional intensity of the aberrant act and, in particular, on the complexities of female sexuality. In this regard, it is of interest that the three stories I have examined here are all by women writers. Rather than allegorizing to a socio-political plane, the incest theme seems to be more intimately tied to the negotiation and construction of female subjectivity in contemporary texts. In dealing with mother-son incest in an explicit way, each of these stories explores the female body as a contested site fraught with both sexual and ethical tension, where the woman, as concurrently mother and wife, is seen as a *shifting function* of the relationship between father and son. Given this thematic focus on female subjectivity, it is unsurprising that these stories exert a much stronger erotic force than their textual predecessors. Importantly, no single female subjectivity is posited. As my foregoing discussion has shown, the maternal figure takes on different formations in contemporary narratives: she is the sexual predator in “Gluttony”, the neurotic mother in “Near Dusk” and melancholic wife in “The Son”. Each of these characters points to a different conception of the contemporary woman caught in the web of maternity, patriarchy and sexuality, and, as I will attempt to demonstrate, is related to the sexual discourse governing the respective narratives.

One of the main arguments of this article is that in articulating the occurrence of incest, the different narrative trajectories project divergent discourses on consanguineous sex. The various guises in which the Oedipal pattern is replayed also reveal the tensions and anxieties involved in representing the culturally tabooed. To what extent do incest narratives challenge or reinforce extant norms on sexual relations? What are the ethical implications of the stories discussed for (de)situating incest within the popular erotic imagination?

I would like to make two inter-related remarks about the task of the modern critic in assessing the function of incest narratives. First, sexual consummation between mother and son is not necessarily indexical of the degree of moral subversiveness. The psychological struggles of the protagonist in “The Son” culminate in a graphic scene of copulation between mother and son that runs to nearly two-pages (see Chen 2006: 37-39). But it would be too hasty to conclude on this basis that “The Son” has gone a long way in increasing the visibility of incest and hence normalizing it in the public consciousness. The many love-making scenes subsisting at the level

of the plot involving the protagonist are surface manifestations of sensuality, but they remain just that: sensual images of bodily pleasure which, together with the descriptive fetish on the body, bring to the fore the materiality of incest psychology. The graphic nature of the copulation scene must be read in light of the high degree of female sensuality that is characteristic of Chen Xue's oeuvre, and should not be interpreted as evidence of her avant-gardism in respect to the representation of incest.

This leads me to my second point: to probe the ethical implication of incest narratives, it is necessary to look into the structural workings of the narrative, in particular its (non-)adherence to established patterns that provide 'routes of escape' for the reader. These routes of escape are essentially platforms that facilitate the reception of incest plots within explanatory frameworks, without which reading becomes a potentially 'dangerous' affair on the moral frontier. At the heart of the issue here is the cultural (un)representability of mother-son incest, as well as how different authors adopt different modes and strategies to re-present the unrepresentable and to divert the anxieties involved in such representation.

The erotically-charged plot of "The Son" belies a reliance upon standard psychoanalytic narratives to rationalize acts that are culturally unrepresentable or, at the very least, challenging to re-present. Earlier I briefly mentioned two plot details which we now revisit from the perspective of the discourse of representation. The first is the dephallicization (symbolic castration through amputation)¹⁹ and subsequent elimination (by way of death) of the protagonist's father. As mentioned before, this creates the necessary symbolic space for the son to assume the senior masculine position within the family structure. The second is the temporal and spatial separation between the protagonist and his mother – the two have not seen each other for eight years prior to the father's death. This physical and emotional alienation weakens the familial bond between them, such that the final consummation act between *mother and son* may alternatively – and more conceivably – be imagined as that between *woman and man*. This is corroborated by a minor detail: the mother is relatively young; she was nineteen years old when she was pregnant, which means she is now forty-eight while her protagonist-son is twenty-nine.

I suggest that these plot details be read as protective mechanisms that the writer installs in her narrative to manage morally-threatening passions. In effect, they render mother-son incest as something that is less confronting and therefore something that *can happen*. Their very presence indicates the writer's anxiety in handling delicate kinships in a sexual-romantic context. In an interview, Chen Xue explains why she chose to write about a woman deserted by her husband and how the inter-dependent relationship between she and her son later develops into a sexual-romantic one: "to my mind *that is very possible*. Incest has become taboo because the boundary [between kinship and romantic love] is fuzzy, which thus requires its regulation by morality" (Chi and Chen 2006: 34; my emphasis). In other words, the plausibility of incest in fiction is the writer's chief concern. The effort put into portraying in detail the angst and agony, both physical and psychic, of the protagonist suggests an authorial concern for emotional verisimilitude. To this extent, the embedded dreams and haunting memories in the story, which provide the psychological origins of the protagonist's incestual passion, also point beyond the text to an

¹⁹ The fatherly figure can also be seen as 'dephallicized' in his disavowal of duties and/or lack of qualities traditionally ascribed to him in the Chinese familial structure. See Zhang (2000: 134) for this use of the word on the father character in Tsai Ming-liang's *The River*.

authorial urge to account for the incestuous event. In order for the incestual passion in the story to be believable – ‘to work’, so to speak – the character has to behave in a way that ‘makes sense’; that is, his actions need to be premised on definable psychological motivations. Emotional realism, in other words, is the guiding principle behind Chen’s creative design.

Thus, the epistemology of incest underlying “The Son” is this: it is an aberrant act that must be explained within some rational framework circumscribed by received notions of the family. The moral value emanating from such a framework dictates that incest be a marginal instance of human passion that cannot be the result of inexplicable psychology or random fate. Some kind of abnormality, or departure from the norm, must serve as the catalyst, and this assumption, of course, already presupposes the existence of a positivistic norm. The prototypical narrative of the broken family, complete with abusive fathers and submissive mothers, is a prime candidate of such a catalyst. By invoking this narrative, Chen Xue’s self-professed attempt to challenge the perceived boundaries between incest and non-incest relations (Chi and Chen 2006: 34) paradoxically reinforces those same boundaries. The disruptive (to recall the semantics of *luanlun* in Chinese) event of incest comes full circle to reaffirming the discursive categories that define and thereby confine and criminalize it. While, on the face of it, the fictionalization of the incestual act makes it culturally representable and hence potentially less tabooed, by absorbing it into commonly-accepted discourses, Chen also turns it irredeemably into a moral Other within the Chinese erotic imaginary.

“Near Dusk” offers a similar formula in simultaneously breaching and reinscribing the incest taboo in fiction. By recourse to psychological diegesis, the story renders incest a pathological, and therefore conceivable, act. The largely logical connections between event and behavior, with the exception of Li-fen’s seemingly innate hatred for her younger son, foreground causality as the binding principle in plot design. In this regard, the frequent use of streams-of-consciousness is not only a demonstration of modernist flair, but an attempt to sink the main character Li-fen into mental disarray. The message arising from such characterization is thus that incestual behavior is an unfortunate psychological/psychiatric condition suffered by traumatized individuals, thus relegating incest to the peripheries of mainstream social psychology.

By contrast, “Gluttony” presents a very different discourse of representation. When the protagonist Zi-han pleads for his son’s sexual freedom, Ru-ai replies: “How strange. What is this that you’re saying? I’m his mother, of course I love him. Are you sick? Would you like to see a doctor?” (Huang 1997: 145) Ru-ai’s line of defence may sound bizarre, but it is in fact infallible, for it operates outside of commonplace kinship sensibilities. It seems that in Ru-ai’s world, only one type of all-inclusive love exists, which precludes the constructed category that we have come to label as ‘incest’. For incest to happen as a thinkable event, it must have a ‘non-incestual’ counterpart; clearly Ru-ai does not adopt the same conceptualization. Her response to Zi-han’s plea can be read as a mockery of attempts to impose categories on human emotions and relations, which may in their primordial form exist as undivided substance. The final, rather ironic, suggestion that Zi-han might require medical attention further destabilizes any immediate assumption that Ru-ai has a pathological condition. Indeed it is Zi-han who more often demonstrates a lack of emotional control throughout the story, so that at the end of the day, we begin to wonder who among the two has a psychiatric condition. Is it the mother who loves her son sexually, or the impotent father who seeks to protect not his son but, above all, his own masculine identity from complete erosion? We have seen that at one point Zi-han fantasizes the

idea of his son being dead, just in order to spite his wife and preserve the intactness of his symbolic status as the father-husband. This series of convoluted behavior and mentality throw the reader off the comfort zone of reading, as there is no easy conceptual grid into which such behavior and mentality could be slotted and thus rationalized in common psychological parlance. To this extent, “Gluttony” represents an intriguing case where the narration of an incestual event takes place outside the discursive box of psychoanalysis, beyond logical reasoning (which, of course, is itself a cultural construct). This is in contrast to the other two stories, where the hegemonic moral order is the authoritative point of reference, such that an attempt to transgress the incest taboo ironically results in its perpetration.

The production of incest narratives entails anxieties on the part of authors, the audience and critics. In her perceptive discussion of Taiwanese auteur Tsai Ming-liang’s *The River*, Chang Hsiao-hung highlights the disavowal of father-son incest in the film by both the director and critics. On the one hand, Tsai confesses to his reluctance to look at his own film upon its completion, in particular the climactic scene in a sauna depicting father-son sex, and his tendency to disremember the fact that he has actually made it (Zhang 2000: 114). Critics, on the other hand, implicitly refuse to come to full terms with the controversial sexual scene. Thus, in conceptualizing the image of copulation between father and son, they resort to ‘transexualizing’ the father by invoking the (positive) Oedipal model and Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, effectively superimposing a motherly image on him (Zhang 2000: 115-120). In other words, the receptive blockage created by this problematic scene can only be resolved by either denying or re-imagining (heterosexualizing) it. Expounding on the status of the same scene in *The River*, Chow (2004) argues that if same-sex sex cannot be imagined as ‘real sex’ within normative sexual discourse, the problematic scene in question cannot logically be defined as incestuous, given that established notions of incest hinge on heterosexuality and the institution of marriage.

These observations pertain to the politics of recognition in incest narratives, which is appropriate to the present discussion, notwithstanding the fact that mother-son incest is arguably less prohibitive than father-son incest is. I suggest that in addressing the incest theme in literature, writers have two discursive options: to exoticize incest as morally deviant, or to normativize it as part of conceivable human psychology. These options signal different authorial attitudes toward atypical sexual behavior and their ensuing literary responses. They determine the status of the incestual act within the moral-ethical structure of fictional narratives. In “The Son” and “Near Dusk”, mother-son incest is an instance of *normativized abnormal sexual behavior*, meaning its abnormality is epistemologically restrained – tamed, in effect – by its causal structure, without which the passion becomes unruly, unthinkable, and hence unspeakable.

In both stories, incest is realized in a corporeal way – obliquely through a son-surrogate in “Near Dusk” and directly in “The Son”. But such realization is premised on the *conditions of utterability* – whether and to what extent mother-son incest is representable in literature. In the former case, the obliqueness of sexual consummation itself points to the anxieties involved in such representation. The transference of emotion from a lost son to his surrogate fulfills the author’s impulse to seek psychological justification; it also circumvents the problem of recognizing mother-son incest as a ‘valid’, albeit unusual, human passion, because although incest is treated directly, the sexual act itself is oblique. Eventually, the aberrant relation is between Li-fen, an older woman, and Yu-bin, a younger man who is unrelated to her by blood. In the moral climate of Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s (and, to some extent, even today), such

union was controversial, as the social norm weighed against a significant age disparity between two parties in a sexual relationship; and in the case where the female member was much older, it became prohibitive. But it was not unutterable, as incest was perceived to be. The surrogate-transference mode of narration is therefore a crucial buffer, as it allows the writer to transgress *within limits*.

As an avant-garde of her time, Ouyang Tzu seeks to address the sexual predicament of the modern Chinese woman – a sensitive issue at the time of her writing. Her choice of the incest theme and the ensuing Freudian conception of kinship relations indicate a desire to incorporate the feminist problematic into a modernist discourse of psychology. This authorial disposition dictates the psychoneurotic characterization of Li-fen, because, as mentioned earlier, it is through a pathological lens that her aberrant behavior may become explicable. Otherwise, it is simply not possible to materialize this character, who falls beyond the discursive-intellectual frame of that (and even this) generation of Chinese readers and writers in Taiwan. On this note, it is possible to claim that Ouyang's oblique treatment of incest in "Near Dusk" is less an indication of her moral conservatism than a testimony to the constraints of the broader ethical milieu on her creative trajectory. Such treatment enables her to shock readers without repelling them totally, and to tread on dangerous literary grounds without being censored. We must also not forget that incest is not the only kind of forbidden passion in the story. The homosexual relationship hinted at between Ji-wei and Yu-bin relieves the incestual theme from some of its moral burden: it takes some of the critical attention away from incest and projects a more general *guaitai* or queer family – to use Chang Hsiao-hung's term (Zhang 2000). The story as a whole is, then, no longer exclusively incestuous, but is instead about the dramatic consequences of trauma and desire.

As for "The Son", the final sex scene between mother and son can happen insofar as it is possible to imagine the two parties as estranged kins. To this extent, it is reasonable to claim that the scene has no intention to shock readers; it exists primarily as a resolution of narrative conflict. Within the moral discourse of the story, the appearance of the scandalous scene paradoxically means that it cannot be out to scandalize, as the scene simply cannot materialize in its raw form without its being conceptualized within a rationalist frame. It is therefore possible for the story to end on a positive note of reunion, for the initially sinful act is dovetailed into a *familiar* and *familial* structure in a way that recalls the hero-rescues-damsel-in-distress archetype. In this regard, the stereotypical characterization of the protagonist as a handsome and testosterone-driven young man and of his mother as a languid and forlorn woman is in accord with Chen Xue's strategy of constructing a fairy-tale-like narrative with an erotic-incestual turn. Such characterization also resonates with Chen's general tendency to highlight female sensuality and sexuality in her fiction, particularly her works on lesbian love. It is therefore possible, tempting even, to consider incest in "The Son" as part of Chen's "queer tactics" in writing (Martin 1999). However, inasmuch as incest is 'queer' in the sense of being aberrant, 'queer' in Chen's lesbian fiction is "figured as that which moves between and on the borders of discursive systems, continually interrupting each by means of the other, between and within discourses of psychoanalysis and traditional family, lesbian identity and daughterhood" (ibid.: 90). Such liminality and ambivalence do not characterize the ethical stance in "The Son". Rather, by replaying the causality formula (i.e. traumatic family history leads traumatized individuals to take extreme actions), and by characterizing the mother as a distressed damsel, Chen Xue

unequivocally taps into dominant heterosexual discourses as a resource for moral redemption, thus suppressing the potential subversiveness of the incest plot.

What makes “Gluttony” a unique piece, then, is its attempt to de-rationalize readers with respect to incest. In contrast to “The Son”, the denouement of “Gluttony” pushes readers into a state of intense discomfort, for the mother-son relationship is not resolved in a way that might seem ‘reasonable’ to the layman reader. The mother successfully takes control of her son, driving the husband/father – himself the dubious representative of morality and rationality – to a nervous breakdown. The anxieties and eventual defeat of the father very much reflect those of the discomfited reader, who cannot fit this tale into any precedent conceptual model. The lack of a ‘satisfactory’ resolution points to a mode of thinking and writing incest that departs from the other two stories. While Ouyang and Chen largely subscribe to psychological realism in their portrayal of sensitive sexual relations, Wong Bik-wan heads irredeemably for the surreal and gothic. This is, of course, in agreement with the overarching theme of Christian sin, which dictates the entire series of stories. The religious overtone here hints at an unfathomable space beyond the confines of common human psychology. By positing incest as an instantiation of gluttony, Wong corporealizes the metaphor in the term ‘sexual appetite’, hence the depiction of Ru-ai as beastly and vampiric. This equation of wantonness and carnivorousness, together with the *fin-de-siecle* ambience permeating the story, situates readers in a non-mundane context, dislodging them from their status quo. Incest is seen as what it is: extraordinary, perverse, unutterable. At the same time, however, it is on par with all other sexual passions, as Ru-ai’s interest in her son is presented as part of her voracious desire for all men except her husband. In depicting her dystopian fictional world, Wong exploits the disruptive force of incest, which, when coupled with the subversion of gender hierarchies, hits at the moral-sexual establishment. A dystopian reading is especially inviting when we consider that this story was released in 1997, the year when the sovereignty of Hong Kong was handed over to China and when there was a general sense of disenchantment and uncertainty within the psyche of the city’s inhabitants. In Wong’s dystopian world, incest is neither right nor wrong, it just *is*. Ultimately, it is this ambiguity toward mother-son incest, this delinking of forbidden passions from institutionalized thought-patterns and ethical-constructs that truly is the point in representing the unrepresentable.

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