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**Women, Mothers, Wombs and Ghosts:
an Interdisciplinary Reflection on the Novel
Jinhui 锦灰 (Sheng Keyi, 2018)
and Its Resemantization of the Feminine**

*It has often been said in different ways, that people live and give their lives,
not for objective certainties, not for things, houses, wealth, but for opinions,
for the imaginary, secret bond which links and bonds the world
and things deep in the consciousness, thus giving a meaning to death.*

*Not only do people live and die for ideas,
but the deaths of people are absolved by images.*

(Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, 1963)

做一个活在书里的女鬼，挺有意思的。

(盛可以, 锦灰, 2018)

Being a ghost woman living in a book is extremely interesting.

(Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, 2018)¹

¹ Sheng Keyi 盛可以, *Jinhui* 锦灰 (Jinhui), Taipei 2018 (eBook), p. 105; all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.



Abstract

This paper analyses the novel *Jinhui* 锦灰 (2018) by Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (born in 1973). Its protagonist, Yao Minzhu, is a female journalist with a fondness for metaphors. She is confined to a clinic to treat “rhetorical disorders,” but refuses treatment and falls victim to therapeutic doggedness. The narrative seems to begin with her death, or the loss of consciousness preceding it, and tells a dreamlike journey through the places and stories of Fuyinzhen (Gospel Town). For Yao Minzhu, this journey is an opportunity to reappropriate her memories and reimagine those of her parents. As for Sheng Keyi, it is a chance to construct new and powerful metaphors of Chinese history and to question the position of women – both in the recent past and in today’s society – through the resemantization of their bodies and roles.

The textual analysis includes two complementary methodological paradigms: an anthropological one, based on archetypal structures of the Chinese imaginary as identified by Sun Chaoying in the wake of Gilbert Durand’s studies, and a psychoanalytic paradigm, infusing reflections by Massimo Recalcati regarding the concepts of taboo and *lalangue*. With this dual approach, the analysis shows how Sheng Keyi’s use of metaphor allows her narrative to deviate from (yet still reference) reality more directly, free from symbolic mediation. This technique is considered the *sine-qua-non* of the aforementioned resemantization.

Keywords: Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, archetypal imaginary, taboo, *lalangue*, resemantization

1. Sheng Keyi’s Literature: A New Interpretive Approach

Sheng Keyi (1973–), originally from the Yiyang Prefecture (Hunan), moved to Shenzhen in the 1990s, then eventually to Beijing. She began writing in the early 2000s and has published numerous short stories and novels since then. *Beimei* 北妹 (*Northern Girls*, 2004) marks her debut both in long fiction and in international literature due to a successful English translation by Shelly Bryant (*Northern Girls*, Penguin, 2012). Her main works include: *Shuiru* 水乳 (*Lotion*, 2003), *Daodesong* 道德松 (*Praise to Morality*, 2007), *Siwang fuge* 死亡赋格 (*Death Fugue*, 2013), and *Yeman shengzhang* 野蛮生长 (*Wild Growth*, 2015). Additionally, she’s written the *Zigong san bu qu* 子宫三部曲, her so called “womb trilogy,” which includes the following books: *Jinhui* 锦灰 (*Brocade Ash*, 2018), *Zigong* 子宫 (*Uterus*, 2019) and *Nüyong shouji* 女佣手记 (*The Maid’s Notes*, 2020).²

² These publications dates refer to first editions. It should also be noted that *Siwang fuge* and *Jinhui* are not available in mainland China. However, the availability of eBook versions has facilitated their circulation even among PRC readers. The novel *Zigong* was released in China under the title *Xirang* 息壤 (*Fertile Soil*).

Sheng Keyi's works are often autobiographical or largely shaped by her personal experience. This includes her life as a migrant, her former job as a journalist, and a brief position at a birth control clinic. Her books explore the actual freedoms and confinements of contemporary women, considering both external constraints and internal inhibitions. In addition to reworking historical memories and contemporary news, which are often used as backgrounds in her stories, the theme of the body is a more frequent topic: naked, obscene, sexualized, impalpable, virtual, or unattainable. In her writing, the female body never actually belongs to women and is rarely a source of pleasure for them. Instead, the female body becomes a place in which every erogenous zone is violated or resisted, female conditions are denounced, and women are reduced to machines, tools or property of the State.

In fact, the main themes in Sheng Keyi's work – women, the body, the subaltern classes, and the contrast between rural and urban settings – are also the main focus of most literary studies regarding her writing.³ However, these papers rarely explore the disturbing intensity of her writing stemming from both its content and form. While some studies vaguely nod to her “courage,” and Western publishing mentions her “dissidence,” this article rather interprets and analyses said intensity through the concepts of “metaphorical deviance” and “resemantization.” What does Sheng Keyi deviate from? And what kind of resemantization does she ensue?

As regards the first question, it is undeniable that Sheng Keyi's literature deviates from China's dominant narrative of this country's history and contemporary society. As Lingchei Letty Chen aptly explains, “to reestablish and maintain social equilibrium after Mao's death, the Communist Party sought carefully to manipulate and control public mnemonic discourse,” but Sheng Keyi's literature clearly deviates from this kind of manipulation.⁴ As a matter of fact, some of her works are banned in mainland China and are commonly described as politically militant. However, Sheng Keyi's literature should not be simplified into mere political interpretation or dissidence. This interpretation is refuted by her own words, as she clearly outlines in *Jinhui's* afterword that reality is only one possible lens through which to interpret the novel.⁵

³ There are several studies in English and Chinese dedicated to Sheng Keyi's literary production. On only the CNKI database, there are almost 340 studies dating between 2003 and 2024, Viewed 16 July 2024, <http://www.cnki.com.cn/index/>.

⁴ Lingchei Letty Chen, *The Great Leap Backward. Forgetting and Representing the Mao Years*, Amherst, New York 2020, p. 8.

⁵ In an interview with Griffith Review, Sheng Keyi also explains that she is not very interested in politics, but in the imaginative possibilities, or the “space of dislocation,” that fiction writing offers her (Anna Georgia Mackay, ‘Interview with Sheng Keyi’ *Griffith Review* 49 (2015), Viewed 15 June 2024, <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/interview-with-sheng-keyi/>). Literature as a “space of dislocation” is a common thread in the author's literary production. Consider novels and novellas such as *Jinhui* (2017), *Siwang fuge* 死亡赋格 (2013), *Fudi* 福地 (2016), and more. In these works, the invention of a parallel world allows for represent memories and truths that can't be universalized with a purely realistic narration.

Actually, Sheng Keyi's metaphorical deviance not only subtly criticizes the government but also broadly challenges the *status quo* in various ways, including:

1. **Subversion of the literary genre.** Sheng Keyi's literature – using *Jinhui* as an example – often exceeds the boundaries of realism, although it can't quite be defined as fantastic or science fiction. It reworks history, but is not historical. It puts women at the centre of the story, but it is not feminist. It explores the body in an obsessive and unprecedented way, yet it doesn't overlap with the “body writing” genre proposed by other post-Seventies writers, such as Mian Mian 棉棉 and Wei Hui 卫慧.⁶
2. **Subversion of roles.** The heroes in her works are more often women, not men. The characters and narrators are not necessarily human or anthropomorphic. In *Jinhui*, for example, the testimonies of the living, the dead, humans, and animals are all equally reliable. The main character is often the author's alter ego, meaning the character is a writer. The reader is often involved in the story via a second-person narrative, thus transformed into a direct witness of the story itself.
3. **Subversion of the reader's expectations,** through frequent narrative changes and a disorienting intermittency of past and present, creating both a dreamlike dimension and reality.
4. **Subversion of the canonical language,** such as betraying and/or transcending semantic boundaries of images and words by using metaphors, which will be outlined later in this paper.
5. **Subversion of the dogma of subversion itself,** by breaking the implicit rule against alluding to taboo historical events or social issues. Instead, she uses these taboos as an “experience of the limit and a drive to its transcendence,” or an “unresolved dialectic [...] which properly defines human nature.”⁷

To illustrate Sheng Keyi's metaphorical deviance and how it can spark resemantization of the feminine, this article closely examines excerpts from her novel *Jinhui*.

The term “resemantization” is borrowed from the fields of linguistics and semiotics, where it often appears alongside the concept of “desemantization.” In linguistic studies, these processes refer to the ways in which words can shed old meanings or adopt new ones. Beyond verbal language, desemantization and resemantization can also apply to other forms of communication, including architecture, objects, visual arts, and texts in general. For instance, resemantization can be observed when old buildings are repurposed for new uses or when the functionality of objects changes.⁸

In this article, “resemantization” specifically refers to the transformation and expansion of meaning that Sheng Keyi's narrative evokes in relation to key concepts such as “woman” and “mother.” The focus will not be on the semantic aspects of these terms, but rather on

⁶ Giulia Rampolla, *Stridente armonia. Tre generazioni di scrittori cinesi de XXI secolo a confronto*, Napoli 2016, pp. 96–98.

⁷ Massimo Recalcati, *I tabù del mondo*, Torino 2017 (eBook), p. 1.

⁸ For an exhaustive discussion of resemantization and desemantization in the linguistic and semiological fields, see: Alice Giannitrapani, ‘Itinerari del senso,’ *Versus, Quaderni di studi semiotici* 1 (2022), pp. 3–22, doi: 10.14649/104497.

their psychological and social significance. What do we mean by “woman” and “mother”? This article argues that *Jinhui*’s narrative reshapes and broadens our understanding of these concepts.

The representation of women who transgress or transcend the dominant canon of femininity, and the problematization of motherhood are undoubtedly topics explored by other contemporary Chinese writers. However, as Nicoletta Pesaro explains, many of these authors “fail to convey the more intimate and complicated aspects of female subjectivity, [...] the problematic issue of women’s right to bear children or not, and to personally control their own sexual life, by freeing themselves from longstanding and devastating psychological, cultural, family, social and political shackles.” Examples of this include Ma Jian’s 马建 (1953–) *The Dark Road* and Mo Yan’s 莫言 *Frog*.⁹ In other terms, the “representation” from these authors is not followed by the process of “resemantization” that occurs in Sheng Keyi’s literature. Resemantizing, or giving existing terms and concepts (“woman,” “mother,” “womb,” “body,” “kinship,” etc.) new meanings, requires the intuition or imagination of other perspectives, and therefore a shift aimed at reaching them.

To demonstrate how Sheng Keyi’s novel enables a resemantization of the feminine, the analysis of excerpts from *Jinhui* will primarily employ two interpretative frameworks. First, an anthropological approach based on the archetypal structures of the Chinese imagination, as identified and described by Sun Chaoying on the basis of Gilbert Durand’s studies; and second, a psychoanalytic approach inspired by Massimo Recalcati’s ideas about taboo and *lalangue*.

Jinhui can certainly be read as a critical allegory of the Cultural Revolution, the Great Famine of the Maoist era, or more generally, the Chinese Communist Party and its actions.¹⁰ Both in spite of and due to the fantastical elements throughout the writing, the references to historical-political realities are undeniable and noteworthy.

As Giulia Rampolla argues, “[the post-Sixties] authors are able to relate to the Cultural Revolution as a historical fact,” while the post-Seventies “operate in a changing environment” in which “their perception of reality and memory is fragmentary and elusive.”¹¹ Yet, this “fragmentary and elusive” condition fuels Sheng Keyi’s desire to reappropriate and repeat that memory in the Lacanian sense, constantly reaching for a reality that is either chronically missed or legally forbidden. And she does this as an attempt to position herself in a true chronology and authentic space where she can receive

⁹ Nicoletta Pesaro, ‘Men control our vaginas; the state controls our wombs. Sheng Keyi’s Novel *The Womb* (Zigong) and the representation of the female reproductive body’, *DEP. DEPORTED, EXILED, REFUGEES* 47 (2021), p. 29.

¹⁰ “Jinshu jiedu | Yu Jie: bu shi Fuyinchen, er shi gongchanguo – Sheng Keyi *Jinhui*” 禁书解读 | 余杰:不是福音镇,而是共产国-盛可以《锦灰》(Interpretation of banned books | Yu Jie: It is not “Gospel Town”, but a communist country – Sheng Keyi’s “Jinhui”), 2020, *RFA*, Viewed 16 July 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/pinglun/wenyitiandi-cite/yj-10152020155243.html>.

¹¹ Giulia Rampolla, *Stridente armonia*, pp. 41 and 43. The so-called “post-Sixties” authors (*liulinghou* 60后) are Chinese authors born in the 1960s, whereas the “post-Seventies” (*qilinghou* 70后) are those born during the 1970s.

recognition and legitimacy. As for the protagonist of *Jinhui*, “it is suffering and memory that make a person’s soul heavy. And it is only thanks to the weight of their soul that people can walk on the ground.”¹²

Hence, Sheng Keyi’s narration, is not an act of political militancy, because it arises first and foremost from a deeply personal need for historicity and legitimacy. Official history simply proves to be incomplete to her, contradictory or insufficient in reconstructing individual identity and legitimizing her existence. For example, how can Yao Minzhu 姚皿珠, the protagonist of *Jinhui* and daughter of a protester who died on 4th June, 1989, understand her own existence if the official narrative denies the circumstances and reality of her father’s death? If her father never died, he never existed. Thus, how could his daughter exist? In the end, Sheng Keyi, much like many protagonists in her stories (e.g., Yao Minzhu in *Jinhui*, but also Yuan Mengliu 源梦六 in *Siwang fuge*), does not deviate from official history out of militancy, but out of a human need to find, or at least re-imagine, the necessary pieces to understand and legitimize her own existence.

Additionally, merely interpreting *Jinhui* from a historical-political viewpoint would also overlook the transnational significance of this work and the dialogue it weaves with world literature. Sheng Keyi draws inspiration from the novel *Pedro Paramo* (Juan Rulfo, 1955), demonstrating a literary background that includes international works and is no way limited to influences from Chinese literature. Furthermore, *Jinhui*’s reader base is not only Chinese or Sinophone, but rather global. Hence, by using the aforementioned approach, this article offers a new perspective of *Jinhui*, one which may do justice to its transnational and transcultural value, particularly to the very important resemantization of the feminine that Sheng Keyi hereby offers to her international audience.

2. *Jinhui*: Synopsis and Themes

Yao Minzhu is a metaphor-loving journalist born on a historically taboo date in contemporary China. Her father, a poet, died on the same day. His name, never stated, has been locked in a box of oblivion. But his wife, Yao Minzhu’s mother, has learned his verses by heart and Yao Minzhu herself never fails to quote them throughout her articles. Her father has disappeared, but his metaphors are everywhere:

There was a time when my passion for metaphors absorbed me to the point of making me negligent in my work as a journalist. The boss [...] told me that if I couldn’t let go of metaphors, I’d better turn to fiction. At the time, I did not grasp the warning that was hidden in those words. In fact, my mania for metaphors became even more unbridled, I started using at least one per paragraph, but soon I switched to one per sentence. Finally, every single word became metaphorical in some way, and so

¹² Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 159.

did the punctuation marks. [...] “Your articles give off a bad smell,” the editor said with a shrug, “and I’m not going to attract flies.” [...] One day some strangers came to pick me up [...] I vaguely remember that the place [where they took me] resembled Kafka’s castle, or Borges’ labyrinth, immersed as it was in fog; [...] the only sound I heard was the metallic clang of a gate that was opened and closed.¹³

Yao Minzhu is imprisoned in a clinic to treat “rhetorical disorders,” such as her metaphoromania. The centre hosts intellectuals, artists, and people working with language, like Yao Minzhu. Here, metaphors are eradicated by pharmacological means, audiovisual materials and targeted readings, such as speeches and essays written by political leaders. Patients must listen to these readings several times so they can recite them later. Refusing the therapies results in surgical intervention to physically eradicate your metaphors from the areas of the brain where they have slowly developed together with memories. What remains, Yao Minzhu testifies, is a white hum and losing the ability to form a phrase, let alone a metaphor. The mind, she says, becomes murky water, with metaphors becoming uncatchable fish.

Instead, fellow patient and lawyer Gu Xiang 顾乡 undergoes indoctrinating therapies and memorizes what is necessary to save himself from surgical operation. Yao Minzhu and the lawyer have an affair inside the clinic, which they later discover to be the result of an artificially-induced attraction. It is a scientific experiment to distract their minds from metaphorical activity through romantic love and sexual attraction. Their authentic feelings remain a mystery, but the lawyer is secretly transferred elsewhere. Later on, Yao Minzhu likely dies, and spiritually leaves in search of her former life partner, though she can’t recall if they were married.

This man, artist Zhou Mi 周密¹⁴, recently left for an experimental town, Fuyinzhen 福音镇 (Gospel Town). In fact, following a fortuitous gold discovery, the economic and social life of Fuyinzhen was completely revitalized to implement a collective search for the precious metal. Under the banner of a new ideology called “new altruism,” Fuyinzhen has been transformed into a so-called “New Paradise,” a promise of universal prosperity. The town’s thirteen ethnic groups have been merged into a single group with one creed. Traditional costumes and furnishings have been relegated to the local museum. The old church has been repurposed, its cross removed as the inhabitants were converted to Buddhism.

“I have to go and paint those minorities before they disappear,” Zhou Mi explained to Yao Minzhu, justifying his decision to leave for the “New Paradise.” Consequently, the journalist’s journey becomes an attempt to follow in the footsteps of her former partner, who may also be the father of a son Yao Minzhu does not remember having.

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 86–87.

¹⁴ This name means “careful; attentive to every detail,” and was also the name of a literate living during the Yuan Dynasty period.

Much like Juan Preciado, the protagonist of *Pedro Paramo* (Juan Rulfo, 1955), Yao Minzhu's journey is thus an expedition in search of the "truth."¹⁵ The "truth" is represented by several elements throughout the story: a missing companion or son, a mystery surrounding the existence of a tree-spirit woman, a collection of personal notes (a bundle of letters sent by Zhou Mi? A travelogue written by Yao Minzhu herself? A novel within the novel?). The "truth" is also the voices of people, as well as of ghosts, or the improbable testimonies of Yama (the king of the Underworld), and of various animals, such as a fish, a dog, a pig and a snail. These creatures, much like humans (and sometimes more reliably than humans), experience the vicissitudes and failures of the "New Paradise" on their own skin, but they also survive; thus, they bear witness.

In fact, the heart of the narrative is not the clinic itself, but Yao Minzhu's journey. Her erratic movements throughout Fuyinzhèn's times and places shatter into continuous changes of focus and narrative voice, yet blend into a single hallucinatory simultaneity. Thanks to an eye solution administered to her by the sorceress Wei Yifeng 魏一凤, Yao Minzhu can see past and present simultaneously, allowing her to meet and hear the stories of the dead.

From the old tailor Pi 皮, to the clever dog Duole 多乐 who avoids being eaten due to his intelligence, everyone in Fuyinzhèn seems eager to share their stories. They were waiting for her, they explain to Yao Minzhu. They knew she would come. So what do these characters have to tell? What have they experienced and what are they still experiencing under the visionary eyes of the journalist?¹⁶

The answer is a hunt for a non-existent gold mine, fuelled by the propaganda of a shared but illusory dream of wealth, promising that all the inhabitants of Fuyinzhèn would benefit from the mining industry and leave behind every hardship. For the local government, realizing this dream entails unifying cultures, even down to clothing, and erasing all ethnic and interpersonal differences. It begins with a carnivalesque period of great and even lethal binges, fuelled by the belief that gold discovery (perhaps an allegory of the steel "discovered" during the Great Leap Forward) would increase the village's economy beyond measure. However, an invisible insect soon damages crops and makes them sterile, eventually causing a famine (an obvious allegory of the "Great Chinese Famine"). Regardless, the village's men tirelessly continue to pierce the soil of nearby mountains in search of gold. No one listens to the warnings of Wei Yifeng, the sorceress, or madwoman, who invokes respect for the earth and the divine inspiration dwelling in it. Instead, they break the glass ampoules in which she breeds her magical insects and let her fall victim to their poison. The people use whatever they can find as fertilizer in vain hopes of revitalizing productive land: human and animal corpses,

¹⁵ Regarding Sheng Keyi's admiration for Juan Rulfo's book and its significance in the conception and elaboration of *Jinhui*, I've utilized information obtained by the writer herself by means of a private interview, carried out by e-mail on March 6, 2020.

¹⁶ The figure of the journalist as a receptacle and compiler of testimonies is a type of character that Sheng Keyi had already tested in the novel *Yeman shengzhang* 野蛮生长 (2015), a partially autobiographical family story.

excrement, hair, dirty water from foot baths, and bricks of specially demolished houses. Beyond this, people are obligated to hand over a certain amount of faeces every day, and to produce these excrements they are forced to eat the only (non-)food left: the “earth of Guanyin” (*guanyintu* 观音土, lit. kaolinite).

While the situation escalates, Fuyinzhèn’s government stands firm. The Bodhisattva has been promised a golden statue, and one must keep one’s word.¹⁷ Failure to honour this commitment would mean “losing their face.” In other terms, the “New Paradise” experiment must be carried out. Gold must be found! The circus caravan temporarily stationed in Fuyinzhèn could possibly conceal the answer: Jin Shengsheng 金生圣, alchemist and member of the circus company, is secretly hired to chemically produce the much-desired metal.¹⁸ Jin Shengsheng, however, falls in love with Chang Duoxi 常多喜, the tree-spirit woman, and this unrequited love leaves him helpless, in a state of inactivity and constant waiting.

Hence, gold is not found nor obtained by transmutation. Large provisions hidden by chiefs go rotten, the common people are increasingly tired from the absurd tributes, and many succumb. Everyone seeks real food of subterfuge, but any attempt to cheat is promptly punished. Every act of humanity is banished, and every possible meal is consumed, resulting in cases of cannibalism, necrophagy, and coprophagy.

The population is halved, although the official numbers are promptly burned. Duole, the dog, provides this information. The plan for constructing “New Paradise” is thus suspended, but without any admission of defeat. After all, if someone is responsible for what occurred, it’s a shared responsibility. And if a scapegoat is needed, it is certainly not sought among politicians with simulated good intentions, but rather among marginal and discordant voices. For example, it may be Wei Yifeng’s responsibility. She’s a female medium and environmentalist publicly disagreeing with implemented policies. It was she, they say, who brought bad luck upon Fuyinzhèn. She is therefore the rightful person to seal its atonement.

“We have no meat left to eat, how could it be?”... “Because we’ve previously killed too many pigs, eaten too much meat, and wasted too much grain.”... “And who is to blame for that?”... “The inhabitants of the New Paradise! They were the ones who ate and wasted so much.”... “I got it, basically the New Paradise shouldn’t have been created.”... “Ah, don’t ever say that, Uncle Gui! Words like that could cost you your life!”¹⁹

¹⁷ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 29.

¹⁸ The figure of the alchemist belongs to an imaginary sphere that Durand refers to as the “nocturnal regime,” evoking the transmutation myth of base metals into gold. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for Fuyinzhèn’s experiment: the thirteen ethnic-cultural variants originally present in town are to base metals as the unifying experiment of the New Paradise (an ethnicity, a religion, a culture) is to gold, in which every difference is destined to merge.

¹⁹ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 100.

The authorities put on an innocent facade and quickly announce a new plan for repopulating the city. They sign agreements with Yama, the king of the Underworld, to allow ghost women to offer the use of their wombs at the “womb rental” counter. Under the new laws, women are required to have children based on their age, and men must follow strict rules about their sex lives. Contraceptives, abortion, masturbation, and homosexual sex, among other things, are all prohibited.²⁰

However, the dreams of the townspeople, regularly inspected by “dream catchers,” reveal a great hunger rather than a genuine passion for the imposed indoctrination. The authorities focus on promoting poetic production (referencing the poetry produced during the Great Leap Forward), creating cohesion among people and distracting them from constant hunger.²¹ Yet, when sleeping, no one dreams of this poetic activity, highlighting the glaring falsity of this top-down mandate.

Nevertheless, people remain confident about the new measures from the local government. The authorities assure they have a plan to help them, believing conditions will soon get better. One of the most convinced villagers is Feng Er 冯二, the driver that escorted the journalist to the village’s threshold at the beginning of the novel, where the search for her companion and artist Zhou Mi began.

But what happened to Zhou Mi? What happened to Gu Xiang, the lawyer with whom Yao Minzhu had a love affair inside the clinic? Perhaps, the journalist reflects in a sudden moment of clarity, it was Gu Xiang himself who mentioned Fuyinzhen to her. Gu Xiang was originally from Fuyinzhen and had embarked on his law career precisely to return to his hometown and fight the human rights violations perpetrated there. Speaking with a couple who initially intended to cook her, Yao Minzhu discovers that Gu Xiang now has an established business of producing and distributing poisonous insects with magical-aphrodisiac properties. As for Zhou Mi, she concludes he’s likely never been to Fuyinzhen, nor has he written her any letters. Nonetheless, after seeing and hearing the stories of the village, looking for him seems meaningless.

After discovering she’s already dead, mirroring Juan Rulfo’s work, Yao Minzhu finally returns to Wei Yifeng’s home. It is the same place where the driver Feng Er had left her on her first day in the village. Yao Minzhu can’t recall how long it’s been since her arrival, but she notices that in the Wei household, there is the same portrait that hung above her bed at the clinic. It features a leader with a mysterious “Mona Lisa” smile. Yao Minzhu had once turned it upside down to make it face the wall, but after waking from surgery, she found it facing her again, mocking her with a smile.

As she gradually reads notes and listens to Gu Xiang and Wei Manyi (Wei Yifeng’s son) speak nearby, Yao Minzhu begins to transmute into her final metaphor:

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 208.

²¹ S.H. Chen, ‘Multiplicity in Uniformity: Poetry and the Great Leap Forward’, *The China Quarterly* 3 (1960), pp. 1–15.

My vision is getting more and more hazy. The characters [that I am reading] float as if immersed in water, swim like tadpoles, [...] the writing completely disappears from the book, and finally the book disappears as well, leaving only my hands in the act of holding it. Then the bent fingers, phalanx after phalanx, incinerate, one by one they detach and fall apart like cigarette ashes. In an instant, it is the whole arm that crumbles, the whole body... [Yao Minzhu] became a heap of ashes and particles; the cone of light under the lamp refracting their colors like a crystal. "I'm a fistful of brocade ashes": that's my last metaphor.²²

The expression *yi dui jinhui* 一堆锦灰, translated in this context as "a fistful (lit. a heap) of brocade ashes," doesn't actually refer to fabric reduced to dust. Instead, it refers to a traditional artistic technique called *jinhuidui* 锦灰堆, (lit. "pile of brocade ash") or *bapotu* 八破图 (the "eight destroyed images" technique). Similar to patchwork, the *jinhuidui* technique uses various fragments of artworks, texts, relics of historical and cultural value. When they're scattered onto a new surface seemingly randomly, it creates the impression of "rubbish spilled from a basket." In the novel's afterword, Sheng Keyi explains the image of *jinhuidui* is thus well-suited to summarize the main themes of the novel: exuberance, arrogance, crumbling, and finally, ashes.

This crumbling can be interpreted as a generational *topos*, where the post-Seventies generation "grew up on the rubble of history, [...] on the unravelling of an order."²³ However, the way Sheng Keyi uses metamorphosis for characters and metaphor for language in *Jinhui* allows her to offer an unprecedented and unique resemantization of that history. Instead of presenting history as a coherent memory, she re-envisions it as an emotional space that can be newly explored and experienced. This is the very principle of *jinhuidui*, which resemantizes its "destroyed images" by transforming them into a new artistic product, thus creating a new semantic space.

The very structure of the novel also reflects this artistic technique. The plot is "shattered" into forty-six chapters, each with unique content, style and language. For example, there are interpolations in the Yiyang dialect often accompanied by footnoted Chinese translations. Additionally, one will find frequent use of different fonts, recalling the heterogeneous and chaotic nature typical of *jinhuidui* and adding to the novel's visual diversity. Instead of using fragments of ruined papers to create something new, *Jinhui* assembles bits of conversations, readings, dreams, memories, and glimpses of both the human and inhuman worlds. They're shuffled in the "basket of cards" and finally dropped into a new frame: Yao Minzhu's dreamlike journey.

Consequentially, "I am a fistful of brocade ashes" is not a declaration of defeat, but rather an announcement that new work was born from this collage of relics, saved from the fire of oblivion. Perhaps it is the same novel that Yao Minzhu herself would like

²² Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 226.

²³ Giulia Rampolla, *Stridente armonia*, p. 41.

to write.²⁴ Thus, the victory is not forgetfulness, censorship or the system that scorches a journalist and reduces her to dust. The victory is her metaphorical deviance, transforming oblivion into a new semantic space or into a newly significant space.

In conclusion, the journalist Yao Minzhu embodies what Agamben would call a “complete witness.” In fact, thanks to the magic expedient of the ocular solution, she is able to (re)live firsthand both the past and present of the “New Paradise.” But she is also destined to (re)die from it, thus offering an integral testimony of the inhumanity perpetrated in Fuyinzhèn.²⁵ Differently said, the destruction of her physical body is the proof of her existence. Her dreamlike delirium reveals the atrocities she experienced. Her absence highlights the presence – or rather, the permanence – of unspoken stories. And by metaphorically recalling these stories, Yao Minzhu doesn’t merely recover them, but she gives them new, liveable meanings.

3. Text Analysis: the Resemantization of the “Mother”

A *close reading* of certain excerpts illustrates the key images that Sheng Keyi uses to create her metaphorical deviance. These excerpts focus on taboo spaces which, when re-imagined through her writing, become spaces of freedom and research, and ultimately, as the forthcoming paragraphs are to illustrate, an opportunity of resemantization.

The first and fundamental resemantization hereby analysed is that regarding the mother figure. For Yao Minzhu, as for any other human being, the mother is the first source of both taboo and freedom, as she is the one who first raises the question of identity. The mother is our first Other, the first dialectical boundary of our existence: both the limit that hinders us and the perimeter that draws us as individuals. Additionally, Yao Minzhu’s mother represents the historical Other: the past that Yao Minzhu cannot fully grasp because it is not her present. The memory the mother passes on to her daughter is thus a taboo inheritance: a post-memory destined to remain as a partial testimony. In other words, Yao Minzhu could not find her own identity because she could not reconstruct her past. She could not reconstruct the past because she has no way to relive her mother’s memories. She has no way of re-living them because she did not experience herself. Rather, her mother did.

However, this taboo regarding memory drives its own resolution. Because of Fuyinzhèn’s dreamlike space and the magical solution that allows Yao Minzhu to see the past, she can concretely relive the inherited memory and thus become a legitimate witness. In other words, this space makes up for the inadequacy of reality. This concept is illustrated in the following excerpt from the first chapter of *Jinhui*:

²⁴ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 112.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, New York 1999, pp. 150–151.

My mother instilled in my blood the genes of her thinking. The only difference between me and her is that she has broken the eggshell of history to look outside, while I am outside and peek inside: the information received does not match; each of us does see different things. My mother always wanted me to go into the shell, but there was no place for me in there. When she left [...] I looked at myself in the mirror and I was as she had wanted me to be: a serious face, an absorbed expression, not the slightest interest in worldly things; I lived in an ideal, but I could not say what exactly this ideal was, perhaps just a kind of structural incompatibility with reality.²⁶

This passage highlights the *topos* of the matrilineal inheritance of testimony and transgression. Echoing the beginning of Pedro Paramo, this motif recurs throughout *Jinhui*, not only through flashbacks about the relationship between Yao Minzhu and her mother, but also through a constellation of characters evoking the mother figure and the atavistic imagery of the “nocturnal regime.” In China, as Sun Chaoying explains, this *yin*-related nocturnal/feminine regime does actually represent “une *dualitude* et non pas une *dualité*” with the structures of the “day regime.”²⁷

For example, the medium Wei Yifeng provides the journalist’s ghost with a *different look* at Fuyinzhen’s story (i.e. the ocular solution to see the past). Then there is the “dolphin-woman,” whose body has been disfigured and whose son has disappeared. Both are women and mothers. “If the ‘truth’ is something as important [as you claim],” the dolphin-woman says to Yao Minzhu, “then, for me, to find the truth is to find my son.”²⁸ And in moments of fleeting lucidity, Yao Minzhu herself manages to recall vague memories of her parental experience.

All of these characters are diverse. Some are biological mothers, others adoptive; some live to find their child, others barely remember giving birth to one. Yet, they are all united by traits of strength and volition, and by an aura of “nocturnal” darkness, possessing hidden truths that contrast with the dominant, masculine narrative. They are “mothers” not merely “reproductive tools” or generators of human bodies. They are parents who raise questions about identity, reality and relationship, or “kin,” as Haraway would say.²⁹

So, to conclude, in Sheng Keyi’s resemantization, the mother figure shifts from being defined by her ability to generate bodies to becoming a parent of ideas. She instils doubt, allowing (hi)story to develop. The maternal figures in *Jinhui* represent the existence of the *otherness* and offer a different testimony. This testimony is not a *dissident* but

²⁶ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 6.

²⁷ Sun Chaoying, ‘Structures de l’imaginaire chinois’, in: Gilbert Durand, Sun Chaoying (eds.), *Mythe, themes et variations*, Paris 2000, p. 58.

²⁸ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 124.

²⁹ “[Chinese] policymakers continue to view women primarily as reproductive tools to realize the nation’s development goals.” (Leta Hong Fincher, *Betraying the Big Brother*, London and New York 2018, p. 15); Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London 2016.

a *transgressive* one, witnessing an alternative *within* – and not *detached from* – their living reality.³⁰ The parts of this passage that I have graphically underlined precisely illustrate this *dualitude* between reality and *other* reality, between dominant narrative and subterranean truths. Also, they exemplify how that “structural incompatibility with reality” is essential for Yao Minzhu’s research and Sheng Keyi’s literature, enabling their “deconstruction” and resemantization of language.³¹

History is like an eggshell: a fragile, ephemeral membrane. Truth, the “historical datum,” is a matter of perspective. The memory of those who experienced events firsthand and look back on them is inherently different from the post-memory of those, like Yao Minzhu, cannot but reconstruct the past from the outside. Yao Minzhu’s world exists in a time that is both connected to and distinct from the past. It contains the egg of the past, but also encompasses the space around it, filled with semantic dust waiting for significance.

The final underlined parts from the previous excerpt concern the element of the mirror. According to Foucault, the mirror is a unique heterotopia: “in the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface.” However, he continues, it also develops “a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze [...] from the ground of this virtual space [...], I come back toward myself; I begin again [...] to reconstitute myself there where I am.”³²

Yao Minzhu looks at herself in the mirror in the same way Sheng Keyi mirrors herself in her literature: not with the pretence of seeing her true self, but attempting to relocate herself where the reflected gaze confirms her existence. In other words, the search for truth – which for Yao Minzhu includes the dreamlike reworking of maternal post-memory, and for Sheng Keyi involves the literary reworking of historical and/or autobiographical data – is not a quest aimed at an attainment, where the individuals discover themselves at the moment they reach the goal. It is a search that holds value in itself and identifies the individual as “the one who seeks [herself in the mirror],” that is, as the subject of a gaze. Hence, Yao Minzhu’s gaze at the end of the mirror, as serious as her mother wanted, looks at her metaphor-loving self on this side of the mirror, making her feel *seen* and therefore *existing* where she really is: outside the mirror, outside the “eggshell,” outside her social role as a journalist, and even outside her role as a dead woman.

³⁰ For a discussion of the concept of “transgression” in art, as an attitude contrary to “mediocrity” and therefore a harbinger of awareness, see the following article by Sheng Keyi: Sheng Keyi, ‘Yongren qi shi yishu gexing zui da de laolong’ 庸人气是艺术个性最大的牢笼 (For an artist, mediocrity is the most harmful cage), *Xin Qingnian*, January 7, 2018, p. 5.

³¹ Regarding Sheng Keyi’s strategies to “deconstruct” the language, see: Nicoletta Pesaro, ‘Men control our vaginas; the state controls our wombs’, p. 30.

³² Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias’ (Translated from *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), pp. 46–49), *Foucault.info*, Viewed 16 July 2024, <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/>.

Death is simply the pretext to imaginarily escape from the clinic and subvert its repetitive order of treatments, routines, and propaganda text reciting. This order prevents the subject from deviating and self-inventing, denying its existence as a subject *tout court*. Whereas death constitutes the ineluctable subversion of this order. Death is the surface of the mirror. It represents the chance to deviate from what life has counterfeited as “history” or “reality.” In other words, death represents liberation from the physical body and, consequently, from Yao Minzhu’s various roles as a journalist, daughter, wife, and mother. This liberation is essential for her genuine quest for self-discovery and the resemantization of her female identity.

Therefore, the metaphors of the egg and the mirror that Sheng Keyi develops in this passage have a resemantizing power precisely because they function like Foucault’s heterotopias. Said heterotopias “have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or *invert* the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.”³³ Similarly, the rhetorical device of metaphor, which both the protagonist of *Jinhui* and the author passionately cultivate, acts like a mirror. The first gaze becomes aware of its own existence as a seeing subject, precisely and paradoxically becoming *the object* of the reflected gaze.³⁴ In the metaphor, the similarity between the two elements compared remains silent, just as the surface of the mirror remains invisible. This is why, unlike a comparison, a metaphor creates a closer connection between the two elements at play, causing their semantic fields to interact. If “metaphor means [...] transformation, transfer [of meaning], to lead elsewhere, to carry beyond,” Sheng Keyi *leads* the reader to the mother’s (mirroring) gaze. This “mother” is not merely a reproductive machine or a definitive truth. She is a doubt, a question, and a desire to seek truth, embodying a desire for life itself. Sheng Keyi’s resemantized mother figure no longer just generates life but instils the *desire for life*.³⁵

4. The Temple, the Vase and the Grave: The Resemantization of the Superhuman as Superfeminine

Another process of resemantization in *Jinhui* concerns characters straddling the human and superhuman worlds, such as the medium Wei Yifeng and Yama, king of the Underworld, who shares his perspective as the ruler of Fuyinzhen’s underworld. These characters do not have any salvific or messianic roles, but act as (counter)parts of Fuyinzhen’s apparent “reality.” They become the *other* witnesses of its “New Paradise” project. Instead of being only subjects of beliefs and superstitions, they question the dominant narrative and any definitive idea of “reality.”

³³ Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias’.

³⁴ On Sheng Keyi’s statements about her own “metaphor-addiction” see *Jinhui’s Afterword: Sheng Keyi, Jinhui*, p. 227.

³⁵ Grazia Vittigni, ‘Metafora e Psicoterapia’, Viewed 16 July 2024, <http://www.isfo.it/files/File/Segnalazioni/Metafora%20e%20psicoterapia.pdf>, p. 2.

To explore this process of resemantization, I will draw on observations by French anthropologist Gilbert Durand. He identifies many images as “psychologically synonymous” with universal archetypal solidarity, such as the temple, the vase, and the grave.³⁶ These recurring and unsettling motifs are prominent in *Jinhui*, driving the resemantization process. In *Jinhui*, the temple, vase, and grave no longer symbolize concrete forms, solid walls, or unshakable truths. Instead, they are depicted in states of crumbling, melting, and dissolving, transforming into doubts or taboos and becoming thresholds of the knowable – or its fiction.

[The archetype of the temple] For example, a Buddhist temple is featured prominently in the novel’s opening nightmare: at the centre of the shrine is a golden statue of a Bodhisattva, surrounded by the continuous murmur of prayers. However, suddenly the gold starts to melt. The statue turns into a man, and Yao Minzhu wakes up in her clinic room.³⁷ Another crumbling temple is the ruined church of Fuyinzhèn. Initially dismantled and repurposed as a Buddhist place of worship (as Buddhism is the only religion allowed after the implementation of the “New Paradise” project), it is eventually converted into the “Womb Rental Office” after the project fails. Here, the women of Fuyinzhèn – both the living and the dead – have their uterus exploited to repopulate the town as quickly as possible.

The metamorphosis of this temple space – from a Christian church into a Buddhist temple and finally into a “Womb Rental Office” – is a significant detail because it highlights a transcultural patriarchy and reveals its biopolitical functioning. This temple’s transformation shows how patriarchy is rooted in the submission and control of women’s reproductive lives, thus their bodies, reducing them to merely the use of their wombs. In Christianity, a male God uses the womb of a virgin to give birth to his beloved son – a male.³⁸ Not even Maya, Buddha’s mother, conceives her son by her own will. She is impregnated by an elephant in a dream and dies seven days after giving birth, her worldly role fulfilled. It is thus unsurprising, rather even fitting, that the Christian-Buddhist temple is eventually transformed into an office for womb exploitation. Man continues to exert his power by subsuming women’s reproductive faculties. The metamorphosis of the temple strips away the religious metaphor, revealing the male deities as men who maintain power by subjugating women.

It is no coincidence that the town Yao Minzhu visits is called Fuyinzhèn, or “Gospel Town.” This “gospel” is revealed to be not “the word of God,” but “the word of men,” or the dominant discourse (i.e. the patriarchal narrative). Sheng Keyi’s depiction of the temple’s transformation resemantizes religious stories as expressions of patriarchal biopolitics.

This process of resemantization is further exemplified with extreme consequences when Sheng Keyi sets the scene of a repeated rape in the aforementioned church,

³⁶ Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, Brisbane 1999, p. 246.

³⁷ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 5.

³⁸ Regarding the “secondary role” of Virgin Mary in the Christian narrative, see: Silvia Tubert, *Deseo y representación: Convergencias de psicoanálisis y teoría feminista*, Madrid 2001, p. 165.

connoting the violence suffered by the abused woman with terms evocative of Jesus Christ's passion:

Men take turns entering and leaving the church. Chang Duoxi never resists. It seems she has been sent by God. The abuse she suffers is a crown of thorns, and the men who mount her body rely on her to wash away the dirt and cruelty they carry in their hearts.

[...] [Wei Manyi, entering the ruined church and addressing Chang Duoxi:] "My mother is dead."

[...] [Chang Duoxi:] "Your eyes betray you: in the left there is pride, in the right there is joy. You have no time to regret your mother."³⁹

[The archetype of the vase] As explained by Sun Chaoying, the archetype of the vase in Chinese culture is "incontestablement représenté par le *Tao*, *Grail* chinois possédant des caractères thaumaturgiques." This connection between the Latin term "uter" (meaning wineskin or goatskin) and the term "uterus" (the womb, which is the source of all human life) is significant. Just as the never-filled vessel of the Tao is the origin of all things, the womb is the origin of human life.⁴⁰ The Great Wall itself can be considered a reflection of this archetype ("le plus grand contenant chinois [...] est *la Grande Muraille de Chine!*"). Similarly, the "New Paradise" is a delimited universe that can certainly participate in this concept of the "vase" with its inherent taboo: the impossibility of containing anything. The Tao is never full, and the Great Wall, like Fuyinzhèn's porous borders, witnesses both escapes and returns. This illustrates the paradox of the vessel being both a container of life and a place of dispersion. Here's an excerpt from *Jinhui*, describing a vase (or basin) of water that Yao Minzhu encounters:

The two goldfish painted at the bottom of the basin swim following the ripples of the water. [...] I lower my head, and watch them chasing each other, turning and swimming faster and faster, the water swirling, until the fish turn into two people, sitting on the surface of a river.⁴¹

In this context, the container blends in with its contents. The decorated basin is one with the water it collects. The womb is one with the life it brings. Similarly, Fuyinzhèn's dreamlike boundaries are one with Yao Minzhu's impossible quest. These boundaries represent the edges of death, or the space where death intersects with life, which allows Yao Minzhu to escape the confines of the clinic and reconnect with memories of her loved ones. Essentially, the vase symbolizes the paradox of storytelling itself: it embodies the challenge of creating fiction to capture the essence of life's mysteries, even though fiction can never fully encompass them.

³⁹ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 115.

⁴⁰ Sun Chaoying, 'Structures de l'imaginaire chinois', p. 62.

⁴¹ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 25.

[The archetype of the grave] One final archetype worth discussing is the grave. The grave in *Jinhui* is a negative presence. It stands out for its violation, its emptiness, and thus for the absence it represents.

On one hand, a tomb is the origin of the euphoria, fanaticism and eventually tragedy overwhelming Fuyinzhen. It is while digging the grave for a burial that the first and only trace of gold is found in the town, hence the quest for finding the precious metal and transforming the local economy. On the other hand, though, this tomb is destined to remain empty. It is a mere pre-text, a never-ended ritual.

The insatiable land of Fuyinzhen is never fully satisfied. Any element used as fertilizer is destined to disappear into the land without actually nourishing it. Instead, the earth is dug out everywhere in search of gold. In the case of the “earth of Guanyin,” it is even devoured. This results in the ghosts being unearthed rather than the dead being buried. In fact, even when they do get buried, fresh corpses are often unearthed to monstrously compensate for the lack of real food, highlighting the town’s desperate need to self-sustain.

In *Jinhui*, there is a notable absence of traditional funerals and burials. Yao Minzhu’s death is shrouded in mystery: was it a heart attack, or a drug-induced death? The pig Yongsheng 永生 is exhumed as a carrion and is eventually eaten after being slowly cooked. The tailor Pi is thrown into the river and consumed by fish. A young woman, Bai Huaiyu 白怀玉, is torn to pieces and devoured. These examples show that the novel does not include any proper funerals or burials. Instead, the land of Fuyinzhen is portrayed through Yao Minzhu’s eyes as a place of loss and emptiness – like a stolen tomb would be to a delayed archaeologist. As Yuan Bianhua tells Yao Minzhu, “You arrived late. Now there is nothing left here. Just ashes.”⁴²

In conclusion, then, the empty tomb of Fuyinzhen – or rather, Fuyinzhen as an empty tomb – does not symbolize a resurrection heralding salvation. It instead symbolizes a collective catastrophe led by a collapsing patriarchy. This collapsing system betrays itself in the end, resulting in losing its mask (revealing its own hypocrisy) instead of “losing face.”

Conclusions: Metaphorical Deviance as a Practice of Resemantization

As Foucault explains, “history is not possible if it is not based on an absence of history.” In other words, history requires space that is “empty and populated at the same time, by all those words without language which make anyone who listens hear a dull noise from beneath history, the stubborn murmur of a language which would speak by itself – without a speaking subject and without an interlocutor [...], collapsing before having reached any formulation.”⁴³

⁴² Ibidem, p. 21.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, ‘Préface’ in: *Folie et Dérison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* Paris 1961, pp. I–XI, consulted through: Viewed 16 July 2024, <http://libertaire.free.fr/MFoucault155.html>.

In fact, the testimonies of ghosts and animals in *Jinhui* aren't *really* collected by Yao Minzhu, as she herself has already disappeared, becoming a kind of "empty space" without language. However, if it is true that these characters "collapse" before "having reached any [real] formulation," since their testimonies are delivered to Yao Minzhu after they themselves have already died, their spectral formulations still create a form of "noise," a "stubborn" presence that readers can distinctly perceive. This "noise" represents the memories and truths that persist beyond Yao Minzhu's and her interlocutors' disappearance, and continue to impact the living world.

Among Chinese post-1970s authors, such as Sheng Keyi, Li Yiyun 李翊雲 (1972–), Guo Xiaolu 郭小櫓 (1973–), A Yi 阿乙 (1976–) and many others, language challenges are widely addressed and creatively explored. It's common to overcome aphasia by embracing new styles or approaches, such as A Yi's experimental narrative structures and nearly expressionist use of language, or by writing in a second language – a phenomenon known as exophony, as exemplified by Li Yiyun and Guo Xiaolu. The Chinese language and literature are thus experiencing a multifaceted reinvention, letting go of the Maoist jargon and enriching themselves with foreign contaminations and new contemporary perspectives. One shift theorized by Li Zehou 李泽厚 is aptly expressed in terms of "getting out of the language and back to the essence."⁴⁴

In her literature, Sheng Keyi uses a variety of techniques to create new forms of expression. Her dialogues often include dialect, for example. This approach reflects a broader trend among contemporary writers, who are experimenting with "abstract, evocative, and flexible" language, "fast-paced storytelling," and a "polyphonic narration" that blends multiple voices and perspectives, creating their own unique literary strategies.⁴⁵ And Sheng Keyi's unique literary strategy is what I hereby describe as "metaphorical deviance."

So, how does this metaphorical deviance practically work? How does it manage to influence literary language to the point of activating the aforementioned processes of resemantization? Of course, these questions go beyond the literary text's function and expand to the human minds of both of the author and the reader. Consequently, any attempt to answer them will necessarily imply borrowing categories and suggestions from psychoanalysis.

The novel's synopsis showcases the desire for research in both *Jinhui* and its model, *Pedro Paramo*. Yao Minzhu's desire for search originally stems from a promise she made to her mother: she won't forget her father's poetry and will act on her opinions rather than blindly following others. And this mirrors the promise Juan Preciado makes to his mother to look for his father, Pedro Paramo. This fundamental desire to respond to a request from one's mother, to receive her primal acknowledgement and recognition, is what drives the characters' research and their respective narratives. At the same time, however, this desire also stimulates the reader's interest in following the story, in retracing the footsteps of

⁴⁴ Giulia Rampolla, *Stridente armonia*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 113–120, 259.

their protagonists, and in reconstructing the plot (with them and through them). Indeed, it is through readers that these characters complete their very own research, because, as Peter Brooks *docet*, it is reading a narrative that “animates its sense-making process.”⁴⁶

In *Jinhui*, this “sense” is a journey of rediscovery and understanding, or a *returning-to-understand*: thorough her dreamlike journey to Fuyinzheng, Yao Minzhu, retraces her mother’s (post-)memories, compelled by a need to uncover the truth about her relatives’ lives and, ultimately, her own. It is no coincidence that the Chinese word for “ghost” (鬼, *gui*) is a homophone of “return” (归 *gui*). Nor is it by chance that, in *returning* to the *ghostly* Fuyinzheng in her search for truth, Yao Minzhu does actually end up (re)dying: the beginning and end of the story represent two different yet same forms of death. The first death is the physical one of the journalist trapped in the clinic. The final death, her dissolution into “brocade ashes,” is the loss of her conscious soul and narrative voice, which signifies the end of the novel itself. As Brooks explains, this concept illustrates Todorov’s idea of “narrative transformation,” where the beginning and the end reflect a same-but-different relationship.⁴⁷ Between these two points, there is a crucial space – the plot – that connects them. Thus we must accept this space as “necessary.”⁴⁸ So, what is the “necessity” of the plot that Sheng Keyi creates between Yao Minzhu’s physical death and her final, complete disappearance?

“For as long as I can remember,” Yao Minzhu says, “there have always been strangers who would hang around our house and follow my mother wherever she went, as if they were bodyguards. [...] My mother claimed that I had inherited my father’s literary talent and that the pen was a weapon in its own way. [...] Others would have thought of their children’s safety and happiness, but she urged me to seek freedom and truth even at the cost of my life. [...] When I was little and I was lying in my mother’s arms, her gentle breath was the whole world to me. Since I lost my memory, I don’t remember her face, so [now], every time I think of her, I am reminded of that photograph of Qiu Jin 秋瑾 clutching the dagger.”⁴⁹

The therapies of “detoxification from metaphors” are invasive to the point of eroding even the mother’s memory, a figure now remembered only passively: the object chased by mysterious strangers, a staring gaze that Yao Minzhu’s muddled mind can only confuse with that of the feminist martyr Qiu Jin (1875–1907). The mother’s words, however, have not vanished. The memory of her breath remains equally intact. Contrasting the Qiu Jin-style pose, her breath is described as *wenrou* 温柔, or gentle, lukewarm, and light. It quietly blows on Yao Minzhu’s childhood, providing her with what Recalcati calls the very “first language:”

⁴⁶ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, New York 1984 (eBook), p. 48.

⁴⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, ‘Les Transformations narratives,’ in: *Poétique de la prose*, Paris 1971, pp. 225–240.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 37–38, 268.

⁴⁹ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, pp. 121–122. Qiu Jin – revolutionary, feminist and writer – was born in Xiamen (Fujian) in 1875 and died in Shaoxing (Zhejiang) in 1907, after participating in a failed uprising against the Qing dynasty and being sentenced to beheading. The photograph mentioned by Sheng Keyi is probably the most famous portrait of hers.

The first language is not the national language, the one established by the language code, but a language [...] made up of confused sounds, affections, emotional states, disjointed letters, mixtures of phonemes and spasms of the body, [...] where the signifier does not convey the meaning, but is one with the body of the speaker. [...] We have a clear example of this in the child's lallation or in the preverbal signs that characterize his first affective exchanges with his Other. [...] Lacan baptizes it with the term *lalangue*, "la langue" [in French, "the language"] all attached, precisely to indicate that absence of symbolic spacing, or, the lack of articulation characterizing it.⁵⁰

Thenceforth, what makes the plot of Yao Minzhu's journey to Fuyinzen so "necessary" is the desire to re-learn this very first language and respond to the maternal stimulus. It is a fundamental and impossible desire, connecting all human beings, of perpetual return to the mother's womb,⁵¹ to the eggshell, to a duality that has not yet been split. It is that "absence of symbolic spacing" between parent and child, between self and Other. This is why the deviance of Sheng Keyi's language hinges on the use of metaphors. The metaphor, connecting its terms without any "symbolic spacing", allows a (re-)fusion between them, which is productive of infinite and reciprocal resemantizations.⁵²

Recalcati observes that "books are written in the language established by the codes of the national languages. And yet *lalangue* remains their silent ember." This is why "reading always contains the mysterious possibility of feeling to be read [by the books themselves]." This is how Sheng Keyi realizes this possibility through her use of metaphors. Sheng Keyi "reads" her readers, resemantizing the words in which they articulate their lives.⁵³

By staging metamorphoses and speaking in metaphors, *Jinhui* thus becomes a meta-space (a journey between life and death) and a meta-novel, projecting its resemantizations directly outside the text and into the language of reality. This happens not only in Chinese and not only with female readers, but also with international readers, to whom Sheng Keyi offers *renewed* words, capable of expressing and shaping renewed and *necessary* ways of living in our contemporary societies.

In conclusion, it is therefore evident that declaring herself a writer uninterested in politics does not mean Sheng Keyi leads an impossible existence outside the *polis*. Actually, it means calling herself and her Other (i.e., the character, the reader) *within* the *polis*, but deviating from those prejudgmental superstructures (ideologies, systematic interpretations, Orientalisms or Westernisms of any kind) that monopolize its borders, thus obscuring the *polis'* plural truths, its different stories and their real transformative power.

⁵⁰ Massimo Recalcati, *I tabù del mondo*, pp. 108–109.

⁵¹ Ludovica Grassi, 'Nostalgia', *SpiWeb Società Psicoanalitica Italiana*, Viewed 16 July 2024, <https://www.spiweb.it/la-ricerca/ricerca/nostalgia/>.

⁵² The term *bìyù* 比喻 itself, which means "metaphor," occurs in *Jinhui* about a hundred times.

⁵³ On the "mysterious possibility of feeling to be read," see Massimo Recalcati, *I tabù del mondo*, p. 109.

“What I fear is that cataract affecting the soul...,” says journalist Yao Minzhu, or perhaps Sheng Keyi herself through her. “Yes, exactly, the cataract of the soul, that’s the disease... If a simple article will not be enough to cure it, it will at least have served to reveal its existence.”⁵⁴

Hence, to paraphrase this meaningful passage, even if literature cannot directly alter reality – for example, it may not directly impact the disadvantage and subjugation that women, not only in China, still frequently endure in contemporary societies – it can nonetheless act as a powerful space for raising awareness. When this awareness permeates language, resemantizing it, our understanding of concepts shifts, enabling us to use old words to express and bring about new ideas. For instance, we might redefine “mother” not as one who gives birth to bodies but as one who inspires a desire for life, and we can believe in Mayas and Virgin Marys who do not give birth to male gods, but to human kinship.

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⁵⁴ Sheng Keyi, *Jinhui*, p. 144.