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## The Sensibilities of Semicolonial Shanghai: A Phenomenological Study of the Short Stories by Liu Na'ou

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In the histories of Chinese and Sinophone literatures, there is no direct equivalent of mid-nineteenth-century Victorian sensationalism. However, the notions unavoidably related to "sensationalism," such as "sense," "sensation," "sensitivity," "sensuality," "sentiment," "the sensory," "the sensorial," and "the sensuous," are all useful for examining some groups of literary texts that focus on the nature of perception. The Shanghai new sensationists in the late 1920s and early 1930s were not the first to do this. Shanghai new sensationism was indebted to Japan's 1920s new sensationism as well as to the French author Paul Morand, but the rise of a kind of writing highlighting an apprehension of the narrated world derived from sense-perception appeared in Chinese and Sinophone literary histories long before their time. It is, furthermore, mistaken to assume that other contemporaneous literary movements did not write about perceptual experience. The reason why the short stories of Liu Na'ou 劉吶歐 are chosen in this study is not that he was one of the leading authors in the literary movement of Shanghai new sensationism, but that these stories present a dilemma for the reader: typically based upon urban experiences,

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these stories reveal the impossibility of apprehending the city through its experience, rendering the city an elusive subject. The more exhaustively they portray the city, the more perceptual knowledge the reader seems to have of the city; but paradoxically, the less she knows the city itself. These sensationist texts ultimately constitute an enigmatic genre that reveals the very problem of perception, which hinders, rather than helps, the representation of urban reality. At the same time, however, these texts also suggest a different epistemological framework to understand the city in terms of sensations.

China's semicolonial modernity in the 1920s was not only a sociopolitical phenomenon, but also a sensorial one. It made new sensations possible with sound technologies, silent cinema, lighting technologies, as well as with imported goods and foods. For instance, in the short story "Games" ("Youxi") 遊戲 in the collection *Scène* 都市風景線, Liu Na'ou begins with a multisensorial experience of the male protagonist, Buqing 步青, this way: "In this 'Palace of Tango,' everything is shaking in a kind of rhythm: the bodies of the men and women, colorful lighting, shiny wine glasses, liquid in red and green colors, delicate fingertips, pomegranate colored lips, blazing eyes" (3).

As the quote attests there were sensations that Shanghai's semicolonial context specifically made possible. The asyndeton in this quote lists a variety of sense perceptions: sight (lighting, pomegranate), aurality (Tango), tactility (the dancing bodies, fingertips), and gustation (red and green drinks). They existed along with the introduction of sound technologies (to play Tango music), silent cinema (to watch Tango dancing), lighting technologies, and imported goods (wine glasses, Western alcohol) to Shanghai. The availability of these technologies and goods was a result of Shanghai's semicoloniality. Shanghai was forced by Great Britain to open itself for foreign trade in 1843, and by the USA and France in the following year (*All* 3).

Although this kind of semicolonial modernity brought by the increasing availability of technology, products and information directly contributes to Shanghai's prosperity as the "sixth city of the World" and "the Paris of the East," it is obviously problematic: it mandates the idea of modernity based on a universal and secular point of reference originating from the West (*All* 1; Chakrabarty 4, Sakai 155). Moreover, historians found that Shanghai's prosperity was deceptive; it did not mean China's economy improved (Chow 37). Many critics have discussed how colonialism manifests itself in the relatively more easily discerned discourses

of religion, classical music, and philosophy (Urban 44–45, Weidman 111–149; Sakai 163–176); but how does it work in the realm of the urban sensorium? How does the colonial context affect the representation of the modern city in the writings of the sensationist kind, or how much is it effaced by the style?

To answer these questions, it is essential to first consider the problem of perception in philosophy, because, as explained above, writings of perceptual experience cannot represent social reality directly. Heidegger suggests that when one perceives, one is essentially establishing a closeness with the sources of sensations outside of one's experience. To explain this, he uses the example of how one describes one's experience of sound: "We never ... originally and really perceive a throng of sensations ... in the appearance of things ...; rather, we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-engine aeroplane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. *Much closer* to us than any sensations are the things themselves" (emphasis added) (Heidegger 151–152). In other words, one rarely thinks of sounds as vibrations of different frequencies, speeds, and so on. One thinks of sounds as objects or phenomena, such as the airplane, the Mercedes-Benz, the Volkswagen, and the storm. For most people, sounds are the objects in which vibrations originate, although sounds are actually sensations, not objects. In other words, in one's thought process, there is no room for one to differentiate reality from experience, which is a problem of perception (Crane 2.1.1).

It does not matter if Heidegger is generalizing how most people habitually think of sound; what matters is that he has highlighted the significant notion of closeness, which is useful for the discussion of the semicolonial context of urban experience here. In applying Heidegger's theory explained above, which addresses the perceiver's conceptual fabrication of closeness with the perceived objects, to the experience of the city dwellers in Shanghai, when they sensed the sensations originated from the colonial imports, it is notable that there was little possibility of mediation between colonial experience and colonial reality. The more sensory stimuli there were, the less mediation between the semicolonial experience and the semicolonial reality there was. For the urban subject, there was minimal room to develop a kind of mindfulness. It became difficult to reflect on their own status of experiencing the semicolonial reality they were immersed in. Their day-to-day contact with the city foreclosed the possibility of mediating between feelings and the objects/phenomena that caused them. In their urban culture of sensory overload, contact with

the city was close and immediate. The semicolonial urban experience was overwhelming and instantaneous. In Shanghai's setting, when sensations were so excessively produced, there was limited possibility to develop an awareness of the very process of perception. Unlike other mental activities which are cognitive, such as thinking and memorization, perceiving is usually direct and instantaneous (Deleuze 36).<sup>1</sup> As a result, a place with an active production system of sensations, such as urban Shanghai, is susceptible to colonial culturalization in the sense of perception.

The issue of closeness/immediateness of the 1920s Shanghai experience can be found in Liu Na'ou's repeated use of the trope of someone being swallowed by the city, as seen in two of the stories in *Scène* (Shih 287). In the first example, in the story "Games," he uses the hungry ghost as an image of Shanghai to reveal the urbanites' predicament of being exhausted when the city overwhelms the individual: they get devoured without mercy by the city like a hungry ghost. The urban subjects cannot distance themselves from the city and get drained by an inexorable power—the hungry ghost. As the story of "Games" progresses, we discover that the female protagonist, Yiguang 移光, a femme fatale who uses men for money and sex, sleeps with the male protagonist, Buqing, and then abandons him. As he walks in the crowd in the city, "the city swallows him like a hungry ghost" (17). Different characters, regardless of their gender, class, and education, all, in experiencing the city, get swallowed and eventually lose themselves. In the second example, in the story "Ruin" ("Canliu") 殘留, the female protagonist, Xialing 霞玲, an amorous woman whose husband has just passed away, wanders streets of Shanghai at night. She loves the beautiful skyline of Shanghai, but she does not belong in the city and submits herself to "be swallowed by the dark night" (160–161). The city dwellers' fate of being devoured strongly suggests that the city is an overwhelming power that the individual cannot handle: eventually it overwhelms the psychological unity of the individual.

The reference to the hungry ghost can be traced back to Eastern religions. In Buddhist terms, the hungry ghosts are the kind of sentient beings trapped in the samsara. Hungry ghosts are beings constantly looking for food and drink. Not only are they unable to find food, they cannot even hear the word "food." They have huge stomachs but tiny throats, so they

<sup>1</sup>The cognitive/cognition here refers to the mental activities such as thinking, learning, and memory. See Wang 21.

can never swallow enough to satisfy their hunger (Gyatso 7). A hungry ghost has a big appetite but no way to fulfill herself, so she is always on the hunt for food, a synecdoche for all other physical satisfactions, such as drink, comfortable shelter, nice clothes, pleasant music, beautiful scenery, sex. However, Liu Na'ou does not imply only that the urban dwellers are insatiable, but also that the city itself becomes a hungry ghost that devours its inhabitants, as in "the city swallows him like a hungry ghost" (17).

This type of social annihilation of individuality Liu Na'ou portrays, such as the city as an inexorable power swallowing the urbanites like its prey, has a long history within the field of urban studies. In the classic 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," the sociologist Georg Simmel suggests that the loss of the urbanites' mentality is a result of the peculiar conditions of the modern city, such as the prevalence of money economy, and the division of labor (14, 18–19). Another important essay written in 1938 on the same topic but rather with a historicist approach by Louis Wirth, a scholar of the same intellectual genealogy, concurs that the individual loses his/her selfhood in order to adapt to the social order of a modern city for a utilitarian reason dictated by the production process: "The premium put upon utility and efficiency suggests the adaptability of the corporate device for the organization of enterprises in which individuals can engage only in groups" (101). Similar theories and theses in different fields, such as urban social ecology and urban planning, have since called into question the processes by which capitalist modernity subjugates individuals.

While predominantly using a sociological approach, many of these works of criticism scrutinize the problems by pointing to different types of social formations that contribute to the subjugation of the individual. Relatively fewer concern the senses, like the issue of closeness with the perceived objects/phenomena Heidegger suggests. It is worth noting the problem with perception that philosophers have focused on in order to explore other perspectives of the overpowering pressure of the city on the individual, because the primary "medium" to feel the city is always the sensory apparatus of the perceiver. The production of bodily sensations determines how a person perceives the modern world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes of how the utilitarian understanding of the world misleads people to interpret the objects and phenomena in the city. He states, "We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakably" (*Sense* 16). "The human actions which

put them to use" may refer to the city dwellers' habits of understanding the objects and phenomena in the city within this logic. The ideas the city dwellers have about these man-made objects are therefore limited. In many cases, city residents only think of them going by their use values, but never consider what they really are, such as how they feel, look, sound. In other words, urban culture makes it hard for the city dwellers to accomplish an honest understanding of the objects and phenomena without prejudice. The city dwellers are constantly conditioned by the status quo to misunderstand the objects and phenomena in the city and to assume their interpretations of them as indisputable.

To demonstrate a way to counteract this problem of perceiving the objects and phenomena in the inevitable reduced perspective that the city may force upon each of its inhabitants, Merleau-Ponty cites Cézanne's unusual artistic techniques to "[recapture] and [convert] into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things. Only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism, that of the continual rebirth of existence" (emphasis added) (*Sense* 17–18). Against the standard of using colors for artists of his time, Cézanne applied more colors and used them differently from his contemporaries (the Impressionists) to make his subject matters look lively and vibrant, offering a chromatic sensation (*Sense* 11–12). This is why Merleau-Ponty praises him, for, by employing these unusual artistic techniques, he was able to restore the primordial and pure state of objects (*Sense* 13–14). His paintings show the original and unprocessed visual sensations of the objects. Conceptual thoughts are minimized in these sensations. His paintings do not conform to the customs of society or any particular artistic movement on a consistent basis. The objects are shown "not as spread out before us," which will be the city's customary ways of understanding them, but instead, "as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves," which is lively (*Sense* 15). This is why Merleau-Ponty appreciates Cézanne for resurrecting the misconstrued objects from the mundane logic of modern life. As Merleau-Ponty points out, this type of resurrection of the misconstrued objects/phenomena in the city from the mundane gives a feeling of strangeness in art.

The same thing occurs in Liu Na'ou's writings. The feeling of strangeness is omnipresent in almost all of Liu Na'ou's works. His language is arguably foreign to native speakers of Chinese, if not downright awkward. For instance, he writes, "Miss Luk's hips started

swaying from side to side," while the literary critic of his time, Chen Qiyu 沈綺雨, thought that he should write "Miss Luk stood up and left." He also writes "the school spat out groups of students" while Chen thought that he should write "Groups of students walked out from the school" (65). One of the explanations of the foreignness of Liu's language is his upbringing: he was born and raised in colonial Taiwan (under Japanese occupation) and Japan (Shih 270). The diction, style, and grammar he learned outside of China might therefore be quite different from those of the literati in the Mainland. However, besides explaining the strangeness of language from a predictable biographical point of view, one can also conduct a sensory investigation: Liu's unusual literary expressions are evidence of his attempt to revert one's experience of Shanghai to a pure and primordial state as a sensational literary response, much like the way Merleau-Ponty explains the case of Cézanne. "Sensational" here does not necessarily mean shocking, startling, scandalous. A sensational response can also be a response largely constituted of sensations as opposed to processed thoughts.

The case with the strangeness of Liu's language has something similar in the context of Western literature. It is similar to the case of the Russian formalists who employed the literary technique of defamiliarization. By using a defamiliarized language, these authors problematized the familiar. Viktor Shklovsky explains, for instance, that Tolstoy's use of defamiliarized language is "[to make] the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. [Tolstoy] describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects" (13). Shklovsky's explanation almost resembles Merleau-Ponty's point about Cézanne's style: the Russian formalists undermined the socially accepted concepts, the familiar ideas, and the customarily written objects, as well as suggested a primitive, innocent, open-minded way of writing about the objects. By innocent, it does not mean this approach of painting/writing is unintelligent; it is highly sophisticated but undefined. Both Cézanne's artistic and the Russian formalists' literary traditions sought the mind of the painter or the author like a child's. This kind of spiritual pursuit tries to redeem the often ignored sensations Heidegger calls into question. Similarly, in "Games," Liu Na'ou beautifully demonstrates his own way of accomplishing a bare description of the objects in the city with minimal conceptual thinking:

There were some people in the park during sunset. Two hookers walked by him. A priest in a secular outfit was reading a book under the tree. Two bats flew out from the vines. They circled a few times in the air at quite a low height, then flew towards the willows near the pond. He found an empty bench and sat down by the fence where the roses all bloomed. The breeze and the smell of the moist soil brought a sweet fragrance to the air. Maybe it was the ripened fruits in the trees. Sunset was gradually crawling in, but the people didn't seem to want to leave. It was as if they were trying to seize another moment of this lovely last bit of sunlight. Suddenly, under the dim light, these fragile beige colored women's feet appeared before his eyes. (19)

This quote shows how Liu Na'ou offers a bare description of a moment in the city without excessive conceptualizing or contextualizing, like in a snapshot. The narrator describes first the sunset, the people, the animals, the plants, and then what he can smell in the air, see under weak lighting, and so on in a park. The hookers and priests, two moralistically opposite occupations, are juxtaposed and regarded equally within the bigger picture of the city. These people, objects, and phenomena play no particular role in the story. They neither facilitate the progress of the story nor work as any literary devices, for example, simile and metaphor, to convey any meanings. They are described exactly the way they are for minimal cognitive or organizational purposes. They constitute a setting of the story, but the meanings of these objects and phenomena are indirect and dubious. The objects and phenomena are sensibly parts of the setting, because they are common things present in a city, but they are described in a way that serves minimal rhetorical function of conveying any intelligible beliefs, concepts, or structures of feeling. They are unrelated to the focus of the story. They do not constitute a structure. It is not obvious why this quote as well as other similar descriptions of the objects and phenomena have to be in *Scène*, especially in such an extensive length, but this is the literary characteristic of sensationist literature. Literature tells a relatively unprocessed, unanalyzed, and original version of the actual sensations one feels and does not consciously decipher them. It lays out the bare and unevaluated perception of the city like a foreigner, a child, or someone who has little idea about a place.

This kind of sensational, minimally conceptualized response to the reality of the city Liu Na'ou demonstrates is different from established patterns of understanding in literature, art, and film, like realism or structures of feeling in opposition to sensationism. Realism presumes a processed, thought-through, and accepted conception of reality, while

sensationism does not. Sensationism is about the experience beneath the level of the cognitive or the analytical. Although in philosophy it is still under dispute whether perceptions are nonconceptual, it is at least safe to say that perceptions derived from sensations must be pre-conceptual.<sup>2</sup> They are not or have not become products of logical thinking (yet). Likewise, structures of feeling are "[sets] of [affective] elements [of consciousness], with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (Williams 132). They presume an underlying logic which explains the production of feelings in culture, while sensationism does not. Sensations are not feelings operated within a structured framework of recognizably interconnected relations, regardless of how flexible the structure is. Sensations are beyond structures, so they are different from structures of feeling.

Instead of being conceptual, the urban sensations Liu Na'ou describes open up an opportunity for appreciating the city from square one, feeling it at the most personal level, with the sensory apparatus. This attempt redeems the writing about the city from being overtly literal despite the subject matters of his writings, which are all clearly "decadent" phenomena in an exorbitant semicolonial city, for example, materialistic lifestyles, promiscuity, Western orientalism. It allows for an apprehension of the city in exactly the way its objects and phenomena appear, sound, smell, and feel. With this sensational style of writing, Liu Na'ou develops an egalitarian message about the equally important presence of the prostitutes and the clergy in a modern city, which contrasts with some feminist interpretations of his attitude toward women. Often based on both his portrayals of the "sluts" and his biographical history, some critics believe that he was misogynous (Peng 120).<sup>3</sup> However, by looking closely at his characters' immediate sensations of—not concepts about—the people, objects, and phenomena, I suspect his writing is an experiment of transliterating a spontaneous bodily response to the exorbitant city beyond representations of gender.

The shift of emphasis from the conceptual function of language to the sensational in literature that Liu Na'ou exhibits does not deny the cognitive realm, such as concepts, ideas, logic, analysis. What it does is create

<sup>2</sup>For a general outline of the current theories of mental activities with nonconceptual content, see Gunther 3.

<sup>3</sup>See also another response to this argument in Hsu 93–95.

a different framework of understanding by including both sensations and concepts, in order to question the conceptual as the pre-conceived. When sensations have become a given condition in the narrative, it is then obvious to tell that the concepts, such as metaphors, are also mediated in sensory terms and therefore subjective. As a result, the narrated reality of the city becomes subject to the mediation of sensory functions. For instance, in "Games," when Buqing sees Yiguang in the dance club, he says to her:

I came out from my friend's home in the morning today. When I passed by a busy street, I felt everything in this city had already died. Cars stuffing the whole street, the trains on the rail, passersby right next to me who rubbed my shoulders and cut me off, advertisement signs, glass, messy decorations of the storefronts. They were no longer in my sight. In front of my eyes, I only saw a big desert. It was as silent as it was during prehistoric times. The loud noise in the street turned into whispers of the breeze in the woods. I thought the sound of the running cars on the rail was that of the bells of a camel team. (4-5)

This quote shows how Liu suggests a historical perspective to understand modernity by an interruption of seeing the objects in the city. The things in the city, including the cars, the trains, the passersby, the signs, glass, and storefronts, are all products of modernity. Their relationships with the individual are essentially the same as those of the objects of nature: Liu Na'ou writes that Buqing suddenly feels them turning into things in a desert. The sound of the street turns into the sound of the wind in the woods. The sound of the cars turns into the bells of a camel team. Liu Na'ou makes it clear that this illusion of Buqing's is a perceptual experience: Buqing hears these things that morning and sees a big desert when he closes his eyes on the busy street, imagining that the city has come to an end. The modern world reverts to prehistoric times when there are only woods and people riding camels. The purpose of this imagery, apparently, is a comparison between the modern and the prehistoric, between the cultural and the natural. But Liu Na'ou does not compare these two contrasting historical times as ideas; he uses hearing and seeing perceptions to connect them as perceptive varieties, literally in the blink of an eye. This means that both the modern and the prehistoric must be constructions humans feel to a certain extent. The current reality he is supposedly in, i.e. Shanghai, is not necessarily as it really appears. What he knows about Shanghai is only what the city appears like to him. The

city is virtually an illusory and a mesmerizing phenomenon its inhabitants cannot totalize but can only continuously experience as an origin of ever-changing sensations.<sup>4</sup> In other words, sensational writing works as a call to question the quasi-unshakable conceptual foundation of language/constructions in literature.<sup>5</sup> It does not deny them, but by emphasizing on perceptual knowledge, it changes the epistemology of the city in literature by putting into question the representation of the city itself through direct sensations.

While in "Games," Buqing's illusion questions the construction of Shanghai's modernity, in "An Attempted Murder," another example of a character's illusion questions a stereotype of the city—promiscuity. "An Attempted Murder" is a story about Mr. Luo 羅君, a customer who goes to a bank where he keeps his valuables in a safe deposit box. He always sees the same female worker there, who helps him sign in and open the safe deposit box. At first he thinks of her as cold and unapproachable, but after he sees her on a date with an attractive man in the city, he thinks of her differently. He starts imagining that she is another sexually permissive woman—a "modern girl." The next time he takes things out of his safe deposit box, he strangles her and tries to have sex with her. She screams and he ends up being arrested.

What arouses Mr. Luo's desire for the bank worker in "An Attempted Murder" is thermal sensation. Contrary to the common trope of using hotness as an indication of sexual desire, coldness is used in this example to describe the feeling that makes Mr. Luo crave sex. Liu Na'ou writes about the place where Mr. Luo and this bank worker always meet, the

<sup>4</sup> Buqing's perception of the modern as comparable with the prehistorical has a counterpart in the theory of urban studies. The beginning of Simmel's "Metropolis" essay coincidentally suggests the same situation the individual has to face in the city just like in the natural world: "The fight with nature which primitive man has to wage for his bodily existence attains in this modern form its latest transformation" (13). In other words, modernity, in the case with both Buqing and Simmel, is not an independently new, stable, and separate stage of history. It is a (sensorial for Buqing, or sociological for Simmel) transformation from the time past. The world, either when it is in the form of the primitive or the modern, is still a battleground for the individual to struggle for survival. This idea is a challenge to the assumption of modernity as enlightenment and progress.

<sup>5</sup> Back in Liu's time, critics immediately noticed the merit of using bare descriptions of objects to revitalize clichéd philological constructions in literature, such as to describe a monk coming out of a barber shop, one can write, "The light green monk's head flows in the spring breeze" as opposed to "The monk walks out of the door." See Xie 8.

safe deposit box area, as “steel-like, icy, guarded, fossilizing all people and objects.” The “big mirror in the middle” of the room “reflects the glare of all the metal” (14). This eroticized cold environment makes him want to take off all of his dirty clothes and masturbate in the midst of the metallic reflection (15). Because the bank worker is also perceived as an “icy cold” woman, almost like “a robot made of steel,” she becomes a sexualized object he wants to acquire (14–15) (Fig. 12.1). When he has some trouble opening the safe deposit box, she “cracks a bit of a smile, like a building made of steel,” so he thinks she wants him, too (15).

“An Attempted Murder” subverts the logic of the mundane reality of the city by doing justice to sensations, even if they lead to delusion. Although the plotline indicates that Mr. Luo is deluded about the modern girl, the story illustrates the rich sensations he experiences in the city that mislead him to believe that the woman is sexually open to him. He is fully aware of the illusion he gets from seeing and hearing the woman, yet he completely accepts it. When the bank worker is quiet, he can initiate some conversation with her, but he chooses not to, because he does not want “an external uneasy voice to disturb his feelings [for her]” (13). He chooses to indulge in a fantasy created by the enclosed and cold spatial setup of the safe deposit box area as well as the quiet woman, as opposed to actually hearing her speak—getting to know her. He knows that his fantasy about this woman is a “horrible daydream,” but he allows himself to continue to imagine that the attraction is mutual (15). All these hints are evidence that the protagonist knows the sensations delude him, but he is willingly fooled. After committing an attempted murder of the bank worker, “he does not seem like he feels he has done anything wrong. He neither has any remorse nor shows any usual gestures of most criminals” (17). While the modern girl is often “associated with dating, romantic love and the legitimation of premarital sex” by the mass media (Barlow 264–265), he is actually a self-reflective man with some awareness of the fallacy of sensual images prevalent in Shanghai, despite his failure to overcome his craving. As a matter of fact, he is not only a fictional character created in a short story, but also a representation of Liu Na’ou’s own voice in an essay. In Liu Na’ou’s 1934 essay contributed to the popular magazine *Women’s Pictorial*, he writes that women often dare not say they want the men but would rather show their passion with their closed lips and big open eyes, like the Hollywood actress Joan Crawford (Lee 196)



Fig. 12.1 Detail of Liu Na’ou’s essay in *Women’s Pictorial*, (*Furen Huabao*) 18 (May 1934): 16<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Liu Na’ou, “An Attempted Murder,” *Wenyi Huabao* (Literature and Art Pictorial) 1:2 (1934), 24–28.

(Fig. 12.2). This essay explains why the character of Mr. Luo misinterprets the bank worker—he thinks he is “helping” her to unfold her repressed passion.

All these examples of sensational writing help to disrupt the representational relationship between reality and literature about the city. In the examples in both “Games” and “An Attempted Murder,” sensations are used as a literary strategy to simultaneously recognize the impossibility of access to the narrated reality in the city and to suggest an alternative reality solely according to the conditions of perception. The objective quality of the reality in the city is not what causes its inhabitants’ understanding of the city, but, as Heidegger notes, their perceptions do, which are often forgotten as the link between the object and the perceiver. This idea about the obstacle to fully understand the narrated reality is crucial for analyzing literature about city life, because sensory stimuli characterize the conditions of the city.

Different thinkers have questioned the stable relationship between the representation and the represented (of any kind of reality). Merleau-Ponty reminds us that “we are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in detaching ourselves from it in order to shift to the consciousness of the world” (because we are deluded by our perceptual experience constituted of sensations) (*Phenomenology* 5). Gilles Deleuze further argues that it is violent to produce a “figuration,” like representation or (Saussurean structuralist) signification upon something by means of a narrative or symbolic act (xiv). Spinoza thinks our idea of reality and reality itself are always different: ‘as long as we are engaged in an enquiry into real things, it will never be permissible for us to draw a conclusion from what is abstract, and we shall take great care not to mix the things that are merely in the intellect with those things that are in reality’ (25).

While all these anti-representational arguments may make it sound like sensationist literature denies the possibility to understand the city, they do not; they, instead, open up an opportunity to understand the city in light of the problem of perception. As discussed above, Merleau-Ponty uncovers a new way of portraying the nature in Cézanne’s paintings which is “a form of art ... valid for everyone” (*Sense* 11). What he refers to is not some over-simplistic idea like “music is a universal language.” He also does not mean everyone sees or feels the same way regardless of language, culture, beliefs. What he refers to is Cézanne’s unique style of “[depicting] matter



Fig. 12.2 Illustration by Guo Jianying in *Literature and Art Pictorial* (*Wenyi Huabao*), 1: 1934

as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization" (*Sense* 13). Cézanne's impromptu style he identifies here is similar to Rainer Maria Rilke's idea about the way an artist should follow: "Ideally a painter (and, generally, an artist) should not become conscious of his insights: without taking the detour through his reflective processes, and incomprehensibly to himself, all his progress should enter so swiftly into the work that he is unable to recognize them in the moment of transition" (75). In other words, Merleau-Ponty's and Rilke's consensus is that art reflecting reality should be unpremeditated.<sup>7</sup>

There is a historical merit in this pursuit for unpremeditated perceptions of the objects and phenomena in art and literature. Merleau-Ponty thinks that by stepping back from the metaphysical understanding of the objects and focusing on the artist's bodily relations with them, it helps "make the event [of painting] into a durable theme of historical life and have a right to philosophical status" (179). The same goes for sensationist literature about the city. Unpremeditated perceptions historicize the events of writing by showing the unexpected sensibilities arisen in the short stories. They make the relations of the writer with the objects and phenomena transparent and inviting historical contemplation. As opposed to the way literature about the city, in using conceptual thoughts, forecloses the possibilities of appreciating familiar images of modern life, sensationist writing encourages a new understanding of them. For instance, in her 1927 masterpiece "Miss Sophia's Diary," one of Liu Na'ou's contemporaries, also a famous female writer in the May Fourth Movement, Ding Ling 丁玲, describes the face of Ling Jishi, a handsome young man the narrator has a crush on, in a hackneyed way: "How can I describe the beauty of this strange man? His stature, pale delicate features, fine lips, and soft hair are quite dazzling enough" (55). Whereas Ding Ling uses predictable and generic literary constructions, for example, "fine" for describing lips and "soft" for describing hair, Liu Na'ou goes for the eccentric and specific. His way of describing the face of a young and attractive woman whom the male protagonist, Ranqing 燃青, meets in a train, in the story "Scenery" ("*Fengjing*") 風景, is inventive: "But the most special was her little tiny lips, neurotically cracked open like a pomegranate too ripe" (*Scène* 28).

<sup>7</sup>One may ask what they were actually cautious about and trying to align art to their historical contexts. These thinkers were, perhaps, trying to locate art against the prevalence of premeditated thoughts according to modern science (*The Primacy* 159–161; Potts 213).

Unlike Ding Ling's description of the pale, delicate features, fine lips, and soft hair in "Miss Sophia's Diary," which are historically not specific, Liu Na'ou's description of female neurotic demeanor in "Scenery"—"little tiny lips, *neurotically* cracked open like a pomegranate too ripe" (emphasis added)—clearly reveals an emergence of psychoanalytical terminology and a particular Western aesthetic of female beauty in early twentieth-century China. Through an unpremeditated and intuitive description of the sight of a woman's face that is supposed to be attractive for her time period, the reader is then able to understand the sensibilities of the flâneur in the semicolonial context. The writing is not as much a representation of the reality of Shanghai's semicolonial society but as a historical artifact by itself. It is not an artifact of the thoughts of the time in a cognitive sense, but of the sensibilities in an affective sense. It carries a historical significance and allows room for further reflection on affect and aesthetics during China's semicoloniality.

To sum up, sensationist literature offers an opportunity to understand the sensory culture of urban life. Paradoxically, among the burgeoning body of the study of Shanghai new sensationism, the topic of sensation does not seem to be getting the kind of attention it deserves.<sup>8</sup> Numerous examples of scholarship treat new sensationist literature as representations of something, such as of the city of Shanghai, the women during its time, and so on (Peng 70–72; Ceng 483–487, 495–501, 510–511; Rosenmeier). While scholars have published extensively on new sensationism as well as organized academic conferences on the topic, with one solely dedicated to the study of Liu Na'ou, the majority of the works use a sociopolitical, historical, or narrative approach (Jin, Peng, Ceng). The study of new sensationism has been about politics, history, and narrative in this movement, but not exactly about the theory of perception. Few examples take into account perception as a strategy of writing about the city but not in a representational sense. An important exception to this scholarly attitude is an earlier article by Yomi Braester on the new sensationists' "[abandoning of the] realistic conventions in favor of stylistic experimentalism that resulted in texts permeated with visual, indeed spectacular, imagery" (49).

As I argued, sensationist literature is a specific genre that resists a direct connection between the perception and the object, between the literature

<sup>8</sup>For a genealogy of the study of Shanghai new sensationism, see Hsu 82–87.

and the reality of the city, between the text and the historical context. Sensationist writing poses a dilemma of interpreting the narrated reality for the reader, which Merleau-Ponty refers to as the enigma of the body. The perceiver's body is enigmatic because when it senses and is sensed at the same time, the perceptions are always caught up with confusion, narcissism, self-consciousness, or all kinds of emotions because of one's attachment to one's own self (*Primacy* 162–163). While it is impossible to diminish all emotions entirely, it is possible to write differently, such as in an unpremeditated way, in order to unfold the original and intuitive sensations evoked by the objects and phenomena in the city. By focusing on the spontaneous bodily responses to these objects, sensationist writing highlights the inclusion of the perceiver's body and therefore also the derivatives of sense faculties in different narrated situations.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Page numbers with "n" denote endnotes.