

We are IntechOpen, the world's leading publisher of Open Access books Built by scientists, for scientists

6,900

Open access books available

185,000

International authors and editors

200M

Downloads

Our authors are among the

154

Countries delivered to

TOP 1%

most cited scientists

12.2%

Contributors from top 500 universities



WEB OF SCIENCE™

Selection of our books indexed in the Book Citation Index
in Web of Science™ Core Collection (BKCI)

Interested in publishing with us?
Contact book.department@intechopen.com

Numbers displayed above are based on latest data collected.
For more information visit www.intechopen.com



Identity, Self-Identity and Beauty in Chinese Female Worker

Li Yun and Rong Rong

Abstract

In this chapter, we leave “the Cultural Study” in the contemporary researches on beauty, claiming economico-political matters in our self-acceptance and image projection. Rather than studying the standard set for the middle class, we examine the middle-class dream in the self-acceptance of contemporary Chinese female migrant workers. We take “The Sundress”, a poem written by Wuxia, a migrant worker in Shenzhen, as an example, arguing that it is mainly the political and economic ideologies that function in the overdetermination of the contemporary working class’ projection of beauty in China. In the poem, the “I” speaker, a steam press operator working late in the night, (mis)identifies herself with a middle-class girl who buys and puts on the dress that she irons. She takes great pleasure and tranquillity in picturing the beauty and the leisure time that the idealized “you-I” in the dress enjoys. What’s more, our linguistic study testifies that she, as the speaker in the poem, is subjectified by the (mis)identification. Her self-acceptance, activeness and sense of control arise when she overlaps herself with that idealized body image. A great loss, however, is engendered by her having to leave that body and the fantasy world.

Keywords: beauty, identity, the working class, the economico-political, Chinese migrant worker’s poetry, overdetermination, subjectification, linguistics

1. Introduction

Contemporary cultural studies on beauty, western or Chinese, besides studies from traditional aesthetic perspectives, can be roughly put into three categories, including research on (i) how mass media represent beauty; (ii) how bodies are regulated, beautified and simulated as the effects of consumerism and mass media; and (iii) whether subversive discourses are plausible or not. In these studies, the representations of women are taken as the most illustrative to display beauty politics. Gender, race and ethnicity are the key notes in case studies, which scrutinize the sexism and/or racism in different cultures. What is largely ignored, however, is the class status of the owner of the body. Scholars study mutually middle-class standards but seldom touch the representation of the working class, especially how they perceive and project their own bodily images. It reinforces the public impression that only the upper classes deserve the word “beauty”. The academic complies with the global systematic marginalization of the lower classes.

What’s more, scholars lose interest in investigating the crucial role of the economico-political in overdetermining (if we could use this Althusserian coinage) the representation of beauty. In China, however, its significance has long been noticed. For example, it dominates the representation of women in Chinese

left-wing and socialist cinemas. Because of Marxism, female characters are represented on the basis of class status rather than of sex. Relevant studies notice that body images are moulded in accordance with the ideological and propaganda demands of a particular historical era. In the left-wing cinema (1930s), women are represented as the oppressed, and stars are invited to play charming but wretched “mother” or “daughter” of a beautiful but suffering China. In the early stage of the People’s Republic of China (henceforth, PRC) (1949–1965), they are represented as the “master” of “the new nation”, and the working-class stand is required. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), female stars perform awakened farmers, workers and soldiers, revolutionaries tearing down “the old world” [1–6]. In the 1980s (the Reform and Opening Up began in 1978), female beauty is also displayed in a way to lead the spectator to reflect on the fate of the nation, especially the economic and political (and of course the cultural) “errors” in the Cultural Revolution [1, 6].

Studies on the presentation of women after the mid-1990s (in 1992 Deng Xiaoping published the southern speech on reform), nevertheless, have “the cultural turn”, as consumerism invades Chinese popular cultures. The socialist representation of the Iron Girl during the Cultural Revolution was criticized in the 1990s. What was discarded together with it is the Marxist methodology. Research interests shift to the cultural to detect sexism in Chinese culture. What is missing in these studies, however, is the (re)presentation of working-class women, especially how contemporary female workers accept and display their own bodily images. When we come to the self-perceptions and image projections of the working class, “the Cultural Study” becomes immediately insufficient. Though the cultural is still significant, the weight of the socioeconomic can never be overstated. They function in symbiosis. Often the economico-political trumps the cultural in shaping our acceptance of our identities.

Though their perspectives are middle class, the existing studies do inspire us in one aspect. That is, the acceptance of one’s identity and bodily image is always determined by the ideal-I in the imaginary of the owner of the body, as Lacanian psychoanalysis finds. If the physical body does not match the imagined ideal, artificial beautification, physical and/or imaginary, may be needed. Our self-perception and image projection depend on our self-identification. The elements overdetermining our self-identification also determine our image perception. We see, therefore, the limitation of the existing studies on beauty politics. Though elements related to gender, race and ethnicity are not negligible, we must restate the significance of the economico-political in shaping our self-identity and image projection. We don’t even need a socialist feminist perspective to inform us that the self-perception of the working class is overdetermined by their economic conditions as well as how they are interpellated or hailed by the ideological apparatus.

In this chapter, therefore, we study the self-perception and image projection in the poetry of contemporary Chinese female migrant workers. Here we see how their socioeconomic status and the way they are hailed shape their acceptance of their bodily images. We limit our study to a linguistic analysis of the projection of beauty in “The Sundress” [7], a poem written by Wu Xia, who worked in a garment factory in Shenzhen when she wrote it in 2013. The poem describes vividly the interior monologue of a female worker who works late in the night, ironing a beautiful sundress. The “I” speaker is talking to “you”, another female figure in her imaginary, fantasizing how “you”, putting on the dress “I” ironed, can enjoy leisure time in some park with your lover. “I”, the worker, (mis)identify myself with that idealized middle class “you-I” [8] and pictures a pretty body that “I” should have.

We argue, however, that the misidentification is paradoxical in the Chinese context. It displays a reverse of the acceptance of the working class of their social identities, caused by the transformation of economic conditions and political ideologies. In socialist China, they are addressed as the master of the nation and the

builder of its economy. In the post-socialist era, however, they lose their social privileges, politically and financially. Their self-acceptance changes as their social status changes. To understand it, we can compare the self-projection in Wu's poem with the (self-)presentation of working-class women from 1949 to 1964. As Wang Zheng shows in her researches, in the socialist epoch when working women are interpellated as the glorious working class, female film directors and magazine editors present healthy, strong and working women as beauty. The sick image of "bourgeois ladies" is to be transformed [5]. In the twenty-first century, however, the class status of the working class "falls". Migrant workers are regarded as "strangers" or "outsiders" (外来) by the cities in which they live and work. Economic ideologies belittle their contributions to the nation. At the same time, they become financially vulnerable [8–11]. In short, the working class loses its pride in self-acceptance, while middle-class standards become global.

We see therefore the middle class dream the imagined ideal-I in "The Sundress". In the poem, there is a sharp contrast between two bodily images. One wears a sweaty factory uniform, working late in an enclosed factory and having no time and money to enjoy the prettiness and happiness brought by the dress she makes. The other puts on the dress, having a wonderful time of love in a park. The imagined body is active, running, swirling and laughing, glowing in the dress that "I" made. The real body that "I" am in, however, is confined to my position in the packing area of the factory, busy ironing and packing the dress that "you" wear. The imagined charm of "your" body is in sharp contrast with the plainness of "my" body in reality. I have great pleasure in picturing the beauty in that body because I take subconsciously that body as an ideal-I that should be me. Therefore, at the end of the poem, we sense a loss in her when she detaches herself from the fantasy since she has to pack the dress so that it could go to some boutique to be bought by the "girl unknown" before she gets off work.

We see the effects of consumerism and mass media in this idealization, because the "beauty" represented by "you" exemplifies the middle-class tastes that "I" may get from mass media. What's more significant, however, is the (mis)identification in the fantasy. "I" take "your" life as the ideal life, "your" image as the ideal image, "your" body as the ideal body that "I" should have. I project all my fantasies about beauty onto that image, regarding it as an idealized "my" body and describing vividly how that body looks. On the other hand, the "I" does not take her working body as pretty. Rather, she believes that the body of the ideal "you-I" is glamorous. The glamour comes partly from the dress I iron but more from the fact that you enjoy the dress and the leisure that I cannot afford. I take that middle-class you as superior to me. I want to please that "you-I". In contrast to the foregrounded charm of "your" body, however, "my" body seems invisible. "I" seldom focus on it. The reader only sees a pair of hands and a vague figure in a factory uniform. The vagueness betrays an unsatisfaction in the speaker with her identity as a migrant worker.

Our linguistic study on the poem testifies the (mis)identification. We argue that "I" become active only when "I" am connected to "you". Conventionally speaking, the "I" is the subject in the poem because she is the first-person narrator and is in an interlocution with someone in her imagination. We, however, do not read much activeness in this subjective position. On the contrary, our linguistic study discovers that her activeness comes from her identification with "you". It is this (mis)identification that makes "me" the subject. In the poem, the "I" seems passive before she enters her fantasy world and after she detaches herself from it. But when she is in her fantasy and mixes herself with the imagined body, she becomes active, both physically and mentally. Not only the idealized body is active, but the real body in parallel also becomes active and capable of control. Her imagination is activated. She gives a more vivid and specific description of the movement of her real body,

the working hands. The “I” speaker is subjectified by her misidentification with the idealized “you-I”. We can illustrate it through a close reading of the poem.

2. Plainness in self-identification

But before the reading, we need to know some background information about the poet. Wu Xia (郇霞) was born in Sichuan province, China, in 1984 but has been working in factories in Shenzhen since the age of 14. As a factory worker, she has been writing online for two decades. She is known for her faithful representation of factory life and for the mixing of reality and dream in her poems. “The girls under Wu Xia’s pen live a better life than hers. In ‘The Sundress’, we don’t read the tragic and the repression in most poems written by migrant workers”.¹ Both tendencies are brought to the fore in “The Sundress”, which is collected in *The Verse of Us* (2015). The poem also exemplifies Wu’s preoccupation with a range of mental and emotional experiences of being a female factory worker in contemporary China, particularly her desire of escaping factory life and of living a better life. We see the desires in her creating and self-identifying with another “me” in the poem.

- 1 包装车间灯火通明 The packing area is flooded with light
- 2 我手握电熨斗 I hold the iron
- 3 集聚我所有的手温 Collecting all my hand’s warmth
- 4 我要先把吊带熨平 I am going to press the straps flat
- 5 挂在你肩上不会勒疼你 So that they won’t dig into your shoulders
- 6 然后从腰身开始烫起 And then press up from the waist
- 7 多么可爱的腰身 A lovely waist
- 8 可以安放一只白净的手 Upon which a fine hand can lay
- 9 林荫道上 And on the tree-shaded lane
- 10 轻抚一种安静的爱情 Caress a quiet kind of love
- 11 最后把裙裾展开 Finally I’ll smooth the dress out
- 12 我要把每个皱褶的宽度熨的都相等 To iron the pleats to equal widths
- 13 让你在湖边 或者草坪上 So you can sit by the lake or on a grassy lawn
- 14 等待风吹 And wait for a breeze
- 15 你也可以奔跑 You can also run, but
- 16 一定要让裙裾飘起来 带着弧度 You must let the dress fly with curve
- 17 像花儿一样 Like a flower
- 18 而我要下班了 But I’m getting off work
- 19 我要洗一洗汗湿的厂服 I need to wash my sweaty factory uniform
- 20 我已把它折叠好 打了包 I have folded it packed it
- 21 吊带裙 它将被装箱运出车间 The sundress It will be taken out of the factory
- 22 走向某个市场 某个时尚店面 To some market Some boutique
- 23 在某个下午或晚上 Waiting in some afternoon or evening
- 24 等待唯一的你 Only for You.

¹ “Contemporary Chinese Workers’ Poetry: Speaking the Inside Story” (http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/06/c_1114279855.htm, accessed: February 1, 2020). Migrant workers’ poetry writing has been a cultural phenomenon in contemporary China. It is estimated that 20,000–30,000 peasant workers write poems in their blogs, QQ or on literary websites. In 2015, *The Verse of Us* was published, causing public attention. Qin Xiaoyu, the editor, also made a documentary of the same title, demonstrating the life and poetry of contemporary Chinese workers. In it the invited worker poets read their poems. Wu Xia reads “The Sundress” (<http://www.docuchina.cn/2016/11/21/VIDEoulgdZbeLxxBCDTrS1go161121.shtml>, accessed: February 1, 2020).

25 陌生的姑娘 The girl unknown

26 我爱你 I Love you

The poem consists of 26 lines which feature the voice of a clothing factory worker, who talks about her work as a steam press operator. Her job is to iron pieces of sundress before packaging. The speaker also describes her emotional involvement in the process of ironing the dress, represented in the form of her addressing a hypothetical hearer “you” about how the dress should be worn (we will explain below why we treat the speaker as female). The poem is divided into four stanzas; the first three describe, respectively, the scenes before ironing, during ironing and after ironing, which correspond to the time before her fantasy, in her fantasy and after her fantasy.

Of course, she feels pretty in her fantasy. Our study, however, is not on what that prettiness is but what causes that charming feeling, i.e. her self-acceptance and sense of control. Remarkably, the linguistic features in the poem show that her activeness and sense of control fluctuate as she enters and leaves the dream world. Her self-acceptance also rises when she prepares for the ironing and fantasizing. It goes to the peak when she invests herself into the fantasy and overlaps herself with the ideal image. When she has to leave the dream world, however, she loses her activeness, self-acceptance and sense of beauty. In the last stanza, her language indicates a great reluctance to be detached from the idealized image.

The “I” speaker only feels active and charm when she is not in her real body. The poem begins with plain language, describing the reality that she is in. But when she gets closer to the dream world, her language becomes more vivid and colourful. The first few lines establish the physical environment where the speaker is working:

1 包装车间灯火通明 The packing area is flooded with light

2 我手握电熨斗 I hold the iron

3 集聚我所有的手温 And collect all my hand's warmth to it

One of the first and most prominent features in these lines is the specificity of the here-and-now context in which the speaker is situated. This context not only involves the specific place, time and participants but also is “coloured” by a certain mood of commitment. First, the poem begins with the locative expression “the packaging area” which has the duo effect of anchoring the ongoing events in a particular place and also activating readers’ frame knowledge about factory work. With this knowledge, readers are able to interpret the word “iron” in line 2 as specifying “I” as a steam press operator and also read the modifier “灯火通明” (literally meaning “fully lit up”) as suggestive of the time of the day (i.e. late at night).

Also, the adjective “所有的” (“all”) modifying “my hand's warmth” is used to indicate the high degree of temperature caused by the pressing work. Both these adjectives are used as amplifiers ([12], p. 429) which function to dramatize a tough working environment against which the speaker is about to begin her night shift. Against this setting, the speaker is presented, however, as physically static. The first verb “握” (“hold”) in line 2 is a transitive stance verb, suggesting no change for the time being ([12], p. 747), while the second verb “集聚” (“collect”) in line 3 is used metaphorically to refer to the accumulation of heat from my hands and the transmission of it to the iron (so that I could iron the dress with love). Altogether, these introductory lines help to position the reader within an immediate and close distance with the speaker who, while being physically static, is fully committed and prepared for the pressing work.

3. Beautification in misidentification

The impression that the speaker is fully prepared and committed in her work is reinforced by lines 4, 6, 11 and 12 which describe a series of actions that constitute the whole work of steam-pressing:

- 4 我要先把吊带熨平 I am going to press the straps flat
6 然后从腰身开始烫起 And then press up from the waist
...
11 最后把裙裾展开 Finally I'll smooth the dress out
12 我要把每个皱褶的宽度熨的都相等 To iron the pleats to equal widths

The language describing the speaker's planning contains a number of linguistic features that are typically associated with making commitments. To begin with, there are four “把” (*bǎ*) in lines 4, 11, 12 and 20. The word often appears in what Chinese grammarians call the disposal construction, i.e. *bǎ* +NP+VP. The verb itself has been highly grammatized and acts only as a disposal marker instead of a verb, and the following NP+VP structure is often considered as a resultative complement that gives prominence to the causative result the object (recipient) receives from the subject (actor) ([13], p. 150, [14], p. 99). In Wu's poem, the *bǎ* +NP+VP structure serves the function of emphasizing the possible results that the speaker intends to achieve.

In addition, the content of the plan is characterized by a detailed list of the particular parts of the dress (“straps”, “waist”, “pleats”) and a series of adverbials denoting sequence (“first”, “then”, “finally”). Cognitive scientists and linguists studying narrative comprehension treat these linguistic devices as world builders that help readers mentally construct the story world depicted in a stretch of narrative text [15–18]. The more detailed a story world is described, the more concrete and vivid this world would be conceptualized by the reader. As such, expressions including temporal and spatial deixis and nominal and verbal references suggesting people, objects and actions play an important role in highlighting the scenic vividness [16] as well as encouraging empathy from the reader [19, 20].

There is, however, a contrastive effect of under-specification evolving from the process of plan-making. In particular, this comes from the description of a series of imagined situations resulting from the speaker's planned actions:

- 5 挂在你肩上不会勒疼你 So that they won't dig into your shoulders
...
7 多么可爱的腰身 A lovely waist
8 可以安放一只白净的手 Upon which a fine hand can lay
9 林荫道上 And on the tree-shaded lane
10 轻抚一种安静的爱情 Caress a quiet kind of love
...
13 让你在湖边 或者草坪上 So you can sit by the lake or on a grassy lawn
14 等待风吹 And wait for a breeze
15 你也可以奔跑 You can also run, but
16 一定要让裙裾飘起来 带着弧度 You must let the dress fly with curve
17 像花儿一样 Like a flower
...

One of the prominent linguistic features in depicting the speaker's imaginations is the introduction of “you” which invokes an illusionary addressivity. Despite the fact that the second-person pronoun has the effect of bridging the spatiotemporal

divide between the two interlocutors, the hearer referred to as “you” is hypothesized by the speaker and exists only in her future-related imagination. This understanding allows readers of the poem to interpret “you” as an anonymous, generic figure whom the narrator has constructed herself based on her knowledge and belief.

In narrative comprehensive research, readers tend to first evaluate the trustworthiness of the narrator ([18], p. 81), which is done based on the readers’ knowledge of the narrator, as well as on their perceptions of the narrator’s level of knowledge. This is termed as “belief world” which consists of a package of knowledge and beliefs that are *only* related, and hence plausible, to this particular character [17, 18, 21]. In “The Sundress”, the speaker is viewed as a reliable narrator whose personal knowledge concerning steam-pressing is recognized by her occupation. However, as the speaker continues to construct her future projection based on her own false belief or strong desire, the speaker’s credibility begins to decline—interestingly, this process is indicated by a list of linguistic features which create the tone of uncertainty.

The first characteristic feature suggestive of under-specificity includes a series of unprecise “world builders”. There are altogether three hypothetical scenes, line 5 describing the illusionary addressee “you” putting on the dress, lines 7–10 going on a date and 13–17 being outdoors. The spatiotemporal frames for these imagined scenes are unprecise. For example, the locations in the latter two hypothetical scenes are specific in terms of type (tree-shaded lane, by the lake, on the grassy lawn) without giving specific information concerning exactly where. Moreover, the references for the imagined events are indefinite, suggested by the use of generic quantifiers “一只” in line 8 and “一种” in 10. All these features add up to create an effect of under-specification: the speaker seems to be engaged actively in constructing and experiencing an imagined yet unspecified fantasy.

Meanwhile, this effect is foregrounded by the contrastive effect of specificity which is generated by the same lines of the poem depicting the actions “you” have been engaged in. There are three verbs denoting “you” as an active participant (actor) in a material intention process (“wait” in 14, “run” in 15, “let” in 16) and three verbs denoting “you” as the passive recipient in the material event processes (“hang” in 5, “place” in 8, “caress” in 12). Material process is a term from systematic functional linguistics (SFL) to describe the roles of the subject and the object in a sentence and their relationship. Material intention process refers to the process in which the actor has the deliberation in performing the action and is commonly associated with a goal, whereas material event process does not necessarily have a subject (or actor) since its focus is on the goal or on the object that is being affected by the process. In the poem, the material intention processes mentioned above highlight “you” as an active actor engaging in a series of outdoor activities, all of which are indicative of freedom and happiness. The material event processes (“hang”, “place”, “caress”) treat the participant “you” as the receiver of all gentle actions, thereby foregrounding the sense of tenderness and tranquillity.

In addition to the vividness, the imagined scenes are also “coloured” by a tone of positivity. It is interesting to note, firstly, that the imagined lover, referred to by means of metonymy as “a hand”, is modified by the adjective “白净的”. The literal translation is white (“白”) and clean (“净”). A quick search of the 780 million-word CCL corpus (developed by the Center for Chinese Linguistics, Peking University) shows that the expression is associated with both female and male. The male-associated connotation suggests either neatness in appearance or physical weakness. In the poem, the collocation focuses on the good physical state of a male’s hand as contrastive to a hand that is dark and dirty due to heavy labour work. In terms of discourse analysis, this value-laden adjective is viewed as an indicator of

the speaker's "world-view" ([22], pp. 130–134) or "ideological viewpoint" ([23], p. 277) about social superiority of "you". The ideological assumptions of this description are carried by further an abundance of positively charged adjectives including "lovely", "fine", "tree-shaded" and "quiet", which help create a first-date scenario that is correlated with the ideological associations the speaker has for the middle class ([8], p. 60).

The set of ideological assumptions discussed above tend to foreground (i) the speaker's belief world that it would be the middle-class girls who can buy and wear the sundress and also (ii) a wish world that she could be one of them. It is arguable that the specificity of the imagined scenes is associated with the speaker's wish in a "you" that can realize all her fantasies by wearing the sundress, whereas the effect of vagueness is contributed by the fact that the speaker's limited amount of knowledge about how these scenes might be played out in real life (i.e. *prospective extension of a character's knowledge-world*, 21: 116). In general, the high degree of idealization of these hypothetical futures in turn implicates a mixed attitude of dissatisfaction, compromise and hope that the speaker holds towards her real-life situation.

This attitudinal combination of belief and wish is supported by the combination of boulomaic, deontic and epistemic modalities. All the features identified so far contribute to vivid representations of the steam-press work and the dress-wearing that do not take place in reality by the speaker. For the dress-wearing scenes, the unrealized status of the actions is implied by the modal verbs "可以" ("kě-yǐ") in 8 and 15 that express not only the speaker's notion of possibility (paraphrased as "it is possible to") but also her permission (paraphrased as "be allowed to"), thereby also conveying some degree of intrinsic human control over the hypothetical situations ([12], p. 219, [18], p. 99).

The sense of control is further intensified by the modal verb "一定要" ("yī-dìng-yào"; literal meaning "must") in line 16. Similar to the English modality, the Chinese expression "yī-dìng-yào" expresses the intrinsic modality of duty while conveying the extrinsic sense of necessity. In the poem, from "you can run" to "you must let the dress fly", the speaker apparently maximizes her control over the imagined addressee, a process which could be interpreted as the speaker's increasing involvement in constructing a hypothetical world, alone with which also her increasing desire in living in this fantasy world.

4. Loss in demisidentification

Whereas the dress-wearing scenes are supported by the speaker's strong desire, the dress-pressing scene can then be argued to be in line with her sense of determination. Different from the modal verbs used for depicting the dress-wearing situations, the work scene is mainly delivered through the modal verb "要" (yào), first in lines 4 and 12 and then in 18 and 19. According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* [24], three senses are mostly relevant to the understanding of "yào": (i) "to want, to wish"²; (ii) "being determined to"; and (iii) "being going to". The verb "yào" in lines 4 and 12 is conceptualized based on a combination of the last two senses, denoting a semantic mixture of planning and determined willingness to carry out the plan. This is similar to the modal verb "will" in modern English which has an

² According to grammarians (Po-Ching & Rimmington, 2003, p. 284), "yào", when denoting wish, tends to suggest a strong desire in comparison to the modal verb "xiǎng" (lit. want) indicative of a lighter degree of desire. Also, it is the first sense of "desiring" that is used in the published version.

overlapped meaning of volition (intrinsic) and prediction (extrinsic)” ([12], p. 219).

The same modal verb “yào” underlined in lines 18 and 19, however, suggests a different sense from the previous one in lines 4 and 12, thereby signalling a change of attitude:

18 而我要下班了 But I’m getting off work

19 我要洗一洗汗湿的厂服 I need to wash my sweaty factory uniform

The first thing to notice in the above lines is the connective “ér” (literal meaning “but; however”) that is associated with the notion of contrast. Prior to these lines, the speaker was described as being actively and closely engaged in her fantasy. Her engagement with the fantasy, parallel with the steam-pressing work in reality, is now drawn to an end as she ends her work shift. Also, the sense of authoritarian control resulting from her fantasizing, however, has been challenged since the sundress is to be sent away and that she has to draw herself out of the fantasy. Therefore, the connective “but” is indicative of a tone of loss, which in turn helps us to interpret the modal verb “yào” in 18 and 19 as an expression of self-obligation (paraphrased as “have to get off work”) in which the speaker appeals to her own sense of duty, and this “duty”, apparently, is driven by the external force, i.e. the fact that she does not own the dress.

From this point onwards, the “tone” of the poem starts to change, from an intimate and engaging kind to the one with distance, loss and lack of control. This is manifested linguistically through the following features:

20 我已把它折叠好 打了包 I have folded it packed it

21 吊带裙 它将被装箱运出车间 The sundress It will be taken out of the factory

22 走向某个市场 某个时尚店面 To some market Some boutique

23 在某个下午或晚上 Waiting in some afternoon or evening

24 等待唯一的你 Only for You.

First, the reference to the object “sundress” changes from the second-person pronoun to the inanimate third-person pronoun “it”. In terms of deictic shift theory, the change of pronoun signals the speaker’s perceptual shift in relation to the sundress, as becoming more distal in terms of attitude. This perceptual shift is also consistent with our previous interpretation of lines 18–19 that the emotional bounding between the speaker and the sundress was broken by the fact that the speaker has completed her work in relation to the dress. Even though the pressing worker has devoted her time, effort and even emotion to the sundress, the latter, yet still, leaves her behind. The sense of loss is further reinforced by the multiple uses of indefinite references such as “某个” (literal meaning as “some”) and the connective “or”. From these references, it is clear that the speaker has no idea what would happen to the sundress she has pressed nor has the idea as to who would buy the dress.

Nevertheless, the reader can sense her unwillingness to detach herself from the fantasized “you-I”. It is interesting to note that the buyer of the sundress is characterized by concrete referencing of “you” in line 24. So even the text world switches to a future world that is beyond the speaker’s knowledge, i.e. a hypothetical future world that the speaker still tries to place the imagined “you” inside of it. Therefore, lines 21–24 are arguably still a presentation of hypothetical future world based more on the speaker’s fantasy than on her knowledge.

25 陌生的姑娘 The girl unknown

26 我爱你 I Love you

In the last two lines, two textual features interrelated with one another deserve our attention. The first to notice is line 26 which writes “I love you”. This sentence, in relation to the whole poem, serves as a register signaling the literary convention of a love letter. The researchers of this paper have conducted a seminar, surveying the students’ readings of this poem. After their first reading, three out of eight postgraduate students majored in literature and linguistics have identified, based mainly on line 26, the speaker as a male and the poem a love letter. Interestingly enough, it is also this kind of taken-for-granted identification that evokes a schematic deviation within these two last lines of the poem.

Her wording, however, indicates that despite her reluctance to accept it, she is aware somehow that the fantasy world is leaving her. Conventionally speaking, we should have a good, if not full, knowledge about the person whom we claim to love. In the above lines, however, the love is associated with the person whom the poetic speaker refers to as “the girl unknown”. It is odd to refer to someone we have attached such a strong emotion to as being simultaneously specific (“the only” in 25 and “the” in 26) and unspecific (“unknown” in 25). The only interpretation from this contrastive pair of references is that the sense of specificity is related to the hypothetical enactor constructed by the speaker’s fantasy, while the non-specificity results from the limited knowledge the speaker has in relation to her fantasy.

Similar to all the paradoxical connotations described above, the “girl”, projected by the strong desire and a close identification from the speaker, is however, under-specified due to the speaker’s lack of real-life experience. There does exist an actual future domain in which *some* girl would buy the sundress, and when this happens, the actual “you” would not overlap with the hypothetical “you”. We hence argue that the paradoxical contrast between “I wish to become” and “I know how to become” further reinforces the poetic theme of loss.

In short, she is reluctant to leave the fantasy world because it is a great loss. She is losing the most important part of her. She knows it but she also knows that any effort to cling to it is in vain. We see in this (mis)identification her desire to change her class status. It is a reverse of her identity as the working class. And as we have pointed out above and elsewhere, this reversal is caused by the “fall” of the working class in the economic and political system in contemporary China. The economic-political plays an important role in shaping her sense of beauty and self-acceptance.

Author details

Li Yun* and Rong Rong

School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology, China

*Address all correspondence to: flly@scut.edu.cn and flrrong@scut.edu.cn

IntechOpen

© 2020 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. 

References

- [1] Cui S. *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; 2003
- [2] Hu J. *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; 2003
- [3] Zhang Y. *Chinese National Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge; 2004
- [4] Roberts R. *Maoist Model Theatre: The Semiotics of Gender and Sexuality in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)*. Koninklijke Brill NV: Leiden and Bostom; 2010
- [5] Wang Z. *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; 2016
- [6] Lu S, editor. *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; 1997
- [7] Wu X. *Diaodaiqun (The Sundress)*. In: Qin X, editor. *Wo de shipian (Verse of Us)*. Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe; 2015. pp. 327-328
- [8] Li Y, Rong R. A middleclass misidentification: Self-identification in the autobiographical poetry of Chinese female peasant workers. *Positions: Asia Critique*;27(4):55-76
- [9] Yu J. *Anyuan shilu: yi ge jieji de guangrong yu mengxiang (Anyuan: The Glorious Dream of a Class)*. Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe: Nanjing; 2011
- [10] Pun N. *Made in China*. Durham. NC: Duke University Press; 2005
- [11] Yan H. *New Masters, New Servants*. Durham and London: Duke University Press; 2008
- [12] Quirk et al. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Pearson Longman; 1985
- [13] Po-Ching Y, Rimmington D. *Chinese: An Essential Grammar*. London: Routledge; 2003
- [14] Shi Y. *Hanyu yufa (Chinese Grammar)*. Shangwu Yinshuguan: Beijing; 2010
- [15] Van Dijk TA, Kintsch W. *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*. New York: Academic Press; 1983
- [16] Emmott C. *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1997
- [17] Werth P. *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*. Harlow: Longman; 1999
- [18] Gavins J. *Text World Theory: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; 2007
- [19] Whiteley S. Textual world theory: Real readers and emotional responses to *The Remains of the Day*. *Language and Literature*;20(1):23-42
- [20] Johnson-Laird PN. *Mental Models: Towards a Cognitive Science of Language, Inference, and Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1983
- [21] Ryan ML. *Possible Worlds: Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; 1991
- [22] Fowler R. *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1986

[23] Short M. Exploring the Language of Poems: Plays and Prose. Harlow: Longman; 1996

[24] Lv S et al. Xiandai Hanyu Cidian (Modern Chinese Dictionary). 2nd ed. Shangwu Yinshuguan: Beijing; 1994

IntechOpen

IntechOpen