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Women in Travel: Female Subjectivity and the Transnational Imagination in the Essays of Chen Xuezhao, Lu Yin, and Okamoto Kanoko

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Introduction

Historically, writers and critics have had difficulty defining the Chinese word *sanwen* (散文) and the Japanese word *zuihitsu* (随筆), both of which translate into English as "essay." The plethora of subgenres associated with modern *sanwen*—including *zawen* (雜文), *zagan* (雜感), and *xiaopinwen* (小品文)—render it elusive to categorization within Chinese literary history, while also posing challenges to scholars seeking to explore its value as a unified genre.[1] The modern *zuihitsu* similarly encompasses a diverse range of writing, from anecdotes and travelogues to political commentary. As Yoshida Seiichi puts it, the term includes "everything that cannot fit into any other genre" (7). The ambiguities of *sanwen* and *zuihitsu* are rooted in their position at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, the local and the foreign. Even though they are often inspired by Western personal essays (European, American, and Russian) and are typically written in vernacular and unrhymed languages, they bear traces of literary traditions that date back to ancient China and Japan.[2] At the same time, the flexibility of their narrative structure and writing style, together with their concise yet stimulating content, contributed to their popularity in the burgeoning print culture of Republican China as well as Taishō and early Shōwa Japan.

Even so, despite the popularity of *sanwen* and *zuihitsu* among Chinese and Japanese writers of the time, they have not become notable foci of modern Chinese and Japanese literary studies.[3] The generic vagueness of the essay makes it tricky to study in a systematic way, and many critics and scholars have concentrated on the novel—a genre that Chinese and Japanese intellectuals of the early twentieth century believed to hold transformative value, for culture as well as for society and the nation. Accordingly, my paper opens by questioning the prevailing focus on novels and the neglect of essays, examining how this imbalance has shaped our understanding of the literary contributions of modern Chinese and Japanese women writers. What experiences and topics did women writers of the Republican as well as the Taishō and early Shōwa eras explore in their novels and essays? Do these experiences and topics differ? If so, how? And to what extent have women's voices and expressions of their subjectivities and identities been amplified or subdued by the differing literary techniques, narrative frameworks, and questions of audience reception

that have been associated with novels and essays, respectively? In order to explore such questions, I focus on the essays of three women writers—Chen Xuezhao (陳學昭; 1906-1991), Lu Yin (廬隱; 1898-1934), and Okamoto Kanoko (岡本かの子; 1889-1939)—and situate their works not only within a cultural discourse centered around novels but also within the broader historical context of transnational feminist politics. By investigating the ways in which their feminist consciousnesses and transnational visions are articulated in these living critical texts, I argue that the capaciousness of the essay offered female writers a more inclusive platform that enabled them to explore diverse aspects of modern life.

Before delving into the three writers' essays, it is important first to understand that even though the novel addressed gender issues, it also—simultaneously—suppressed the voices of women. Having been popularized in Japan in the late nineteenth century, then introduced to China at the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel—*shōsetsu* in Japanese and *xiaoshuo* in Chinese—was celebrated by the literati as offering "new narrative forms to fit the New Age of the West" (Miyoshi ix). Indeed, as Donald Keene has noted, the novel "afford[ed] the Japanese the means of expressing [...] their consciousness of being men of the enlightened Meiji era" (16), while also sparking intellectual interest in literary criticism, which further enhanced the practice of novel writing (17-18). Chinese intellectuals similarly saw the novel as a crucial tool for literary modernization, one that had the potential to facilitate the cultural transformation of China. For instance, reformist scholar Liang Qichao (梁啟超; 1873-1929) promoted a "New Narrative" revolution through his periodical *New Novel* (*Xin Xiaoshuo*; 新小說), arguing that Chinese narrative genres should aspire to transform both individual minds as well as society as a whole (44). This potential of the novel to rejuvenate national culture while also competing on the international stage of modernity appealed to female writers, many of whom sought to elevate the position of women—which was seen as "a key indicator of the nation's level of civilization" (T. Suzuki 147).[4] This new genre, then, offered women not only a medium for expressing feminist thought but also the opportunity to do so while contributing to nation-building projects.

Nonetheless, the novel had its limitations, both in terms of capturing the many experiences and identities of women as well as in relation to the knowledge that had evolved from various feminist practices in the Republican as well as in the Taishō and early Shōwa periods. First, the understanding of the novel as a symbol of modernity was ultimately premised upon a male logic that saw women as subjects to be modernized. In response to Liang's call for narrative reform, Chinese scholars championed the educational potential of the novel in the early 1900s, with Xia Zengyou (夏曾佑; 1863-1924), among others,[5] arguing that "there should be two types of novels, one tailored for scholar-officials and the other aimed at educating women and the vulgar folk" (1). Tsubouchi Shōyō (坪内逍遥; 1859-1935) similarly emphasized a difference between his perception of the "true novel"—

that is, a realistic novel that "exposes the dark side of contemporary life" and "is suited to educated men"—and the didactic and entertaining works that were intended for women and children (83-84). Both of these statements implied that women were intellectually inferior, requiring male education and modernization, a perspective which resulted in many novels depicting women in stereotypical roles. In this respect, the inclusion of women—who were denounced as "repositories of the past" (Sievers 15) as well as hailed as a "discursive sign [...] in the larger frames of anti-Confucian discourse" (Barlow 52)—constituted a trope allowing male novelists to assert their cultural authority. Second, given the related aims of nation-building and education, both modern Chinese and Japanese novels emphasize moral ideals. In the 1890s, a series of laws and other regulations were introduced in Japan to reinstate Confucian gender hierarchies within families and control women's social positions, with the result that novels often portrayed female characters with high moral standards—something that restricted their freedom to engage in "immoral" activities, such as political gatherings (T. Suzuki 158-159). Also, as C. T. Hsia maintains, Chinese novelists "were occupied by their national crisis in such a way that they were unable, or unwilling, to expound the moral and political relevance of the fate of the Chinese people to 'the state of man in the modern world' " (xvii). As a consequence, the women in novels were often presented as displaying affection for and devotion to their country.

Although women writers sought to escape such narrative norms, by creating new types of heroines as well as by rejecting the traditional marriage/death/madness endings of female-centric stories (Duplessis xi), their endeavors cannot be fully appreciated through an examination of their novels alone. This is because in order for the novels of women writers to be recognized and valued within the hegemonic framework of evaluation, women writers often had no choice but to assume roles that had previously been defined by men. As Rey Chow explains, "Chinese women learn to give up their own desires in exchange for their 'social place' " (75). Even feminist writers such as Ding Ling (丁玲; 1904-1986) admitted that "It's not easy to create a bold female character [...] because everyone else will assume that the character reflects you, the author, which can be quite annoying" (16). Women writers, then, were forced to view themselves from the outside (male) world. What is more, the language of the novel also made it difficult for them to carve out their own space: the embrace of the *genbun-itchi* (言文一致) writing style, for instance, which was developed by Japanese male writers in the late nineteenth century to better align with European novels, resulted in the exclusion of so-called "feminine" writing—a neo-classical style that was typically associated with the female writers of the time.[6] Depictions of issues relating to women, then, were also, fundamentally, "resisted in language" (Vernon 6).

The essay, by contrast, was less bound by male-defined criteria, owing to its elasticity in form and style, as well as its connections to both premodern women's literature and

modern feminist writings. To begin with, its loosely defined structure allowed women writers to offer more immediate reflections of their experiences and emotions: essays, whether written as personal diaries, travelogues, or simply for pleasure, were accepted as short, fragmented, and even unfinished, enabling women writers to explore issues that were not deemed suitable for novels. In addition, this thematic openness allowed for greater flexibility in style, meaning that women writers could use techniques such as irony and humor not only to push the boundaries of their craft but also to confront the stereotypes of women as overly sentimental. Finally, the essays that appeared in magazines and periodicals in the early development of Chinese and Japanese feminism established a direct platform that enabled women to engage in social debates about gender politics.

In the following sections, I explore how Chen Xuezhao, Lu Yin, and Okamoto Kanoko used the essay to develop a gendered subjectivity and feminist consciousness, thereby demonstrating the genre's potential for catalyzing social movements. The primary sources include Chen's essay collection *Ocean, Sky, and Fragile Heart* (*Haitian Cunxin*; 海天寸心), Lu's essay collections *Tokyo Essays* (*Dongjing Xiaopin*; 東京小品) and *Memories under the Moon* (*Yuexia de Huiyi*; 月下的回憶), and Okamoto's essays in *The Collection of Okamoto Kanoko's Works, vol. 11 and vol. 12* (*Okamoto Kanoko no Zenshū*; 岡本かの子の全集). The included essays were originally published in magazines and periodicals during the 1920s and 1930s, with the collections being compiled and printed later.[7] In addition to analyzing the texts themselves, I adopt what Michel Hockx calls a "horizontal reading" approach, by contextualizing the essays within the journals and literary organizations where they first appeared and analyzing how they echo the writings of feminist activists such as He-Yin Zhen (何殷震; 1884–1920), Fukuda Hideko (福田 英子; 1865–1927), and others. In so doing, I attempt to show how the self-consciousness of these women writers, in terms of their subjectivities and identities, as well as their efforts to articulate feminist ideas, developed from specific dynamics between individuals, literary institutions, and audiences.

The various essays, however, exhibit as much diversity in terms of narrative, topic, and mood as they do unity in terms of constructing anti-patriarchal voices, with each of the essayists negotiating the relationship between writing and gender in different ways. Even though all of the writers identified themselves as "New Women," Okamoto's works reveal a stronger cultural self-confidence, due to Japan's rising position in the global race for modernization, whereas the works of Chen and Lu include more anxious reflections when describing foreign cultures. Similarly, Okamoto's aristocratic upbringing as well as her close connections with government officials and policymakers result in her essays containing sharper political insights. By contrast, Chen and Lu mainly focus on cultural and educational issues, being from middle-class backgrounds and working as school teachers. These differences are important, because they emphasize that women are not a monolithic group and that feminism is plural.

Reimagining the New Women and Their Transnational Vision

In her seminal essay "On the Question of Women's Liberation," Chinese feminist writer He-Yin Zhen considered women's freedom to be a global problem, rather than merely a national one. Discussing women's suffrage movements in the West, she argued that "a minority of women holding power is hardly sufficient to save the majority of women" (66), pointing out that "gender equality implies equality among all human beings" (65). Such a transnational emphasis resonates with the work of Japanese activist Fukuda Hideko, who similarly argued that women's emancipation ought to transcend national boundaries and align with international socialist movements in her journal *Sekai Fujin* (*Women of the World*; 世界婦人).[8] Although these writers are now seen as pioneers of early Chinese and Japanese feminism, their views—especially on transnational gender politics—were not as influential as those of their contemporaries who believed that the struggle for women's rights should be linked to the struggle for national empowerment, if not remain secondary to it.[9] Indeed, such a conjunction of patriotism and feminism shaped the cultural figures of the "New Women" and the "Modern Girl" in the 1920s and 1930s, which were often portrayed as symbols of national progress and ultimately established "a compelling historical model for [...] some of the most notable female protagonists" (Dooling 65).[10] Even though many of the New Women who appear in realist novels had foreign experiences, most stories explore their returns to their home countries, where their new transnational knowledge and vision could aid social improvement, leaving the details and influence of their foreign experiences obscure. What is more, the "New Women" writers who held different opinions from their characters also had to remain invisible within such a framework.

By contrast, the essay, which does not require the creation of characters, enabled women writers to explore their experiences as transnational New Women as well as to document thoughts that were difficult to express in novels. Indeed, even though Chen, Lu, and Okamoto all wrote novels at various points in their lives, they detailed their adventures in foreign countries in their essays. By focusing on such accounts, I argue that they not only deviate from the feminist-nationalist paradigm but also engage in active dialogue with He-Yin and Fukuda, portraying female selves that transcend national borders.

One of the recurring themes in Chen's essays, for instance, is her compassion for other women, regardless of their nationality and ethnicity. From the late 1920s to the mid 1930s, Chen lived and studied in Europe, meeting women from all over the world, who "not only assisted [her] in times of trouble but also inspired [her] to advocate not just for Chinese women but for the misery of women everywhere" (Zhong 69). In her essay "Impression" ("Yinxiang"; 印象), written in Paris in 1927, Chen remembers a Sunday visit to Montfort, where she saw a middle-aged French woman being insulted by her husband

because she was unable to stop her children from making noise when eating. The woman's helplessness recalled the situation of a close friend in China, who could only sob in the face of domestic violence, and the similarity between the two memories prompted Chen to lament the universal suffering of women:

> After Montfort, I came across several similar sad moments where women were abused by their husbands. Each time, I felt frightened; these situations were like thunder and lightning in a storm, disorienting and panicking me [...] I am in deep sorrow—I never expected to see such tragedies involving women in Europe. I no longer have the courage to find joy in life; please leave me alone with my pain and melancholy. (147)

Another essay, "Parisian" ("Bali Ren"; 巴黎人), finds Chen recounting her friendship with two Spanish girls of her own age, with whom she practiced French and explored the city. She moves on to describe her relationships with several older ladies from other European countries, whose kindness "left a lasting impression on her" (132). At the end of the essay, she nostalgically suggests that

> If I ever have to leave Paris, all of these experiences with my friends here will be my indelible, everlasting memory of Parisians, even though none of them are Parisians by birth. Nevertheless, they embody my impression of Parisians, and because we met in Paris, I will just call them "Parisians"! [...] Alas, I will never forget Virginie and Agnes—how many days do we have left to be Parisians? (132)

In this passage, Chen uses the tropes of "Parisian" and Paris—as symbols of "surprisingly cosmopolitan nature" (Herbert 1)—to affirm the importance of female rapport. In contrast to He-Yin and Fukuda, Chen does not directly challenge the worldwide interplay of patriarchal, racist, and capitalist power dynamics. Rather, her essays subtly convey an understanding of transnational feminism through the ordinary activities of everyday life.

Even so, it is important that Chen's cosmopolitan consciousness not be dissociated from her other encounters, because her essays include a considerable number of pieces critiquing other women to whom Chen struggled to relate. In a series of letters to the editor of the feminist journal *New Women* (*Xin Nüxing*; 新女性), Chen singles out three groups of women with whom she finds it difficult to identify: sex workers; those worshipping money and sexual desire; and students indulging in gambling (117-118). Even though Chen acknowledges the social and gender oppressions that these women encountered, she is nonetheless angered and saddened by their "self-destruction," as her confession reveals: "I know it sounds mean, but they make me uncomfortable. How can I make them understand that society and themselves need to change? How can I make them understand that

everything should be reformed?" (115). Despite disagreeing with such behaviors, Chen declines to pass moral judgment and instead emphasizes her connection with them and her responsibility for helping them to change—in alignment with He-Yin's assertion that "the joy of liberation lies in the development of the character of women" (63).

Chen does not directly address questions of class in her essays, even though her transnational feminist ideas resulted from her membership of the cultural elite. Lu's insights, by contrast, were gained through her interactions with underprivileged and working-class women. Her *Tokyo Essays*, a collection of nine pieces written between 1930 and 1931 while traveling in Japan (and edited by Lu's husband, following her death during childbirth in 1934), details the sufferings of various Japanese women, including sex workers, portrait models, and elderly widows. Chen saw herself as being superior to such women, hoping to "educate" and "save" them, but Lu emphasized her emotional connections to them. In an essay documenting a visit to a brothel, for instance, she describes meeting a prostitute who accused her of selfishness and cruelty after discovering that Lu was in fact a woman dressed as a man. This prompts an expression of guilt: "she said that I am a modern girl, and how dare I do such a thing like those bad men. I certainly won't blame her. She must be a kind and honest person. It was me who did the wrong thing" (*Tokyo Essays*, "Liudao Zhi Yipie").[11] In another essay, Lu characterizes her neighbor as a poor but generous Japanese woman who is always ready to lend a hand and gives Lu presents, despite her own financial struggles. She exclaims, "I regret my previous belief that Japanese people are mean. In reality, apart from a small group of egoists, most people in the world exhibit genuine compassion and friendship. Humanity, on the whole, is quite lovely!" (*Tokyo Essays*, "Neighbor").[12]

Even so, such optimistic views are rare, with most of the essays expressing Lu's disillusionment with feminism as well as with humanity more generally. In "On the Branches of Cherry Trees" ("Yinghua Zhitou"; 櫻花枝頭), Lu describes a Japanese acquaintance who treats his daughters as if they were goods, then states that "Although the wave of feminism is crashing vigorously, it's nothing more than a mere embellishment in human history that benefits no one" (*Tokyo Essays*, "Yinghua Zhitou"). Such a disappointment also stems from the realization that gender is not the only cause of inequality, with many other essays exploring the relationships between gender and class, highlighting homeless people and working-class men living miserable lives in Japan. Although Lu was not expressly affiliated with any leftist or socialist groups, the depictions of class disparity in her essays accord with Fukuda's understanding that global feminist movements should be accompanied by a global revolution against capitalism.[13]

Similarly to Chen and Lu, Okamoto also displays a special interest in women from other parts of the world. Unlike her Chinese counterparts, however, she focuses on their unique

gendered identities. This curiosity stems from her upper-class background and the special care and attention that she received from her parents and husband (Mori 68–69). Such favorable circumstances not only gave her the confidence to assert her body and identity but also the courage to challenge traditional understandings of femininity. Indeed, Okamoto's essays display strong self-acceptance as well as assurance regarding her elaborate clothes, make-up, and her "famously plump figure" (M. Suzuki 33), which often caused her to be denounced as a "narcissist" by contemporaries as well as critics (ibid.). Femininity, for Okamoto, comprised diverse meanings, so women ought not to conform to a specific style simply to please men. In an essay written during a stay in Paris, she observes that "Women in Paris look more fashionable; German women are very spirited [...] Japanese women enjoy gossiping [...] I think they're all great" (*Vol. 11 of The Collection* 35). Such an emphasis on the freedom of women recurs throughout her essays. Her critique of the stereotypes about the New Women is as sharp as her disapproval of traditional gender roles, such as the "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kenbo*; 良妻賢母). When she is discussing so-called "modern femininity," Okamoto comments sarcastically:

> The descriptions below are commonly believed to be generalizations of modern women. I present them here as satire and paradox [...] You, the reader, should decide what is right.
> [...]
> "Love is ridiculous. I can't love anymore," she declares, "but I don't want to lose my feelings of love."
> "I only find men attractive when they are playing rugby."
> "I must go to Paris at least once in my lifetime before I die."
> (*Vol. 12 of The Collection*, "Gendai Wakaki Josei Katagi Shū")[14]

In this passage, Okamoto rejects the preset codes that define what a woman is supposed be. By inviting her readers to question over thirty popular assumptions relating to gender, she makes it clear that the New Women must not only challenge traditional norms but also be cautious regarding new norms that can be equally confining and oppressive. Read today, Okamoto's opposition to the hegemonization of womanhood, plus her belief in the agency of women to speak and act in accordance with their own perceptions of femininity, can be seen as an early articulation of the theory arguing that gender is a social construct.[15]

Although the essays by Chen, Lu, and Okamoto focus on different aspects of the transnational experiences of women, they enrich our understanding of the New Women as autonomous cosmopolitan individuals with unique personalities, rather than as standardized literary characters. In other words, the New Women are not the static symbols of nationalism and modernization often depicted in novels; rather, they are gender identities in the making. Through these essays, we see more of how the New Women lived, traveled, interacted with different peoples and cultures, and, most

importantly, how they struggled to write and to fight. For Chen, Lu, and Okamoto, the practice of writing itself—both in terms of the subjects they tackled and the literary techniques and styles they used—constituted an act of resistance.

Revising Women's Writing

As Amy Dooling has suggested, the New Women writers articulated gender politics and enacted "the process of [...] self-examination and self-interpretation" (66) by developing narrative practices and rhetorical strategies that resisted the existing masculinist logic of writing. Although Dooling's analysis focuses on women's fiction, such a connection between authorship and female (self-)emancipation applies to the form of the essay, too. Given that many essays were initially drafted as personal notes, diary entries, or letters to friends, these pieces often communicate the authorial voices of women writers in a more authentic manner, because there is less concern about pleasing a potential audience. What is more, given that women writers in most cases present themselves in their essays without intermediaries, their use of language and style and their experimentation with narrative structure often relate to their motives for writing. As Teresa Winterhalter has suggested, women's attempts to manipulate their authorial voices are attempts to "explore the relationship between narrative and political authority" (239). Following in the footsteps of Dooling and Winterhalter, this section argues that each writer's feminist consciousness and reflections on the intersections between gender, ethnicity, and class are bolstered by their choices of essayistic techniques and styles. In particular, I explore how Chen and Okamoto offer feminist reinterpretations of "nature," while Lu employs humor to challenge the literary hierarchy.

In the new novel, depictions of nature are often imbued with gender bias. Even though women writers had traditionally featured nature as a "vital force, exerting a constant influence on characters" (Morris 21), such a creative connection with nature had been lost in modern times, with the female body—symbolic of nature and "celebrated for its vitality yet at the same time precarious, on the verge of ruin" (Oakes 93)—being diminished to a mere prop for glorifying male enlightenment. Essays by Chen and Okamoto, however, resist such relegations. In another manuscript that Chen sent to *New Women*, she interweaves a portrayal of nature with a suggestion of her psychological state:

> It's been three months since I left Shanghai, and nearly two months since I arrived in Paris! A hint of autumn lingers in the city—the streets and gardens are blanketed with golden tree leaves. They fall in the evening rain, only to dance again with the wind the next morning—much like my feelings of homesickness!

> I come from a country plagued by illness and disasters, so life here feels rather comfortable—at least I no longer fret about my safety. War rages across China: against humans, against nature […] but in France, there's neither war nor disease. It's been two months already. While my understanding of French women is still limited, my recent observations suggest that their lives seem to revolve heavily around money and sex. Their mindset appears more traditional in comparison to Chinese women. (117)

In this passage, natural elements constitute extensions of individual emotions: the comparison of autumn leaves to homesickness reflects the Chinese lyrical tradition of "the fusion of nature and feeling" (*qingjing jiaorong*; 情境交融), facilitating a seamless transition to memories of the motherland, before these expressions are abruptly interrupted ("It's been two months already"), as if Chen suddenly remembers the essay's focus on French women. As such, the piece demonstrates how nature shapes Chen's feelings as well as her writing process.

Okamoto's essay "Autumn in Berlin" ("Berlin no Aki"; ベリンの秋) also invokes this synergy, as the recurring image of fallen leaves from a linden tree acts as a thread connecting her thoughts, as well as a motif of her emotional transformation:

> The uniqueness of Berlin's autumn lies in the fallen linden tree leaves.
> The distinct breeze, the distinct fallen leaves, the richness of the yellow foliage.
> As I walk the streets, those linden tree leaves fall on my shoulders and back. I can feel them brushing against my hair and lips before they reach the ground.
> […]
> A young man chases after a dog—they both seem to be dyed by the color of the leaves.
> It's the hue of sunset.
> It's the hue of sunrise.
> The autumn in Berlin.
> During Berlin's autumn, I would dress myself in reddish yellow, yellow, and dark brown.
>
> (*Vol. 11 of The Collection* 39–40)

Both Chen and Okamoto focus on fallen leaves, but the latter associates them with delight, blending colloquial narrative with Japanese *tanka* poetry to create the space to transition from one thought to another and to merge the inner and outer worlds into one synthesis. The final sentence cheerfully declares the author's intention to dress herself as being at one with nature—a representation that contrasts sharply with the societal norms limiting women's individuality and spontaneity.

Lu's essays, by contrast, use humor to challenge the assumption that women's literature is generally sentimental and stylistically inferior. The concept of humor—which was

introduced to China by Lin Yutang (林語堂; 1895–1976) in 1924—was notable in the literary circles of Chinese intellectuals, being embraced for its "marvelous wit and human insight" (Rea 147), yet it perpetuated male cultural privilege by excluding female writers. As such, Lu's foray into humor can be seen as a brave attempt to push the boundaries of women's writing by actively challenging such a privilege. In a piece written shortly after returning to Japan, Lu contrasts the misery of Chinese writers and artists with the circumstances of their foreign counterparts:

> He is Japanese after all [...] Foreign writers indeed lead a much more comfortable life than we do.[18] That's why they have Shakespeare, Byron, and Ibsen. As for us Chinese, we are so preoccupied with becoming politicians and educators that no one wants just a comfortable life. (*Memories under the Moon* 22)
> All right, all right, I've decided to burn my ink brush—my long-time friend—and focus solely on teaching. Hopefully, I won't get too hungry. If one day I become a millionaire, maybe I'll resume my career as a "promising writer"! It's just as the old saying goes, "put down the ink brush, so that you achieve salvation."[19] Haha! God bless me! (*Memories under the Moon* 23)

While it cannot be denied that Lu's humorous style adheres to the modalities of the genre as dictated by Lin and other male writers,[16] her essay nonetheless also subverts these modalities, blending female sentimentality with humor: beneath the playful and self-mocking speech is an uncertainty about Lu's writing career, with the adoption of a facetious tone allowing the author to assume a more gender-neutral mode of writing. Nonetheless, Lu's use of humor is restrained and cautious, revealing her self-consciousness about her identity. In this respect, the title "A Few Honest Statements" ("Jijü Shihua"; 幾句實話) can be interpreted as a comment on the choice of language and style: the genre of the essay is usually considered as conveying the author's true feelings in a straightforward way, but Lu disrupts this principle by portraying herself as an unreliable narrator. While it is possible that her complaints about the difficulty of writing are truthful, and that she has decided to quit writing, the lightheartedness of the language suggests that the piece constitutes a performative counterstatement against the title. Lu, then, not only blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction but also breaks down the traditional dichotomy between masculine humor and feminine sentiment.

Through their control over the form, style, and meaning of their writing, Chen, Lu, and Okamoto encourage us to consider how genre differences can encode women's authorial voices. While women writers vocalize their resistance against being transformed into "an inert, exploitable, national resource" (Barlow 8) in novels as well as in essays, their voices are more direct and also more varied in the latter: not only because the essay offered a more seamless connection with the everyday psyche but also because its connection with public affairs meant that it resonated more closely with audiences.

Intervention in the Public Sphere

As many scholars have noted, the boom in modern Chinese and Japanese essays occurred at the interface between modern life, literary journals, and the market (DiNitto 254). The essay's suitability for the rapid pace of journal publishing, as well as the busy lifestyle of the new middle class, caused it to shape the public realm, not only through the dissemination of knowledge but also by evoking sentiments. As Eugenia Lean suggests, the emotion-driven public, formed by modern subjectivity, mass consumer culture, and the growing authoritarian state (10), managed to "sway legal proceedings, threaten the moral authority of cultural elites, mediate center-warlord relations, and influence the state's tactics in legitimating its power" (12). As active participants in and contributors to this "affective public," women writers moved beyond discussions of gender to engage in public debates about politics and culture, thereby leveraging their feminist knowledge in order to drive social change.

In her travelogues, for instance, Okamoto explores a range of public issues corresponding to the immediate concerns of the Japanese government, from transportation systems to elections in Europe. She also approaches the topics of civil rights and social welfare with a focus on women's suffering. In the essay "Patrolmen" ("Kōtsūjunsa"; 交通巡查), for instance, Okamoto describes how the inauguration of a new prime minister resulted in British patrolmen having to take a pay cut of thirty per cent as a result of the economic crisis, analyzing the situation from the perspective of the patrolmen's wives:

> The new government's savings plan will reduce all patrolmen's salaries by thirty percent. Their families will have to eat "prison meat" from Australia instead of lamb, and drink water contaminated with heavy metals rather than beer [...] The talkative wives of the patrolmen will have more quarrels with their husbands [over how to maintain their lives] during weekends. (*Vol. 11 of The Collection* 187)

By emphasizing the financial and emotional distress of women, Okamoto highlights two ways in which women are excluded from the public sphere: first, their opinions on social change are disregarded, and second, their sufferings remain unrecognized by the public. Because the wives hold no "official" position, they are marginalized by the makers of discourse—male politicians, the media, and even the patrolmen themselves—who continually reinforce the boundary between the public and the domestic, thereby sustaining the social system of women being subordinate to men. By highlighting their lack of representation, Okamoto criticizes women's confinement to the domestic sphere and calls for change, urging the Japanese government and media to "take a lesson from

Britain's situation and enhance the social position of women" (*Vol. 11 of The Collection* 189).

While Okamoto's elite background prompted her interventions with regard to policy, Chen translated her experience attending a class by Madame Curie into a sarcastic commentary on Chinese higher education. Residing close to where Madame Curie taught, Chen attended her class to "experience the charm of the renowned scientist" (148). Deeply impressed by the lecture, she remarks:

> Madame Curie has such a serene demeanor. She must have transcended life's trivialities and have devoted herself solely to scientific research since Mr. Curie's passing. Mr. Curie was not just her life partner, but also her research collaborator [...] She has dedicated her entire life to science, and her contributions have benefited all of humanity.
> [...]
> I emerged from the warm, bright classroom only to be greeted by coldness and darkness [...] I found myself reminiscing about my homeland and soon overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness and despair. Have we ever treated knowledge with such respect, sincerity, and dedication? We go to well-equipped universities for an education, but often end up just wasting time and waiting to get married. (149-150)

She proceeds to identify four major shortcomings of the Chinese academy: the excessive pursuit of money and fame; the overemphasis on administration; the interference of revolutionary politics; and the laziness of students (150). Madame Curie is also cited as an example supporting Chen's belief that feminist movements should not prevent women from choosing to be wives and mothers—"Being an independent scientist doesn't mean you should give up your family," she maintains: "I am glad that Madame Curie has two daughters [...] so she won't be too lonely" (149). Chen, as a regular contributor to the journal *New Women*, debated with other feminist writers about the meaning of feminism in the everyday negotiation between work and family responsibilities. Contrary to those arguing for the abandonment of marriage and the family, such as He-Yin (57-58), Chen states that both men and women should be able to marry and have children with their chosen partner, although "the roles of wife, husband, mother, and father should be premised on the protection of one's human rights" (110).

Such a rejection of binary gender roles also influenced Chen's views about space, with its separation into "public" and "domestic" being seen as a construct of male dominance aimed at oppressing both men and women (108). Accordingly, feminism should dismantle such divided spaces and value all elements of the social realm equally, rather than merely urge women to enter the public sphere (Chen 109). In a similar vein, Lu also views space as fluid, but she concentrates on discursive space—or, echoing Eugenia Lean, emotional

space—rather than interrogating physical space. As Lu acknowledges, her motivations for writing are as simple as "recording what [she] is living through" and "capturing human emotions" (*Memories under the Moon 38*). Opposing the revolutionization and politicization of literature, she argues that it can "transcend its own time and national boundaries" and "break free from any rules that confine true human emotions" (ibid.). Even though she does not use the term "world literature," Lu's understanding that literature can connect the inner self and the outer world as well as peoples and cultures challenges the mainstream emphasis on its didactic and political functions. What is more, Lu also suggests that women's social status can be solidified only when they "have the same power as men in critiquing artistic works and shaping historiography" (*Memories under the Moon 42*).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that even though the novel and the essay were both important in representing and shaping Republican and Taishō-early Shōwa feminism, the capaciousness of the latter form allowed for more diverse manifestations of women's everyday experiences, in terms of their navigation through different identities, cultures, and spaces. With fewer narrative and linguistic constraints, the essay genre offered women writers a more flexible medium for conveying their transnational feminist politics, enabling the exploration of different literary techniques and styles and the reclaiming of social and literary spaces. It is the author's hope that this paper has further enriched our understanding of the New Women by foregrounding their roles as cultural producers rather than subjects of representation, suggesting that women's essays should be interpreted as living texts that reflect their emotional and embodied experiences rather than as something supplementary or otherized in comparison to other genres.

The three writers discussed—Chen Xuezhao, Lu Yin, and Okamoto Kanoko—are certainly not the only women who dedicated significant time to the writing of essays. Their developing approaches to feminism and sometimes contradictory perspectives on women's issues indicate that comparative studies of essays by women writers should always be situated within personal as well as historical contexts. As such, this paper hopes to have offered a point of departure for exploring what Nanxiu Qian, Grace Fong, and Richard Smith describe as "different worlds of discourse" (1)—worlds that are shaped by ongoing transformations of gender and genre.

Notes

1. A common approach adopted by modern Chinese literary historians to explain the relationship between these terms is that *sanwen* is a literary genre juxtaposed with fiction and poetry, whereas *zawen*, *zagan*, and *xiaopinwen* are subgenres, each characterized by distinct thematic focuses and literary styles. However, this approach has been the subject of ongoing debate since the early twentieth century. See Fang, Weibao [方维保]. "Xin wenxueshi de sanwen xushu celüe yu sanwen wenti gainian de duocengcixing [新文学史的散文叙述策略与散文文体概念的多层次; Strategies for Narrating Sanwen in Modern Chinese Literary History and Sanwen as a Multi-layered Genre]", *Xueshujie* [学术界], no. 5, 2023, pp. 120-130.
2. Charles Laughlin identifies three traditions of the modern Chinese essay distinct from Western influence: the playful critique of Confucianism, the eremitic tradition represented by the Six Dynasties poet Tao Qian, and the influence of Buddhism (1-3). On the Japanese side, while many modern *zuihitsu* writers chose not to emulate predecessors such as Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (966–1025) and Yoshida Kenkō 吉田兼好 (1283-?), they recognized the influence of pre-modern *zuihitsu* on their literary journeys (DiNitto 255-257).
3. Recent studies of modern Chinese and Japanese essays include Tam, King-fai. *A Garden of One's Own: A Collection of Modern Chinese Essays, 1919-1949*. The Chinese University Press, 2012; Li, Tonglu. "Modern Chinese Essays: Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang and others." *Routledge Handbook of Modern Chinese Literature*. Routledge, 2018. 290-302; Weidong, Wang. "Wenzhang Traditions and the Theoretical Reconstruction of Modern Chinese Prose (Sanwen)." *Social Sciences in China*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2022, pp. 95–112; Carter, Steven D., ed. *The Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays: Zuihitsu from the Tenth to the Twenty-First Century*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
4. In Japan, educated and progressive women began to write novels from the late 1880s. See T. Suzuki. In China, most literary historians concur that women's novels did not emerge until the 1910s. See Xue, Haiyan [薛海燕]. "Lun Zhongguo nüxing xiaoshuo de qibu [论中国女性小说的起步; The Early Development of Chinese Women's Fiction]", *Dongfang Luntan* [东方论坛], no. 1, 2001, pp. 34-39.
5. See "Lun xiaoshuo zhi jiaoyu [論小說之教育; On the Educational Role of the Novel]", *Xinshijie Xiaoshuo Shebao* [新世界小說社報], no. 4, 1906, pp. 8-11; "Xiaoshuo Conghua [小說叢話; Reflections on the Novel]," *Xinxiaoshuo* [新小說], vol. 2, no. 2, 1905, pp. 176-179.
6. *Genbun-itchi* literally means "unification of the written and spoken language." It refers to a literary movement in late nineteenth-century Japan. See Tomasi, Massimiliano. "Quest for a New Written Language: Western Rhetoric and the Genbun Itchi Movement." *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1999, pp. 333-360.
7. Chen was involved in reprinting the collection, but the collections of Lu and Okamoto were organized and published after their death.

8. For more about Fukuda Hideko, see Mackie, Verak. *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: Gender, Labour and Activism, 1900-1937*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
9. Compared to He-Yin Zhen, Qiu Jin (秋瑾; 1857-1907), the revolutionary executed after a failed uprising against the Qing dynasty, was mentioned and praised as a role model more often by feminists in Republican China. See Introduction. *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, edited by Lydia He Liu et al., Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 1-26. Fukuda Hideko's *Women of the World* was banned two years after its first issue due to Fukuda and the journal's socialist affiliations. See Mackie.
10. Unlike the term "New Woman," "Modern Girl" more often carried negative connotations. See Stevens, Sarah E. "Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 82–103; Tamari, Tomoko. "Modernization and the Department Store in Early-Twentieth-Century Japan: Modern Girl and New Consumer Culture Lifestyles." *Approaching Consumer Culture: Global Flows and Local Contexts*, 2018, pp. 237-255.
11. The Chinese title of the essay is 柳島之一瞥 ("A Glimpse into Yanagishima").
12. The Chinese title of the essay is 鄰居 ("Neighbor").
13. See Murata, Shizuko [村田静子], and Ōki Motoko [大木基子], editors. *Fukuda Hideko Shū* [福田英子集], Fuji Shuppan, 1998, pp. 3.
14. The Japanese title of the essay is 現代若き女性気質集 ("Collection of the Characteristics of Modern Young Women").
15. In Western scholarship, John Money is often considered as a pioneer who popularized the concept of the social construction of gender in the 1960s. See Goldie, Terry. *The Man Who Invented Gender: Engaging the Ideas of John Money*. UBC Press, 2014.
16. See Wu, Xiaodong [吴晓东]. " 'Yusi' fengge de jicheng yu chuli: Lin Yutang de xiaopinwen yundong ["语丝"风格的继承与出离: 林语堂的小品文运动]," *Zhongguo Zuojia Wang*, 20 Jan. 2014, www.chinawriter.com.cn/2014/2014-01-20/189196.html.

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