

**Urban Malaise: Women and the Discourse of Desire in
Pan Xiangli's Shanghai**

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Abstract

This paper deals with the portrayal of contemporary Chinese middle-class urban women in fictional works by the writer Pan Xiangli. Most of the stories are set in present-day Shanghai and describe the female universe against the backdrop of the metropolis. By focusing on the psychology of her characters, on the feelings that arise from their personal experiences while they work hard in their pursuit of brilliant careers, and by illustrating their particular perspective on romance and marriage, Pan Xiangli provides the reader with a unique insight into the collective imagination of Chinese women in an urban environment and reflects upon the issue of gender consciousness in time of globalisation. Her fiction suggests that a latent sense of discontent and malaise is connected to modernity; even though materialism and consumerism drive the actions of her characters, they are also closely related to feelings of disappointment and failure. Through the analysis of some short stories by Pan Xiangli, which not only mirror the new values and ambitions of China's emerging metropolitan middle-class after the turn of the century, but also illustrate the challenges women are confronted with in the context of the city, this paper will show that female characters go through a process of reinvention and renegotiation of their individual sphere, whilst dealing with unprecedented competition in the job market, loneliness, and misunderstandings caused by their own emancipation. They are therefore compelled to find new ways of establishing personal and social relationships. Pan Xiangli's works are examined in the context of 21st century Chinese literature written by women and new urban fiction.

Keywords: new urban literature, Chinese metropolis, white-collar fiction, 21st century Chinese women writers, middle-class women, Shanghai literature

Introduction

In the constantly evolving landscape of present-day Chinese metropolises, the rise of the middle-class,¹ with its specific culture and values,² is inevitably intertwined with the discourse of women's emancipation and with the growth of contradictory feelings of urban identity and belonging. In her fictional works, writer Pan Xiangli, merges these three features and develops a singular perspective on Chinese urbanisation that quietly subverts the conventional poetics of desire, which constituted the literary counterpart of consumerism in the late 1990s and over the following decade.³ Pan Xiangli, whose main sources of inspiration are Shanghai's urban atmosphere and the Chinese women who work in this bustling metropolis on a daily basis, resolutely moves away from the celebration of materialism which characterises “desire writing”: although her female characters are able to afford all the status-symbols necessitated by their stylish life in the dazzling city, they seem to be looking for something more and are certainly not willing to give up on themselves in order to settle for a compromise with mainstream values. She looks deep into the human spirit, with particular consideration towards the contemporary well-off female subject. She does not propose hedonism as a means of liberation and her protagonists pay a high price for being independent, emancipated women and often come up against the misleading side of wealth. With its strong individualist stance, Pan Xiangli's literature can be symbolically situated within the temporal space of Chinese global modernity and the existential sphere of the female universe. Through her unique style, she conveys a vision of a completely modernised metropolis, which is, contrastingly, narrated using an elegant and refined language, with occasional classical hints, which we can also appreciate, for example, in her short stories *Yongyuan de Xie Qiuniang* (The Eternal Xie Qiuniang; Pan, 2016b) and *Bai shui qingcai* (Vegetables in white water; Pan, 2016a). The use of this language also reveals the influence of the *sanwen* (literary prose), a genre Pan Xiangli has often used since the beginning of her career.⁴

Born in 1966 in Quanzhou, Pan Xiangli⁵ moved to Shanghai in 1978, where she has lived ever since, meaning that she therefore has first-hand experience of bourgeois women's constraints within the restlessness of the contemporary city. Furthermore, having been born in the 1960s, she belongs to the last generation with personal memories of the Cultural Revolution: her representation of young urban women reveals a lucid awareness of the generation gap between people born before and after the 1970s. While young women, such as the frivolous protagonist of *Wo ai Xiao Wanzi* (I love Maruko-chan; Pan, 2016c), are totally immersed in a consumerist lifestyle, always following the latest fashions and keeping up with the latest trends, older

¹ In 21st century globalised Chinese cities, the widening gap between the rich and the poor results in the emergence of an urban middle-class, formed by relatively wealthy people, mostly white-collar workers or professionals, and new lower social strata, mainly constituted by migrant workers and the suburban population. For further reading on this topic, see: Wu & Webster (2010).

² In China, the inequalities between hinterland and coastal cities and among urban areas of different tiers make it difficult to formulate an unequivocal definition of middle-class (Ekman, 2014, p.10).

³ The “writing of desire” (*yuwang xiezu* 欲望写作) is very common in the Chinese urban literature of the 1990s, as it is connected to the introduction of the market economy and the spread of consumerism (Chen L., 2007, pp. 245–7) of which it is, in some cases, critical. Zhu Wen, Qiu Huadong, He Dun are among the writers who followed this trend (Cheng, 2005, pp. 300–60).

⁴ Among Pan Xiangli's *sanwen* collections: *Chunzhen niandai* (The age of purity, 1998), *Jubu youshi you wanmei* (Partial sometimes is perfect, 2009).

⁵ Pan Xiangli 潘向黎 graduated in Shanghai in 1991, started her literary career in 1988. She has worked as an editor for many journals, beginning with *Shanghai Wenxue* (Shanghai Literature). She studied for two years in Japan (1992–94), and is the author of many collections of short stories, such as *Wu meng xiangsui* (No dreams to follow, 1998), *Shi nian bei* (Ten years' cup, 2000). For further details about Pan Xiangli's biography: Jin Y., Zhao P. (2018).

women, like the main character of *Yongyuan de Xie Qiuniang* (The eternal Xie Qiuniang; Pan, 2016b), seem to be gifted with an inner strength which comes directly from their connection with the past. Furthermore, young women in Pan Xiangli's fiction do not have any experiences of political clashes, but they do get degrees from prestigious universities, and grow up with an individualist attitude, appreciating the material aspects of life (Liu, 2009, p.104).

Unlike other 21st century women writers (for example, Wu Jun, Sun Huifen, Xu Yigua, Ye Mi), who focus on the depiction of suburb dwellers that belong to the lower classes, Pan Xiangli explores the mindset, the emotions and the everyday existence of supposedly fortunate women who are wealthy and live what would appear to be perfectly satisfying lives, in their glamorous apartments, with influential acquaintances who are the envy of others. These women are fashion lovers, as indeed is Pan Xiangli herself, but do not follow fashion merely as a consumerist pastime; they consider it, rather, as a tool of emancipation, an emblem of their independence that somehow defines their personality and allows them to distinguish themselves from the male universe (Sun, 2017, p. 85). Moreover, they all have enough money to enjoy urban life and belong to the category of white-collar workers, they are well-educated, and have high-profile careers in a cosmopolitan environment (Huang, 2013, p. 17). Nevertheless, beneath their success lie feelings of unease and irresolution. The well-to-do wives and businesswomen described by Pan Xiangli are not trying to figure out who they are: their well-defined personality is, in fact, their Achilles heel and is emblematic of the system they cannot escape from and the origin of a crisis which, in a broader sense, symbolises the failure of capitalism. This may well be the reason for a comment in *Wo ai Xiao Wanzi*, when one of the protagonist's colleagues says: "To be a white-collar is like being a prostitute: it is our professional ethics to smile at people" (Pan, 2016c, p. 94).

The cultural space of the middle-class, in a globalised metropolis, is characterised by a hybridism that is exemplified by the proliferation of goods related to everyday Western life (Liu, 2004, 78): one of them is coffee and a well-known coffeehouse chain even promotes its bars as a "third space" which generates serenity (Tong, 2015, 29). In Pan Xiangli's works, coffee is often mentioned: a seemingly innocuous detail which actually highlights Shanghai's international atmosphere and recalls other contemporary stories set in the same city.⁶ In her *Mi cheng* for example, we read: "Except drinking large amounts of coffee every day, I almost do not have any other bad habit" (Mi city; Pan, 2007a, p. 126). Coffee was introduced into Shanghai at the time of the foreign concession and is now a fashionable drink that urbanites, especially young people, buy in order to look trendy.

Though frequently identified as urban fiction,⁷ Pan Xiangli's works go far beyond the limits of this kind of writing: she deals with the troubled inner reality and conflicting selves of modern women, revealing aspects that are normally concealed beneath a glittering facade. Her depiction of the female urban world is unparalleled within the wide panorama of 21st century fiction precisely because, by disclosing the real feelings of women who are considered paragons of success, she unravels the inconsistency and the illusions of the Chinese dream of economic prosperity from the point of view of those who have actually attained this goal. The defeat endured by Pan Xiangli's female characters is, above all, a psychological one: they cannot come to terms with an intense awareness of inescapable disillusionment, which luxury and money cannot prevent. However, they are also winners: they rebel against the deforming influence of society and remain faithful to themselves.

⁶ In Anni Baobei's *Goodbye Vivian* (2002) coffee is mentioned more than 15 times.

⁷ In Chinese, *chengshi wenxue* (literature of the city) or *dushi wenxue* (literature of the metropolis). For a detailed explanation of the ambiguity of these definitions see: Song (2016, p.327); Chen X. (2007, p. 3).

21st Century Middle-Class Women and the City: Theoretical Framework and Critical Literary Perspectives

It is not uncommon, especially in Chinese mass-media, for the 21st century to be labelled as “her century” (*Ta shiji* 她世纪) to highlight the importance of women as consumers (Jiang & Liu, 2009), but also because of the ground that they have gained within intellectual circles, including literature. Chinese women, in the globalised city, enjoy more freedom and mobility than ever before and nurture new ambitions; the relationship between men and women is affected by these changes, with an overthrow of the traditional notion of marriage and romance. In Pan Xiangli’s singular outlook on love, which reflects these new tendencies, the contradictions around which the plot evolves, take place within the male-female dialectic; female characters seem to be looking for the meaning of their feelings, caught between the ideal sentimental life they dream of and the unsatisfying reality (Huang, 2013, p. 17). The 21st century has also been tagged as the “century of the metropolis”, due to a rapid increase in the rate of urbanisation, which is unprecedented in world history⁸ and has transformed the cultural domain on multiple levels. The main trends of Chinese culture nowadays mirror social expectations, consumer-driven needs and the daily choices of the burgeoning urban bourgeoisie, a category made up of mainly white-collar workers (*bailing* 白领),⁹ which began to emerge after 1978 and can now be considered as the main constituent of the urban population, the subject of China’s economic development and the engine of consumerism.¹⁰ The rise of the middle-class epitomises the radical changes that have occurred within Chinese society over the last four decades, along with the implementation of the Opening Up and Reforms policy: in fact, there was no class stratification throughout almost thirty years of Maoist rule, during which peasants, workers, soldiers and intellectuals were meant to make up the proletarian class, which the concept of capitalism was directly opposed to (Ekman, 2014, p. 7).

The relationship between women and the urban fabric is a recurring focal point of representation in Chinese fiction of the 1990s and over the following decades. In the 1980s women writers such as Zhang Kangkang, Zhang Jie, Can Xue, Tie Ning, Wang Anyi, to name but a few, consciously embarked upon a journey of enlightenment, focusing on the female condition and gender consciousness. Most of them, though, firmly refused to define themselves as feminists: they did not want to blindly endorse a standpoint that was imported from the West (Wu, 2010, p. 407) and were mainly concerned with female roles within family and society. In the 1990s the so-called “private writing” of Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Xu Kun and others, generated reflections on female inner feelings and desires, and in their works the city was taken into consideration from a radically subjective point of view. At the end of the 1990s, the body and the sexual experiences of female characters whose existence was deeply rooted in the metropolis and their materialistic attitude, constituted the core of the urban narration in the

⁸ In China, the urban population has outnumbered the rural population since 2011. The same had already occurred on a worldwide scale in 2008 (UN, 2018).

⁹ According to Ekman (2014, p. 9), the term “white-collar workers” includes people born in the 1980s with higher education qualifications who work for private enterprises. Commonly, though, the definition has a broader scope. Sociolinguistic studies show that Chinese white-collar workers even acquire their own language by appropriating transnational Chinese spoken all over the world to build up a cosmopolitan Mandarin which helps to shape their cosmopolitan identity (Gao, 2017, p. 3).

¹⁰ For more insights into China’s urban middle-class and its spending power, see: Farrell, Gersch, Stephenson (2006).

fiction of the so-called “beauty writers”.¹¹ The discourse of desire, as a matter of fact, is expressed in women’s literature as a yearning for both material objects as well as sexual experiences (Cheng, 2007, pp. 45–6): the former expressing a temporary reaction to the lack of commercial goods before the introduction of capitalism, and the latter expressing the need for Chinese women’s sexual emancipation. The shifts that occurred in Chinese literature at the turn of the century ushered in a new dimension in the narration of women in the metropolis and allowed writers to rethink literature within a global and transnational context. A deeper awareness of social issues, realism, the growing importance of women in intellectual circles, and the pluralist culture of the metropolis are just some of the new elements.

Zhang Qinghua (2007, p. 19) suggests that, as a result of the social polarisation determined by capitalism, 21st century Chinese literature reflects two main trends, carnival and sadness: the first is an expression of hedonistic culture and consumerism, while the second is the result of anger caused by social problems conditioned by globalisation. In the 1990s, literary portrayals of middle-class young women, in most cases, focused on their hedonistic life-style, their favourite pastimes, and the time and care they spent on their appearance. Female urban fiction published during this decade can be considered one of the symbols of a flourishing consumer-driven culture and of the collective craze for materialism that characterised this period. By describing the real ambitions of Chinese city dwellers, these fictional works also focused attention on conflict with old-fashioned values (Cheng, 2007, p. 47) and, therefore, allowed women to break with “tradition”, and to fight for their emancipation. After 2000, however, many authors began to relate the stories of subaltern characters from the most disadvantaged social groups, such as migrant girls, factory workers, caregivers or even prostitutes (for example, “subaltern fiction” and “workers’ literature”). Others, instead, focused on the middle-class: “workplace fiction” describes the life of white-collar workers who strive for economic success or suffer because of fierce business competition. This literary trend which focuses on the middle-class implies that the existence of a global middle-class with Chinese characteristics is a real possibility (Wu, 2017, p. 318). Nonetheless, Pan Xiangli goes beyond these tendencies, digging into women’s emotional and psychological processes, wondering how they handle everyday life, trying to grasp the constraints that they have to endure whilst faced with the new values of consumerism and competition, in spite of their apparent freedom.¹² As opposed to the urban novels of the “beauty writers”, for Pan Xiangli, the body and sex are not tools to illustrate the metropolis, but rather an aspect of the psychological balance of her characters.

Pan Xiangli’s descriptions of the city, inspired by Shanghai,¹³ betray romanticism and are connected to women’s identity. Shanghai’s cosmopolitan imagination has a long history in 20th century literature; its culture was a symbol of elegance and prosperity in the decades spanning from 1920 to 1940.¹⁴ The representation of Shanghai is somehow dominated, in the post-Maoist period, by women writers (Song, 2016, pp. 332–33): Wang Anyi, for example, is not only Shanghai-based and obsessed with the description of the city, but often identifies it with a female character,¹⁵ who embodies its allure and its decaying beauty. As pointed out by Vivian Lee (2005, p. 134), in fiction written at the beginning of the 20th century featuring Shanghai,

¹¹ It is a pejorative definition with which writers do not identify. Examples of this trend are novels by Mian Mian and Zhou Weihui or Zhou Jieru’s and Anni Baobei’s “petit bourgeois” fiction (Xin, 2011, pp. 41–54). For further reading on the relationship between urban consumer culture, female literature and the private space, see: (Chan, 2007).

¹² Wang (2019) analyses this topic in some women writers’ fiction, including that of Pan Xiangli.

¹³ Regarding Pan Xiangli’s fiction’s relationship with Shanghai, see: Zhao (2010a).

¹⁴ Shanghai’s literary representation during the pre-Maoist period is the focus of many critical studies. See: Zhang Y. (1999); Leo (1999).

¹⁵ For example, Wang Qiyao in *Song of everlasting sorrow* (Wang A., 2008).

Western values, from a Eurocentric perspective, were identified as being “superior”; therefore, the modern woman was portrayed as being “Westernised”, independent and sexually emancipated, especially in literary works by male authors. The modern woman in the cosmopolitan environment of the May 4th period was, in other words, objectified. Shanghai’s middle-class female subject, as imagined by Pan Xiangli, however, is well aware of her condition within the new context of the 21st century metropolis, in which Shanghai has partly retrieved its role of channelling western values, but the representation of the city has been totally liberated from a Eurocentric vision of modernity. Vivian Lee (2005, p. 156) also maintains that since the 1980s, novels set in Shanghai have revived the image of this metropolis as a seductress: she analyses the cases of Wang Anyi’s *Song of everlasting sorrow* (2008) and Wei Hui’s *Shanghai Baby* (2002), as expressing two different conceptualisations of the metropolis, through the features of their female protagonists. Regarding this metaphor of the personified metropolis, in Pan Xiangli’s works Shanghai can be seen as an illusory seductress: its splendour and its sparkling lights offer a fleeting promise of happiness that never actually materialises, while female characters fail in their attempts to be seductresses.

In Search of Emotional Survival in the Cosmopolitan City

Traditionally, Chinese women lived within large families, where they were controlled and restricted by the menfolk; they had no economic independence and, according to Confucian values, they had to submit to the authority of men.¹⁶ Despite the fact that this situation has been overturned in modern times, women still face problems related to the gender gap. The three works that are examined in this section tell stories of strong, independent women who refuse to compromise when it comes to their identity. In order to achieve this goal, however, they are obliged to set aside their own emotions and to allow rationality to guide their decision-making. In the short story *Yongyuan de Xie Qiuniang* (The eternal Xie Qiuniang; Pan, 2016b) the protagonist, whose name appears in the title, is a very talented, beautiful, elegant middle-class woman. Her timeless beauty, in spite of a troubled past and a hard life, represents the everlastingness of her uncorrupted self. Her immutable youthful appearance, which others cannot help but notice and admire, also symbolises the weight of time and the burden of history (Li W., 2005, p. 46), from which Qiuniang will never be able to free herself:

People only remember that she’s looked like this for a very long time. She was barely 22 or 23 when she began to dress like this. All year round, no matter what the season, she always wore a classic *qipao*, which was made of neither brocade nor silk, just simple cotton cloth, usually violet [...]. Looking at her from behind, she seemed to be a student from the 1920s or the 1930s (Pan, 2016b, p. 135).¹⁷

Her youthfulness also means that she does not follow passing fashions, because her values are untouchable. Qiuniang knows that she can only rely on herself: since childhood she has endured hardships that have opened her eyes to the hypocrisy of people around her. Nevertheless, the richer and consequently more independent she becomes, the more she is psychologically isolated and this loneliness of hers could be interpreted as symbolic of the condition of the modern urban subject in the capitalist society; it would appear to be the case that as overall wealth increases, so does a sense of isolation of the individual.

¹⁶ For further reading about the Confucian idea of women’s roles: Gao, (2003).

¹⁷ The quotes from Pan Xiangli’s stories that will be cited from now on are taken from the original Chinese texts, except for the three short stories *A miracle Rides on a Sleigh*, *The Way of her Fragrance*, and *Lady Boss*, which have been selected from the English translation.

Quiniang's father was a musician and her mother a ballet dancer: with gifted parents who deeply loved each other, the protagonist experiences the pain of losing them because of the brutality of the Cultural Revolution:

An ideal couple, a match made in heaven, with a beloved daughter. They unexpectedly found themselves in difficulties, a good family smashed into pieces. Publicly criticised, humiliated and denounced, their belongings were confiscated and they were threatened with eviction. How could her father have endured all this? He looked for a high building far away from there and jumped to his death, he didn't want his wife and daughter to be frightened anymore. But unfortunately her mother was as stubborn as a mule and the following day she swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills and joined him (Pan, 2016b, p. 137).

Left to fend for herself in turbulent times, Quiniang is forced to earn a living singing in a karaoke bar. She gradually becomes cold and emotionless, and this is another reason why she does not seem to age. She then marries a diplomat, but her new life abroad does not protect her from suffering and, after a while, they get divorced and she goes back to China, attempting to rebuild her life by opening her own restaurant. This restaurant that she builds up all by herself, soon becomes very popular thanks to the exquisite food and the welcoming atmosphere. However, while her business is booming, she becomes more and more lonely and unreachable. Even when a wealthy lawyer named Han Dingchu falls in love with her, she is unresponsive and numb. When this man is killed in an accident, her brief emotional reaction is to smash the cup he used to drink from. However, she then returns to her daily chores, impassively, in front of the astonished restaurant staff. The apparent composure of Pan Xiangli's female characters when facing the challenges of life bespeaks their great dignity and self-esteem (Liu, 2009, p. 106). Another example of this is the behaviour of the protagonist in the next story examined here: *Bai shui qing cai* (Vegetables in white water; Pan, 2016a) takes its name from the simple, homemade and apparently unique soup that the protagonist, an efficient yet dissatisfied housewife, usually prepares for her husband's dinner and this soup is, in fact, the cornerstone of the whole story. The dish, throughout the narration, becomes the symbol of the couple's love and of its subsequent slow decay. The names of the two protagonists are not mentioned in the story: they represent, in fact, the average bourgeois couple (Huang, 2013, p. 18). Pan Xiangli here narrates an everyday tale of a marital crisis, which is brought about by the husband when he unexpectedly falls in love with a younger woman. The married couple, we are told, first met as children when they were at school. They were both beautiful, charming and were each other's first loves; they married soon after university, had a child and formed an ordinary well-to-do family: "Theirs was a platinum family that everybody else envied. The meaning of platinum is they owned money and belonged to the white-collar category..." (Pan, 2016a, p. 4). Boredom and normality weigh heavily upon the female protagonist, since she decided to stop working to take care of the family, while her husband gradually becomes a powerful man and is busy furthering his brilliant career:

He first worked as a government official, with a good salary and benefits. After a while, he did not want such a subservient role [...], he soon became a businessman, dealing in different sectors and finally made his fortune in real estate. Afterwards, he managed a website and a private school for the wealthy. His career was relentless, like a frightened wild horse (Pan, 2016a, pp. 4–5).

The plot starts by providing a cross section of the couple's routine, a recurring scene which communicates both monotony and intimacy: the husband comes home from work, he finds his wife cooking in the kitchen, and takes pleasure in the smell of the lovingly prepared food. Even the description of food underlines their bourgeois identity: she only uses a very expensive brand of rice, which is guaranteed to come from organic plantations. This information may seem inconsequential, but it clearly makes the reader associate these people with westernised values and the fashionable habits of urban dwellers. When the husband embarks on an affair, the wife reacts by freezing her emotions, showing total indifference (Huang, 2013, p. 19). Once he has left the marital home, meals become a problem for the male protagonist. The act of eating loses its pleasure and he now sees mealtimes as a necessary chore, since his new girlfriend usually buys fashionable, but unhealthy food at fast-food joints, such as KFC sandwiches or pizza (Pan, 2016a, p. 8.). When Dudu, the husband's lover, takes the initiative to go to his wife's apartment to meet her and ask for the recipe for the "famous" soup, she's astonished to find out that such a simple dish requires hours of cooking and numerous ingredients. Through this episode the author compares two completely different kinds of urban women and highlights the striking contrast between the fleetingness of consumerist values, symbolised by the junk food, and the refinement of tradition, symbolised by a dish that can only be prepared with great patience and dedication. Only one month after this occurrence, the man goes back home, and the wife lets him in for dinner. However, when he eats the beloved soup, to his disappointment, he discovers that he can no longer appreciate its taste; in fact, everything has changed, and there is no going back. Even his wife is not the same person, and she makes it clear that she no longer wants to be a housewife:

"From now on, we need to hire a cleaner for our home, I've just found a job and there's so much to do here!"

He was startled: "A job? What kind of job?"

"I'm going to teach in a cooking school".

"You? A cooking teacher?"

"Maybe you forgot that I have a teacher's degree. And I also passed my cooking exams", she said.

Suddenly, that soup, already quite unpleasant to eat, seemed to stick in his throat ... (Pan, 2016a, p.18)

The female protagonist refuses to compromise and chooses to put her own dignity first: her unfaithful husband's actions are irrelevant; she decides to reclaim her place in society.

Nü shangsi (*Lady Boss*; Pan, 2016d) is the story of the successful and powerful Zhong Keming, who is respected and feared by her subordinates and admired as a very beautiful, independent woman, with a happy family. This perfection is shaken by her husband's affair with a younger, rather plain-looking girl. At the end they will reunite, but this only reinforces her immense loneliness. People at the office talk behind her back and, because of her powerful position, she has no one with whom she can share her problems. One night, after working late, she goes out for dinner with a young colleague and they get drunk while dining in a Vietnamese restaurant. The colleague is also in trouble, as she suspects that she is pregnant and is not sure how she feels about this. When everything returns to normal, the protagonist will regret having lowered her guard and having shared her feelings with this girl.

The "leftover" women mentality, according to which a woman should marry before the age of thirty (Fincher, 2014), burdens the lives of many Pan Xiangli's characters, as we can see from the beginning of *Lady Boss* (Pan, 2016d):

When women approach the age of thirty, age invariably becomes a source of worry. One after another – 27, 28, 29 – the years fly by like a speeding train, and the last stop is within sight. Of course, it's not the last stop of life, but it is the last stop of the prime of life. Only after turning 30 do women realise those precautions and worries were unnecessary – a luxury really (Pan, 2014b, p. 180).

According to Wang (2019, p. 194), Pan Xiangli also reveals the different attitude of the two sexes towards love, depicting men as self-seeking realists. Pan Xiangli's female characters, in fact, have to deal with the contradiction between rationalism and functionalism on one hand, and emotion and romanticism on the other; they must choose between love and freedom (Qi, 2013, p.8). The three protagonists of the stories which have been investigated above cannot allow themselves to surrender to any kind of sentimentalism, in order to maintain their psychological wellbeing and strength.

The Unbearable Loneliness of the Urban Dream: Pan Xiangli's Painful Modernity

The alienated modernist self is a product of the city and there are certainly many novels, in both Western and Chinese literature, which describe a sense of confusion, anonymity and alienation caused by urban life. Pan Xiangli's urban female characters' loneliness, though, is also rooted in their need to safeguard their self and sometimes in their refusal to surrender to social pressures.

Yilu fenfang (The way of her fragrance; Pan, 2016e) depicts the sense of isolation felt by the female protagonist Li Sijin, who works as managing editor for an important magazine: in spite of a fulfilling career and a busy life, she suffers for her inability to realise her sentimental desires and to express her feelings. Moreover, most of her social relationships are somehow work-related, but she seems to have no real friends. She works night and day to pursue her brilliant career, yet has no private life outside the office. She is attracted to her boss, a charming married man named Luo Yi, who appears to be an example of moral virtue. Li Sijin represents the typical values of Chinese middle class women: "I will live in a suburban villa with the man I love. We will be a respectable couple with our wealth and money. We will take strolls on the grass, have afternoon tea ..." (Pan, 2014a, p. 31). When Luo Yi's wife is left paralysed after a car accident, he continues to visit her in the hospital every day, avoiding the company of other women. Finally, after Li Sijin has met her and requested that she do so, Luo Yi's wife selflessly ends her marriage so as not to be a burden on her husband; he, however, does not then turn to Li Sijin, but ends up with another woman, making Li Sijin regret the time and energy she has spent working for him. Li Sijin subsequently accepts the courtship of a younger co-worker, Jiang Liyang, who seems to be the only one who really cares for her. He eventually moves to a smaller city, Chengdu, making her realise how much she actually misses him. She finally gets her priorities right, by choosing the truthfulness of feelings over power, wealth and outward appearances.

Throughout the narration Pan Xiangli highlights the fact that money, famous brands and luxury are a priority in Li Sijin's work environment: she drives a second-hand BMW and Jiang Liyang drives a brand-new Polo (Pan, 2014a, 90); the fragrance to which the title alludes is a Bulgari perfume, always worn by the elegant, stylish Li Sijin:

Her hard-soled shoes clattered across the marble floor, leaving behind a wisp of intense, spicy, and yet subtle aroma. The guard, of course, did not know

anything about Bulgari, but he thought curiously: this is not quite the smell of a flower; perhaps more like the taste of ginger (Pan, 2014a, p. 12).

The young Hai Qing, who Li Sijin sees as a rival, presents her with an expensive gift: “Inside the bag was a beautiful box; in it were beauty soaps and signature body treatments from the Beauty Soup Hot Spring and Spa. Judging from the packaging, the gift was not cheap” (Pan, 2014a, p. 61).

In the short story *A miracle rides on a sleigh* (2014c) the main character is a thirty-three-year-old woman who, in spite of her wealth and vast array of belongings, is extremely unsatisfied and bored with her marriage, and can find little meaning in her life. Her husband is depicted as a loyal, capable man, yet the routine of her life with him is no longer enough for her. On Christmas Day she dresses up and goes shopping, with a vague yearning for something new to happen, because she is feeling depressed and melancholic as a result of the western festivities. Her unhappiness is exacerbated by a sense of boredom and monotony that she has been used to since she got married; a feeling of sameness which both distresses and oppresses her:

As an ordinary person, she never once hoped for any sort of miracle. An ordinary life was simply a series of ordinary events. Then, a very ordinary thing happened: she married an ordinary guy. He was truly very ordinary; when they began dating, she was afraid she would not recognise him in a crowd. But among all the young men, he was the one who pursued her for the longest time, and with the most sincerity (Pan, 2014c, pp. 151–52).

The significance of everyday life in 21st century Chinese fiction goes far beyond the obvious need to normalise the daily routine of ordinary people in order to confer upon it a new dignity, thus opposing the previous literary discourse. In times of globalisation, as Liu Kang points out, “the everyday is not only both global and local (in the sense that it encompasses different temporalities, subjectivities, spaces and public spheres); it may also serve as a site that unravels and critiques the contradictions and fallacies of the age” (Liu, 2004, p. 93). The materiality of objects highlights the steadiness of a typical middle-class life:

She was lucky. Once married, she did not live with her in-laws; she and her husband had their own two-bedroom home. Work-wise, she never went to college, but a family relative who was the assistant principal at a high school offered her a job in the library. The salary was not very high but it was a stable position. She was never dissatisfied with her job, especially when there was constant news of others being laid off (Pan, 2014c, p. 152).

The unexpected thing she has been secretly craving for suddenly comes along when, while sitting in a coffee shop, she meets an old schoolmate who once had a crush on her. After a while, the man’s wife suddenly appears and makes a scene when she finds the two of them pleasantly chatting together. Her old friend was supposed to meet a foreign businessman there, but this man does not arrive until her old classmate has left. She herself has a cup of coffee with the foreigner before going home. At home, the daunting daily routine overwhelms her once more, making her forget the thrill of the afternoon adventure. The following day she receives a very expensive gift from her old friend. When she tells her husband the whole story his reaction is one of indifference.

According to Tong (2015, p. 29), “consumption in post-Mao China symbolises modernity. Acquiring and consuming material goods tastefully has become an intrinsic part of modern living in China and a validation of one’s high social standing”. Pan Xiangli here gives prominence to luxury brands and objects which symbolise modernity and demonstrates the assimilation of the characters into urban life, as well as the influence of western consumerism and fashion: the protagonist is drinking coffee when she meets her old school friend and has just eaten dinner in a Pizza Hut restaurant, feeling particularly proud of the fact that she is still able to use fork and knife. The protagonist is shopping to enjoy the Christmas atmosphere: the assimilation of western festivities mainly concerns the consumerist aspect of the celebrations, but randomly includes the cultural, traditional or religious values from which they originate.¹⁸ In this story the protagonist does not have any significant problems, but her perfect reality is a burden which weighs heavily on her.

Wo ai Xiao Wanzi (I love Maruko Chan; 2016c) attempts to describe the huge generation gap between Chinese people born before the 1960s and those born from the 1970s onwards. This short story differs from Pan Xiangli’s standard format, even though the female first-person narrator, Jiang Xiaojiang, is still from Shanghai, and belongs to the middle-class, in that the story does not focus on her psychological evolution, but rather it has a shallower approach to the character’s description, because she is a normal white-collar worker with no significant problems and an optimistic outlook on life (Huang, 2013, p. 18), who models herself on a Japanese manga cartoon character, Chibi Maruko-*chan*, created by Sakura Momoko. Even though she is a nine-year-old child, Maruko expresses her thoughts using the language of adults. She has many brothers and sisters, and comes from a family that is not particularly well-off; she tries her best to fulfil her dream of becoming a manga artist, but she is very disorganised and clumsy.

The lack of introspection of the character of Jiang Xiaojiang could be a way for Pan Xiangli to assert that, by asking herself no questions and simply accepting her normal bourgeois life, Jiang Xiaojiang has no particular reasons to worry. Her unusual name is emblematic of the vast difference between her generation and that of her parents. Even her beauty differs from the traditional Chinese aesthetic standards: her skin is not pale and she wears clothes inspired by cartoon characters. She works at a design company, she loves to chat online and has virtual friends, she loves shopping and likes flirting. She is the symbol of a new generation of girls who believe in individualism and in fashion.

Conclusion

The psychological dimension of the relationship between the two sexes, and women’s freedom and independence are the key focus of Pan Xiangli’s fiction; the women she describes are from different age groups with different professions, but have a very similar attitude towards life (Qi, 2013, p. 7). By researching the urban universe in her works, from the perspective of female middle-class characters, my purpose is to demonstrate the connection between urban culture and the formation of a new female identity in present-day Chinese society and, above all, to show that the attainment of material wealth and success generates a deep sense of unfathomable dissatisfaction within these characters, as well as contradictory feelings of attraction towards and refusal of consumerism. A superficial perusal of the female condition in the works of Pan Xiangli may initially reveal an image of relatively emancipated women, yet it becomes clear

¹⁸ For the assimilation of Christmas and other western festivities as a consequence of globalisation: Liu K. (2004, pp. 78–79).

that urban women have to ignore and fight against deep-rooted prejudices and outdated cultural legacies in order to become who they really want to be. The analysis also reveals the uniqueness of Pan Xiangli's female characters: in fact, they find singular solutions for the problems they are confronted with in daily urban life. Putting themselves and their own identity first and refusing to compromise is, for them, not so much a choice as an unavoidable necessity.

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