

Students' Quests in Liu Sola's Post/Modernist Narrative: *You Have No Other Choice* and *Chaos and All That*

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In this essay, I offer close readings of *Ni bie wu xuanze* (*You Have No Other Choice*, 1985) and *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* (*Chaos and All That*, 1991), two short novels by Chinese author, musician, and composer Liu Sola. A graduate in composition from the Central Conservatory of Music, Liu made a resounding literary debut in 1985 with *You Have No Other Choice*, which was rapidly classified as the first authentically modernist Chinese work of narrative fiction. In 1988, she moved to London, where she wrote *Chaos and All That*. While keeping in mind the tension between, on the one hand, Liu's pivotal position in contemporary Chinese cultural discourse and, on the other hand, the diasporic location she ended up occupying, I attempt to contextualize both novels under examination with respect to the Chinese historical, cultural, and literary context of the 1980s and the very early 1990s, when an effervescent debate on modernity, and especially on the potentialities and pitfalls of literary modernism, gradually showed the signs of a shift towards post/modernism. Within this context, I also engage with a more strictly literary and tropological frame of reference, exploring Liu's creative usage of a recurring, rich trope in Chinese literature: the "student", especially as study abroad student – a trope that changes, and is the bearer of different connotations, according to how the component of gender is deployed.

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“Whirlwind Liu Sola”: The Wind Blows Glocal

In 1985, the publication of the short novel *Ni bie wu xuanze* (*You Have No Other Choice*) on the periodical *Renmin wenxue* (People's Literature) caused a sensation in the literary circles of the People's Republic of China, to the extent that the author – and the phenomenon – were dubbed “whirlwind Liu Sola” (*Liu Sola xuanfeng*).¹ Besides being an experimenter in terms of style, with her literary debut Liu had, it was perceived, lent voice to a generation whose members expressed needs that the establishment must reckon with. In the words of writer Wang Meng, who became the Minister of Culture of the People's Republic of China in 1986: “The appearance of Liu Sola's story in 1985 is not a fortuitous but an avant-garde phenomenon, for both its content and style show discontentment and brave exploration. We cannot help but learn to have a dialogue with the characters in her story, try to understand them and pay more attention to them” (qtd. in Jiang 2000, 191).

Born in Beijing in 1955, after the end of the Cultural Revolution Liu entered the Central Conservatory of Music, where she graduated in composition in 1983. In 1988 she moved to London and, after five years there, she moved on to New York City in 1993. More recently, she has been living between the U.S. and her native Beijing, extensively working as a composer and a musical performer across different locations, Chinese and international. For decades, she has combined music – her main occupation – with writing. *You Have No Other Choice* has been widely recognized as the first *xiaoshuo*² that truly belongs to the new Chinese “modernist school” (*xiandai pai*) of the 1980s. As is well known, the 1980s were a time of ebullience in the literary and intellectual spheres of the People's Republic of China – an ebullience that constituted a response, on the part of the writers and intellectuals, to the socio-political reforms of the Deng era, as well as a multivocal attempt, still on the writers' and intellectuals' part, to play their own indispensable role in the transformation of society and public discourse. This proliferation of debates on modernity, culture, and the relationship between the two was given the name “cultural fever” (*wenhua re*).

In the literary sphere, the “modern” (*xiandai*) was, once again, at the center of the debate. While, in the early 1980s, terms like *xiandai pai* (modernist school) or *xiandai zhuyi* (modernism) conveyed a negative meaning, because they were associated with the idea of a Western(ized) bourgeois, decadent, “polluting” style, an interest for Western modernist literature, and for the potential that a Chinese modernism might have for a renewal of Chinese literature, gradually burgeoned and then escalated in the mid-1980s, blossoming side by side to – and to an extent, as I hope it will become clear in what follows, partly contradicting – the open-door policy of the Deng Xiaoping era and the state-sponsored campaigns aimed at attaining the “four modernizations” (*sige*

¹ According to standard pinyin romanization, the author's first name, composed of two characters, is spelled “Suola”. Liu prefers to spell it “Sola”. Accordingly, both romanizations can be found. In this paper, I follow the author's preference.

² *You Have No Other Choice* can be regarded as a *zhongpian* (middle-length) *xiaoshuo*. The broad term *xiaoshuo* can be seen as nowadays corresponding to “fictional narrative” – although, in its etymological meaning of “small”, i.e. common, trivial (*xiao*) “talk” (*shuo*), it could be referred to both factual and fictional narratives. For a reference on this complex matter of genre, see Gu 2006. A common modern distinction (within the realm of fiction) is the one among *duanpian xiaoshuo* (short story), *zhongpian xiaoshuo* (novella or short novel), and *changpian xiaoshuo* ([long] novel). For the English rendition, I favor “short novel” over novella when referring to *You Have No Other Choice*: “short novel” may be seen as more aptly conveying the blend of inner fragmentation and interweaving threads that characterizes the text.

xiandaihua, abbreviated to *sihua*) that had been declared necessary by Deng: namely, the modernization of industry, agriculture, national defense, and “science and technology”.

When she moved to London in 1988, after the publication of *You Have No Other Choice* and some short stories, Liu Sola was, then, already a well-known writer. In this essay, I focus on two texts that are temporally separated by Liu’s expatriation and relocation in London in 1988. In the UK, she wrote *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* (*Chaos and All That*), completing a first and then a second version between 1989 and 1990, and eventually, after it was banned from publication on the Mainland, publishing it in Hong Kong in 1991.³ While, not surprisingly, Liu herself has emphasized the importance that going abroad had for her artistic life, both as a musician and a writer, and while her new abroad location obviously made a difference and served (as we shall see) as the very starting point for *Chaos and All That*, one should be wary of creating an excessive rift between the two texts, as if they belonged to phases “before” and “after” the author’s relocation abroad. 1988 is also only one year before 1989, a year that is impossible to ignore and not to consider as a historical and symbolic watershed in contemporary Chinese history and culture. Zhang Zhen’s perspective may at this point be useful for developing the kind of “glocal” outlook which is, in my opinion, productive for analyzing Liu’s work. Zhang rightfully places Liu – and several other women writers like Zha Jianying, Hong Ying, and You You⁴ – in the context of a diasporic Chinese-language literary production (*haiwai wenxue*, literally “overseas literature”) by authors who reside out of China.⁵ While Zhang’s interest lies in emphasizing the importance of 1989 as a turning point, she also remarks that the increasing quantity of diasporic literature published since that year expanded and diversified a phenomenon that was already underway:

[I]n the late 1970s and early 1980s *haiwai wenxue* was immensely popular in China, as it functioned as an imaginary outlet for repressed sexuality and a model of modernity (as the *haiwai* as a whole was perceived as materially more advanced). On the other hand, the category also suggests exclusion and discrimination because the diasporic “wandering sons” (*youzi*) are seen as having lost their Chinese authenticity [...]. Because much of the diaspora literature of the past was rather out of touch with the contemporary developments on the Mainland, it was also regarded as a literature doubly removed in time and space.

The horizon of Chinese diaspora writing has been significantly broadened and reconfigured since China opened its doors in the early eighties, and more dramatically so after 1989, when many mainland Chinese writers suddenly found themselves in compulsory or voluntary exile, thus physically as well as discursively

³ *Chaos and All That* would eventually be published on the Mainland in 1994 by Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe (Overseas Chinese Press). Richard King’s English-language translation – my reference text for this paper – was published in the same year by University of Hawaii Press.

⁴ Zhang’s argument articulates an openly gendered perspective, discussing how diasporic post-1989 literature by women authors contributes to giving shape to a specifically feminine/feminist Chinese transnational (not limited to the Mainland) public sphere of discourse. The dimension of gender with regard to my analysis of Liu’s two novels will emerge later on in the course of this essay.

⁵ Both the label *haiwai wenxue* and the concept it subtends – the status of Chinese-language writing from the outside of “China” – are actually very problematic, and the debate around these issues is massive. A major problem, and an inevitably political one, is of course the very definition of “China” proper – its extension, its borders, its features – as the center of irradiation of Chinese culture and/or as the cultural/territorial core to which all those ethnically/culturally Chinese are, in various degrees, expected or compelled to refer to. For a cultural and anthropological reference, see Tu 1994; for three literary perspectives, see Rao 2000, Tsu and Wang 2010, and Fusco 2015.

relocating themselves in the diaspora. Many temporary sojourners such as students, visiting scholars, and artists decided to stay in their host countries. (Zhang Z. 1999, 309-10)

Accordingly, we can regard this production as serving changing needs in a Chinese diasporic but also in a Mainland audience, and as being both connected to and separated from the Mainland in spatial and temporal terms, in changing, fluid, and non-static ways. In Margaret Hillenbrand's (2013, 54) words: "Dreams and nightmares of diaspora, inspired by literary and televisual representations, shape the way that people live 'at home' in [...] palpable ways". One can also maintain that the popularity and function of *hairwai wenxue* also resides in having, for decades, provided doors (spaces for entry/exit) and windows (openings for looking in and/or out) connecting the inside and outside of the country. While *You Have No Other Choice* cannot strictly be read as *hairwai wenxue*, because it was written when Liu had not left the country yet, it does thematize, as we shall see, the student characters' search for "doors and windows" between China and the rest of the world.

In what follows, I offer close readings of *You Have No Other Choice* and *Chaos and All That*, contextualizing both with respect to: 1) selected features of the historical, cultural, and literary context of the 1980s – in relation to which *Chaos and All That*, actually published in the early 1990s, can be regarded as a culmination, an extension, a transformation and, to an extent, a "looking back" in a post/modernist fashion; 2) the recurrence, and Liu's usage, of the literary trope of the "student". Not only as a literary trope but also, especially, as a cultural and political signifier, the Chinese "student" in the modern sense historically emerges, Fabio Lanza (2010) maintains, around the May Fourth period. By 1905, the system of imperial examinations for entering state bureaucracy, which had long been the reason behind the ruling classes' investments in education, had been abolished; before or around 1919 – which, in consolidated historiographical discourse, marks, with the anti-imperialist demonstrations in May of that year, the official entrance of China into its modernity – public universities were established, curricula were radically altered under the influence of Western learning, and students came to be prominent in the militant, progressive, anti-imperialist construction of the new republican state. One may add that, next to its emergence on the national and political canvas of Chinese modern nation-building, the trope of the student cannot be analyzed apart from a long and vexed history of "international education" and student mobility that had characterized China since the latter half of the nineteenth century – a period when missionary foreign schools were founded and protected by foreign occupying powers on Chinese soil, but also when patriots and intellectuals were, often on state-sponsored missions, sent abroad to study, in order to gather the "modern" knowledge that was regarded as necessary to defend and liberate the nation from those very occupying powers.⁶ With this thick cultural and historical background in mind, I attempt to focus on how Liu Sola creatively deals with the trope(s) of the student, the modern student, and the study abroad student. Liu Sola, as we shall see, also contributes to reclaiming an often male-based trope from a feminine perspective, following different strategies in the two texts under examination.

⁶ Here I am synthetically referring to the complex – and endlessly debated – matter of the relationship between the study of Western knowledge and Chinese reforms, revolution, and nation building across the final decades of the nineteenth and the initial decades of the twentieth century. For an impressive literary study that renovates and redefines the analysis of terms such as modernity and modernism in the Chinese context with relation to the early twentieth century, see Shih 2001.

Hopelessly on a Quest: *Ni bie wu xuanze* (*You Have No Other Choice*)

Narrated in the third person, and clearly based on the author's personal experience, *You Have No Other Choice* recounts, with both light and dark humor, the daily lives of a group of college-level male and female students of music, following them throughout an unspecified amount of story-time that culminates with graduation. Although the (nameless, but clearly prestigious) music institute they attend comprises various departments, the narrative largely focuses on the experiences of a restricted group of students who major in composition. The narrative shifts its focalization among different students, while privileging the perspective of five of them, all male: Li Ming, Sen Sen, Meng Ye, Dai Qi – and, to a lesser extent, Shi Bai. A few professors with whom the students interact complete the school's microcosmic *comédie humaine*. At least to an extent, the characters are constructed as comical, typified exaggerations: the disillusioned would-be dropout, the inspired would-be artist, the dazed and clueless girl student, and so on. For Jiang Haixin, “[e]very character is dramatically exaggerated by one feature of his/her personality, and thus becomes strikingly rebellious against conventionality” (2000, 192). As for its temporal structure, the narrative moves forward in a fragmentary but only partly disjointed fashion. The short novel consists of twenty-three untitled chapters; sometimes the reader finds no direct connection between the events presented; other times, the events are explicitly connected through cause-effect relations or through mental connections retrospectively made by the characters.

You Have No Other Choice speaks so much to its time of publication because it is, in many ways, a highly ironic manifesto for literature but also, more generally, art. In the novel, traditionalist Professor Jia's loathing of the “modernist school” extends to music, literature, and behavior: “Professor Jia called on his colleagues in the composition department for an educational initiative on orthodoxy in life and learning. Not only the music curriculum was not allowed to enter the field of twentieth-century works; the literature course also expunged Kafka” (Liu S. 1994a, 201).⁷ Liu Sola's mocking attitude, articulated through her characters, constituted, in critic Liu Xiaobo's opinion, “even more of a challenge” (1986, 35) to the aesthetic establishment by virtue of its humor. On the other hand, debates on aesthetic representation during the 1980s are inescapably intertwined with debates on society and economics. Liu Sola's ironic claim to the category of “modernism” can be squarely placed in the middle of the tension surrounding various – grammatical and conceptual – articulations of the term *xiandai* during the 1980s. In Jing Wang's words:

[...] in contrast to the derogatory term *xiandai pai* (*xiandai* means “modern”, and *pai*, “school”), which contains the negative reference to Western modernism, the catchy phrase *xiandai yishi* [modern consciousness] was endowed when it first surfaced in post-Mao China with the positive connotation of a keen epochal consciousness that highlighted two keynote concepts of modernity, change and progress. It was not until the mid-1980s that the public's appraisal of these two terms – the one negative, and the other positive – began to undergo an inverse transformation. The term *xiandai pai* gradually lost its ideological stigma as the debate over the nomenclature of Chinese modernism ended in deadlock. A process

⁷ All references in this paper are to a 1994 Chinese edition of *Ni bie wu xuanze* (Liu S. 1994a), included in a volume that also includes *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* and selected short stories. See note 3. Page references will be henceforth parenthetically provided after the quotes. All translations from the Chinese-language text are mine.

of revalorization turned the dismissive term into a tame appellation for the Yuppie “modernists” (Liu Suola and Xu Xing). In the meantime, the term *xiandai yishi* fared worse. The popular consensus on the positive value of modern consciousness fell apart as soon as creative writers participated in the naming of the modern. They made it clear that *xiandai yishi* had to record the throb and cadence of an aesthetic modernity that more often than not ran counter to the logic of social modernity. (J. Wang 1996, 139)

In Liu’s short novel, the tension around what “modern(ist)” means at this time is also articulated as a tension between progress and irresolution, as well as between choice and entrapment. The sense of being trapped in an inherently contradictory situation, a “Catch-22”, is mentally articulated by Shi Bai – the only one, among the students, who often sides with professor Jia, the outspoken defender of tradition and continuity, and who dutifully engages with the canon, the classics, the inheritance of the great masters of the past – an inheritance that proves as fundamental as it is impossible to deal with. Because of this fundamental impossibility, artistic innovation becomes a meaningless issue, resulting in a parodic take on the “anxiety of influence”:

Others had already done unattainable things, so you couldn’t dream of doing anything new, you’d try again and it would be a waste of time, you couldn’t surpass Bach. If you couldn’t surpass Bach, you couldn’t become a master; if you couldn’t become a master, you couldn’t surpass Bach. [...] Disputes were meaningless; so-called “innovation” also had no meaning at all. (210)

Li Ming, the character who holds the point of view at the beginning of the novel, faces irresolution and entrapment in his recurring thoughts about leaving school, a decision with which he keeps toying but that he never finalizes. Throughout the novel, Li Ming spends most of his time “hiding in his dormitory” (192, 228), claiming disinterest for everything that happens around him, doing nothing remarkable, just simply going by. In the novel’s initial pages, Li Ming goes to see a professor to discuss whether or not to drop out of school. The paradoxical exchange between the absurdly hyperqualified professor and the disinterested student provides the novel’s title:

Professor Wang was called “the neurotic” by the whole institute. He was proficient in several languages, he had put forth a hundred inventions, he worked in more than ten fields of learning, and he would be given countless different professional titles in one breath. He had added another line to the pentagram, put the piano keys back in a row, confirmed each note by means of its square root. These inventions were enough to drive everyone mad. Li Ming especially worshipped Professor Wang. Even if he didn’t understand what he said, he loved listening to him.

“Hmm.”

“I’m quitting. I must acknowledge I have no talent.”

“Hmm”.

“So, I must drop out of school.”

“Hmm.”

“The others think they’re something. I think I’m no good.”

“Hmm”.

“Perhaps I’d better do something different.”

“Hmm.”

“I’m going to give notice.”

“Hmm.”

As soon as Li Ming stood up, Professor Wang stood up too.

“Be a good guy and keep studying, you fool. You have no other choice, there’s only composition.” (193-94)

By contrast, Sen Sen and Meng Ye – possibly the novel’s “heroes”, *if* there are any – epitomize the continuous search for self-expression and experimentation:

[I]n [Sen Sen’s] work there were almost no harmonic chords [...]. A whole mass of non-harmonic chords produced a loud sound and a fierce irregular rhythm, shocking Li Ming into burying his head under the quilt [...].

“That’s enough.”

“The final four bars, the final four bars.”

“My nerves are already wracked.”

“That’s because I added a seventh chord to all ninth chords.”

“Why?”

“It’s fucking dynamic.” [...]. “It’s not the dynamism the teachers speak about, it’s my own dynamism, my own style.” (198-99)

Both Jing Wang (1996, 138; 177-80) and Huang Caiping (2014, 56-57) stress Liu’s characters’ thirst for development and epiphany in the middle of nonsense. Crucially, however paradoxically, Huang maintains that the importance of *You Have No Other Choice* for the history of contemporary Chinese literature also lies in its renewal of the Bildungsroman genre (*chengzhang xiaoshuo*):

Before Liu Sola, 1950s works like Yang Mo’s *Song of Youth* and Wang Meng’s *Long Live Youth* are also examples of “Bildungsroman”. The difference lies, however, in the fact that, in these [earlier] novels, the representation of youth memories is obscured by the grand narrative that was then common; consequently, it does not appear to have much thematic value. Seen from this perspective, the “youth novel” *You Have No Other Choice*, published in the 1980s, has a distinctive significance. [...]

During the 1980s, the literary circles of China were in the middle of a cultural transformation related to the reform and open door policy [that was underway]. Several irrationalist [feili] Western philosophical trends and a lot of modernist literature penetrated in quantity, and from within the long-term mainstream ideological discourse of literature, a narrative of individualism emerged, which made room for fiction depicting the growth of individuals. (Huang C. 2014, 56)

However, Liu’s characters’ quest for *Bildung* occurs in the middle of disharmony and contradiction, perhaps even *because of* disharmony and contradiction. It’s a *Bildung* that cannot be smoothly reconciled with a grand narrative, nor with a seamless or dialectic transmission of knowledge. As Li Ming suddenly realizes – almost attaining illumination – in the midst of an exam session that is driving all students crazy:

The crux was not knowing right from wrong, absolutely not knowing right from wrong. [...] Suddenly, in a flash he saw through this fucking matter of right or wrong. Basically, right or wrong didn’t make a difference; in any case, Professor Jia would never say that something was right. As soon as he came up with this thought, he was overwhelmed with joy, relaxed all over, and ran straight to the toilet to take a piss. (220)

The novel also deploys a tension between leaving and staying – not only (in) school, as in Li Ming’s case, but (in) China itself, as part of an existential search whose futility is evoked but never definitely proved. (This overseas dimension will later form the basis

of, and will be developed in *Chaos and All That*.) Xiao Gezi, “Little One” – the one male student who goes by a nickname – smilingly announces his intention to Sen Sen: “I’m leaving the country.’ ‘To do what?’ ‘I’ll go find. Here I haven’t found anything.’ [...] ‘What if you don’t find anything?’ Sen Sen asked with a bitter laugh. ‘Then I’ll stop looking’” (247). Xiao Gezi’s movement opens up a door on the outside world. Not a door, but instead a window, through which China can be seen from the outside, is opened immediately after Xiao Gezi’s departure. The institute receives an invitation to send works by composition students to an international competition. This invitation becomes a catalyst for the explosion of various tensions. While Dai Qi ridiculously strives towards the extreme goal of delivering a patchwork composition condensing all kinds of styles – ancient and modern, traditional and innovative – in a single work, Sen Sen and Meng Ye put their talent and originality to use. However, while their wild compositions move the audience of their fellow students to tears, they are fiercely attacked by Professor Jia, who pressures student Bai Shi into writing a paper publicly criticizing Sen Sen and Meng Ye’s music, which he labels “fascist music”. Eventually, Meng Ye’s composition is forcefully excluded from the competition, while Sen Sen wins.

The ever-present, but also mounting tension between growth and development on the one hand and absurdist irresolution on the other is also mirrored by the novel’s gradual shifts in style, in terms of the emergence of darker and darker shades of humor next to increasingly lyrical, elegiac moments. In the first half of the novel, diffused humor emerges from a recurring clash between absurd, extreme, exaggerated situations and the students’ idiosyncratic reactions to them. A narrative climax of this tone is the nightmarish exam session: “To relax the atmosphere, the school decided to make the exam term longer, so as to give a bit more time for each subject. But in this way, the more the end was postponed, the more everybody grew nervous, the more they only wanted the exam to come quickly, no matter if they had to take everything in one day, even if they did not pass they’d be happy” (218). Halfway through the text, a turning point in style is marked by an unexpected plot event: the untimely demise of one of the students, Ma Li, who is reportedly crushed to death by a landslide while away from school on a vacation. Starting with this episode – or, better, with the students’ reactions to the news – the novel’s humor gradually becomes darker, more grotesque, and comedy fully explodes into black comedy. The grotesque scene of the New Year’s party in Chapter 22 is a case in point, with the students drunkenly pushing each other to grab the gifts distributed by a student disguised as Santa Claus, tripping and falling on each other until the fun turns into physical harm and laughter becomes crying (266-69). In parallel, an elegiac undercurrent becomes more evident as the novel draws towards its end, building up, like a musical theme, around the “void” left by Ma Li’s death – from Li Ming’s doleful remembrances of him to the final scene, in which Sen Sen, winner of the music competition, deserts the graduation ceremony, and suddenly burst into tears while looking out of a window and listening to a Mozart tape he has found in the back of a drawer (271-72).

To wrap up my discussion of this novel and to move on to the other one in the next paragraph, it is now apt to highlight the problematic dimension of gender that partly surfaces in *You Have No Other Choice* and subsequently explodes in *Chaos and All That*. In *You Have No Other Choice*, the main characters are male. The female characters consist of two women professors, briefly mentioned in the novel’s initial pages; Meng Ye’s neurotic girlfriend, a literature major who is jealous of his devotion to music and of other women, and who only calms down when cutting things into pieces with a pair of scissors;

and four students, a violinist and three composers. Only the violinist is called by her first name, Lili; the three composition students are only known by their nicknames – respectively “Mao” (“Cat”), “Shijian” (“Time”), and “Mengdong” (“Muddleheaded”) – each typifying an idiosyncratic, exaggerated aspect of their character – respectively athleticism, rigor, and befuddlement. Among the three, “Mengdong” is, to an extent, given more textual space and room for development, changing from stylized parody to “rounder” character who strives to express herself. Overall, nonetheless, I agree with Jiang when she stresses the subordinate position occupied by the novel’s female characters, who mostly seem to exist to “take care” of their male counterparts. For Jiang, however, “[t]he hyperbolic femininity portrayed in the narrative is an ironic response to the prescribed gender difference. [...] [I]n spite of her cynicism, Liu tries, as in all her other stories, to find meaning for the female self” (2000, 194; 202).

Future Pasts and Baffled Learners: *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* (*Chaos and All That*)

While *You Have No Other Choice* is, as we have seen, a multi-character and mostly male-centered narrative, *Hundun jia li-ger-leng* (*Chaos and All That*) centers on the “split” life of its female main character: Huang Haha, a young Chinese woman attending college in London. The novel is structured by means of a double narrative framework. An “outer frame” narrates, in the third person, Haha’s life as an overseas student, although it is never clear what her focus of study is. Within this frame, Haha is writing something that looks like a weird “novel”: this fragmentary text, narrated in the first person, is a comical, grotesque account of her life in Beijing prior to moving to London, and constitutes the novel’s second, “inner” narrative frame. Haha seems to spend a lot of time lost in a reverie, reliving the past and jotting down fragments of it. (She will, eventually, rip page after page of what she has written.) A good portion of her inner-frame “novel” consists of her childhood and teenage memories of the years of the Cultural Revolution – a choice that probably contributed to making the work controversial and resulted into its being initially denied a publication space on the Mainland.

While *You Have No Other Choice* can be seen as a paradoxical Bildungsroman portraying the life of a group of Chinese students educated within a prestigious national institution, the main character of *Chaos and All That* is a Chinese female student pursuing a degree overseas. As is well known, sojourning abroad for educational reasons, both as an experience and as a theme, features prominently in twentieth-century Chinese-language literature. Many among the (mostly, but not exclusively male) writers who became associated with the May Fourth movement and came to be canonical figures in modern Chinese literature studied abroad: among them Yu Dafu (Japan), Bing Xin (U.S.), and “founding father” Lu Xun himself (Japan). Especially since after the establishment of the People’s Republic and of the rival Nationalist government in Taiwan, there has also been a strand of self-exiled Chinese-language authors, both from the Mainland and Taiwan, who initially went abroad for study reasons – among whom the most known and studied figure is probably Bai Xianyong, who was born on the Mainland, whose family relocated in Taiwan for political reasons, and who eventually became a prominent U.S.-based creative writer and literary scholar. Perhaps not surprisingly, these study abroad students and intellectuals wrote about study abroad experiences. The prototypical example is Yu Dafu’s short story “Sinking” (“Chenlun”, 1921), centered on a Chinese medical student in Japan. “Chenlun” is prototypical in its portrayal of a “troubled male *liuxuesheng* [study abroad student]” (Hillenbrand 2013, 51), in this case a student of medicine, who blames his failures, including his weakened masculinity and

his being discriminated in the host country, on the humiliations suffered by his motherland. The study abroad student trope merges, and to an extent overlaps, with the other recurring trope of the exiled, wandering Chinese – often a young man – who cannot find protection, let alone pride, in his country's sorry state, and is looked down upon by the rest of the world. Four decades after Yu, the trope of the troubled Chinese male study abroad student is articulated by Bai Xianyong in the short story “Death in Chicago” (“Zhijiage zhi si”, 1964). This time, the protagonist is a graduate student in literature. While he pursues his studies, Wu Hanhun is forced to live in a shabby basement room and work as a laundry delivery boy to support himself. Finally unable to envision an outcome to his years of hard study and sacrifice, he commits suicide after his graduation ceremony and a nightmarish encounter with a prostitute.

While in literary representation this melancholic “representative Chinese subject” abroad – stuck between past and present, homeland and new environment, will to move forward and paralysis – is, as Sau-ling Wong notes (2001, 144), prevalently cast as male, it might be possible to retrace an alternative representational strand – one dealing, that is, with female characters, their study abroad experiences, and their (often secondary) role in a world interconnected by educational practices, pedagogy, and educational conflicts and differences. Looking thirty years back from the publication date of “Death in Chicago”, we can retrace a female (would-be) *liuxuesheng* in Shuzhen, a character in “The Photograph” (“Xiangpian”), a 1934 short story by Bing Xin – a canonical woman author who began to write in the May Fourth period. In this short narrative, a young Chinese woman is adopted by a New England music teacher who has spent most of her life teaching in China. When Shuzhen – apparently a model of silent female virtue – travels to the U.S. with her mother, she becomes acquainted with Tianxi, a young fellow Chinese, son of a pastor and enrolled in a missionary school. Tianxi admits to Shuzhen that he chafes under the patronage of the school instructors, who alternatively praise him as a model Chinese youth and disparage him as belonging to a heathen, uncivilized race. Shuzhen starts to see Tianxi often and, through him, she becomes involved with a mixed-gender group of young students. She starts seriously thinking about attending college in the U.S. As the story draws to a close, the American mother is shocked by the realization of how much Shuzhen has changed – or, perhaps, she never was, at heart, the sedate girl her mother believed her to be. The story closes with the mother suggesting they may go back to China, thus possibly prematurely – and painfully – foreclosing Shuzhen's transformation and *Bildung*, although the reader is never revealed what will happen next and is thus given an open finale.

Fast-forwarding to the early 1970s, we find another typical, but more ironically portrayed male *liuxuesheng* as a secondary character in the work of a woman writer. Nie Hualing's highly experimental novel *Sangqing yu Taohong* centers on a woman protagonist who flees China, Taiwan, and ends up in the U.S. – a character who is, in herself, a notable departure from the male *liuxuesheng* character abroad à la Yu and Bai. At the same time, this novel evokes the figure of the male *liuxuesheng* through the character of Teng, a graduate student with whom the woman protagonist has a sexual liaison. Here is how Teng describes his situation:

It took me the strength of nine bulls and two tigers to escape from the mainland to Taiwan, and [...] from there to America. Once in America, I scrubbed toilets as a janitor, waited on tables. I have only a few more months until I get my Ph.D. But once I get it, then what? Go back to Taiwan? I couldn't stand it! Go back to the mainland? I can't do that, either. Stay here? I'm nobody! (Nie 1998, 172)

I would suggest that Haha's character in *Chaos and All That* can be regarded as both a reprisal and an ironic/comic reversal of the widespread trope of the *liuxuesheng*. Similarly to what happens to Bai's Wu and Nie's Teng in the U.S., Haha does not really seem to know what benefit will come from her study sojourn abroad; in an even more extreme position than Teng's, she does not really seem to know what she is doing in London: "She even lost track of why it was she had come here in the first place" (Liu S. 1994c, 9).⁸ On the other and, in contrast to Wu Hanhun, who succumbs to desperation and commits suicide, Haha, true to her onomatopoeic name, embraces life with a laughter. Contrary to Wu's troublesome financial condition, Haha has a scholarship, so "money wasn't a problem" (8) – which seems to leave enough time for her to be "bothered by all those things gushing out of her mind [so] that she was practically oblivious to the delights that London offered" (8-9).

About one-third longer than *You Have No Other Choice*, *Chaos and All That* presents, when compared to the earlier text, an even more cynical worldview. Gone are the elegiac tones that occasionally surface as an accompaniment to the music students' (however apparently futile) search for authentic self-expression. While it is suggested that Haha is on a quest, she seems not to have clear in mind, or to have forgotten, what her quest is about.

In this later novel, humor is still a key representational feature, frequently stemming from the contrast between the facts narrated – often degrading, disgusting, or violent – and the playful tone used to narrate them. In the very first pages, Haha narrates an episode from kindergarten:

"Little pals, you are the flowers of the nation, the hope of world revolution. You have to learn [...] – who just farted?" demanded the kindergarten teacher. [...]
 "Very well then, you must all sniff each other's bottoms. The one with the smelly bottom is the one who farted, and that way the offender will be exposed!" [...]
 After one sniff at Song Li's bottom, I knew he was the culprit, but he hissed: "If you tell on me, I'll beat your head in after class!"
 So I didn't tell, and when the teacher called on us to expose the offender, Song Li pushed me forward. [...]
 [The teacher] commended Song Li for daring to wage war on wicked people and evil deeds and instructed all the other little pals that they too must learn to denounce evildoers properly while they were still young. (3-4)

The central position of an educational dimension – both the pursuit and the smashing thereof – emerges on a number of occasions. One of the novel's "loudest" sequences is about Haha and her friend Xiao Ding, both eleven at the time, going to their school, where classes have been suspended, to join the Red Guards. While they are turned down because the other kids see them as too young, they are convinced that they have not been accepted because they can't "swear properly" (17). This leads to the two girls going through a mounting, finally literally explosive, session of swear practice in the school courtyard: "I held my breath. [...] 'Your mother – your mother's – mother's – mother's – mother's CUNT-T-T-T-T!' " (18).

When Haha arrives in London, she starts acting fiercely competitive, self-defensively resorting to national pride while experiencing the need to justify herself in the eyes of the non-Chinese. The ever-present memories of Beijing that keep surfacing

⁸ All references are to Richard King's 1994 English translation (Liu S. 1994c). Page references will be henceforth parenthetically provided after the quotes.

in her mind urge her to draw an all-out comparison between her place of origin and where she is now:

Londoners restored antiquities, displayed them prominently, and left them alone; the people of Peking picked up the shards of their past and either sold them off or smashed them for the hell of it. [...]

London. Peking. Classical sculpture. Opera. Nationality. Peking Man. *Anna Karenina*. Wang Baochuan. The criteria for making judgments that had been drummed into her from infancy were no use at all [...].

Does *The Story of the Stone* really have to be greater than the works of Shakespeare? Must the Chinese poet Li Po be greater than Goethe? Do all my essays have to be stupendously brilliant? If I make a mistake, does that make me a failure? How do I get to be what I'm supposed to be? (10-11)

Besides ironically presenting elements of cultural competition, I would suggest that this passage underlines, in a meta-literary and meta-cultural gesture, what the novel itself is doing, and in what context. Liu is “selling” picked-up shards of the past, instead of smashing them for fun; ironically, though, what she picks up and sells are exactly shards from a ten-year period of turmoil and “past-smashing”. This passage, in other words, can be read as an ironic meditation about what to do with the shards left from the time of the Cultural Revolution.

It may be maintained that the novel's interest also resides in its undoubtedly humorous and ironic, yet inevitably serious – because burningly historical – search for an understandable, at least partly “usable”, past, both within the Chinese context and with respect to the construction of China on the world stage of a modernity it cannot but share with other actors. Daringly, yet inevitably, for Liu this past includes the Cultural Revolution, with its immensely problematic historical memory. In this respect, Mike, Haha's British college professor and lover, also epitomizes the interest for the Cultural Revolution that had been so widespread among Western intellectuals since its inception. In an ironic reversal, Haha taunts him with descriptions of filth and disease while they make love, highlighting the unsavory aspects of that “peasant life” he seems to idealize, pinning such aspects to her own body (25-26).

Ming-Bao Yue (2005) has analyzed *Chaos and All That* as a text that activates Cultural Revolution memories as a complex form of “post-communist/socialist nostalgia” that lives (in Svetlana Boym's terms) of a tension between “*restorative* and *reflective* types. The emphasis of the former is on *nostos* (home) and outlines a transhistorical, and I would add a transnational, reconstruction of the lost home. In contrast, the latter dwells on *algia* (longing) and ponders the ambivalence of human belonging” (Yue 2005, 45). While Yue's framework for interpretation is fascinating, one cannot but notice that reading Liu's novel as a narrative “recounting happy, rather than horrific, memories of the Cultural Revolution” (Yue 2005, 47) is rather problematic. While Haha's memories do include endearing moments and details, they are, to a good extent, made of grotesquely deformed, degraded, and degrading elements – scatological references abound, for instance – and, in some cases, of genuinely horrific scenes – like when Haha, who has finally joined a rather mishmash group of self-appointed Red Guards, witnesses the suicide of an old lady who, accused of being a class enemy, is being deported to her native village by the squadron (42). While on this trip, the kids tell each other the grisly story of an execution (40), which functions as a meta-narrative element. While these characters do what most kids would do – enjoy the thrill of a scary story

before going to bed – the reader, thanks to her/his ex-post stance, can retain the full horror of the story narrated.

In her 2014 study on the “aesthetic afterlives” of the Cultural Revolution, Yiju Huang discusses selected creative works that, in her view, deal with the complexity of the Cultural Revolution as a trauma that cannot be ultimately reconciled into a narrative of healing and progress. Her study, Huang maintains, follows “a broken rhythm of melancholia and indeterminacy but also hope” (Y. Huang 2014, 14). Huang remarks that, in Freudian terms, trauma “entails a re-conceptualization of time. [...] The inner time of the traumatized lurks tenaciously in the shadow of historical time and disturbs its logic of progress and development” (2014, 12-13). This structure is remindful of Haha’s experience of recurring return of the past into the present. Moreover, “[t]rauma demands a creative [i.e. aesthetic] endeavor” (Y. Huang 2014, 13) to be dealt with. In this respect, the ironic, humorous tone of Liu’s narration can be seen as a creative distancing effort that does not trivialize nor subtract from the traumatic quality of the events narrated.

Haha’s thwarted quest for self-fulfillment reveals a crisis that is both historical and geo-cultural, both Chinese and transnational. Significantly, instead of focusing on Haha’s *Bildung*, the novel focuses on the “unproductive” side of her study abroad sojourn, like student parties and sex with her professor; it also focuses on her becoming, in the eyes of the others, a specimen of Chinese culture, studied instead of studying: “Particularly since her arrival in London, she had felt [...] that she had suddenly become an example of a Chinese cultural heritage, stretching from Confucius to patent herbal hair restores, that was both alien to the world in which she now found herself and incompatible with it” (46-7) – which, in turn, urges her to reflect on how – or if – to preserve, or how to make sense of, her own enigmatic, tragic, alluring past. Haha is hopelessly “othered” as a specimen of Chinese culture abroad; at the same time, her own voice is “amplified” by Mike, his name being homophone with “mike” as in “microphone”: “Michael’s love for her gave her a platform from which she could flaunt her eloquence and her charm. She talked and he listened; she performed and he watched” (26). In my view, a search for “authentic” self-expression in this novel ultimately short-circuits in the face of all – clearly untenable – claims to an ultimately Chinese pacified authenticity that Haha is supposed to embody. It is doubly ironic that this putative “authenticity” is also predicated on Haha embodying – or better, needing to embody – for Mike as well as for the reader, a “readable” version of the Cultural Revolution. This clearly clashes with the very enormity of the Cultural Revolution, in Y. Huang’s terms, as a “wound” and not a “scar” (2014, 10) – as a past event that, because never resolved, calls for interpretations that do not shun ethical responsibility.

Concluding Remarks: Post/Modernist?

I would like to conclude with a few remarks on the literary and cultural periodization of Liu’s work. I opened this essay by placing *You Have No Other Choice* squarely in a modernist frame of reference, also emphasizing that it was published at the peak of the 1980s debate on “modernism” in China. For Wang Ning, on the other hand, Liu Sola’s work belongs to an early phase of Chinese postmodernism, epitomized by the work of “young novelists [...] and avant-garde poets [...] who appeared after 1985 with experimental writing that challenged canonical realist and modernist writings” (Wang N. 2000, 28). In the space of this essay, I cannot enter the complex debate around Chinese postmodernism; on the other hand, I wish to remark how, in the introduction

to their 2000 edited collection *Postmodernism & China*, Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang theoretically frame postmodernism as a category that, despite controversy around its pertinence when China is discussed (because of the tendency to equate it, in Jamesonian terms, with the cultural logic of late capitalism), is actually useful when applied to the Chinese case, precisely because it can be helpful in understanding

a situation of spatial fracturing and temporal desynchronization that justifies the use of the postmodern against the spatial (as in the nation-form) and temporal (as in the development of a national market and culture) teleologies of modernity. The coexistence of the precapitalist, the capitalist, and the postsocialist economic, political, and social forms represents a significant departure from the assumptions of a Chinese modernity, embodied above all in the socialist revolutionary project. (Dirlik and Zhang 2000, 3)⁹

There are a number of elements that speak up for placing Liu's work – especially *Chaos and All That* – in a postmodernist frame of reading. Among those, as I have attempted to demonstrate in the previous paragraph, is its postsocialist take on the Cultural Revolution: a nostalgic take, Yue maintains, yet one that, however playful or humorous it may be, does not undermine historical cogency or “seriousness”, nor does it shy away from the additional problematics of a transnational dimension.

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⁹ On the usefulness of “postmodernism” in the Chinese context as a countercategory to a fundamentally teleological – and West-centered – view of modernity, also see Zhang Y. 1994.

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