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The traumatic narratives of sexuality in Taiwanese writer Shao-Lin Chu's trilogy

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Abstract: This paper explores the narratives of the Taiwanese woman novelist Shao-Lin Chu's trilogy to see how the problem of female sexuality and resistance to parental wedlock tragedy becomes a traumatic experience. The traumatic symptoms in the narratives are taken as Peircean signs for tracing the negative influences of traumatic experiences on the formation of personal identity and the associated depressive disorder. The scenes portrayed in Chu's traumatic narratives of female and male sexuality are implications and representations of how sexuality is conceptualized and confined by the traumatic events while backgrounded with regulations and restrictions of a traditional society. The stories of Chu's female narrators reveal the persistent and resisting feminine power. This paper adopts the concept of feminist narrative to analyze the traumatic and sexual events in Chu's trilogy. The decoding and re-encoding of resistance and sexuality in the traumatic narratives prove that the narratological textual analysis and semiotic reading strategy together offer a solid approach to the discovery of the persistent traumatic impacts of the secret veiled in the narratives and reveal the probable strength of compassion that has its roots derived from deplorable trauma but later transforms itself to stimulate a positive reconstruction of the traumatic survivors' identity.

Keywords: traumatic narrative; sexuality; resistance; textual analysis; Peirce's semiosis; Shao-Lin Chu

1 Introduction

Shao-Lin Chu's route to becoming a novel writer is legendary. Her first novel, *The Song of a Sad Coffee Shop*, launched as an online serial story, soon attracted many netizens. Later, this online story was published by a famous Taiwan literature publisher, Chiuko, in 1996. At the end of the year, Chu was already a bright rising star of fame and popularity. Sen Ma, a senior editor, novelist, dramatist, and literary critic

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in Taiwan, in his introduction "Encountering a Born Writer" (Ma 1996, p. i) to *Sad Coffee Shop*, gave high praise to Shao-Lin Chu's art of novel writing. Ma's introduction also set the tone for interpreting the concept of freedom as the central theme in Chu's novel. The popularity and success of Chu's book in the market paved the way for her second novel, *The Swallow* (1999), another win. In 2005, Chu's third novel, *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*, was launched and proved quite a hit.

1.1 Social and historical context of Chu's trilogy

The social and historical background context of Chu's trilogy is traditional and patriarchal during the late 1990s. The social status of a woman is lower than a man's. Traditional women were supposed to stay home and serve the family until the 1970s. Since the mid-1970s, the development of integrated circuits (IC) has driven the overall development of the electronic industry in Taiwan (Kong 2021). It brought female workers into the workplace because of the need for considerable human power after the late 1970s. The continuous productivity of the industry brought forth more women into the workplace. The transformation from labor-intensive industries in the mid-1980s to technology-intensive sectors and its impact on the female workforce is reflected by Mathi's working experience as an executive secretary at a prosperous electronic products company in *Sad Coffee Shop*. Su-Yuan, another married young office lady in *Sad Coffee Shop*, is a typical example of how a married woman is judged and demanded in a traditional patriarchal Taiwanese society. She works hard at the office all day, and after work, she serves her husband as a subservient wife and a meticulous caretaker of the family.

However, it is not easy for a woman to get a divorce and end her marriage in the late 1990s. Mathi's husband left home to go to South America for work soon after their marriage and came back annually for merely a few days to visit his parents, but during these few days, he acted like a stranger to Mathi. He always stayed in his own room, which Mathi had no right to enter. The abnormal marital relationship of this couple never ended until Mathi's husband came to her and demanded she sign the divorce document before Mathi started her trip to Madagascar. In Chu's trilogy, the unhappy marriage life and the problems hidden behind the wedlock are scarcely described but implied. The mothers in Chu's trilogy are brave in a certain sense. All the mothers of the trilogy left their homes, with or without taking their children. In *Sad Coffee Shop*, Mathi's mother took little Mathi with her when she left her husband, though she had to face a poor financial situation hereafter. In *The Swallow*, Ah-Fang's mother left home immediately when her baby girl was born, and in *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*, Jun-Xia's mother even had to poison her husband to death to end her marriage.

What drives these mothers to leave their homes in despair? The marital relationship can be a blessing. However, it is an unbreakable and painful bond for the wives and mothers in Chu's trilogy. None of the mothers in the trilogy get a divorce. Divorce was difficult in the late 1990s and early 2000s when Chu's trilogy was published. According to Taiwan's Divorce Law, divorce can only succeed in three ways: 1. Divorce by consent, 2. Divorce by litigation, and 3. Divorce by mediation. Divorce by consent is hard to get if the spouse disagrees. However, divorce by litigation is even more complex and much more complicated to obtain because the case must be in line with the ten statutory reasons, such as bigamy, adultery, domestic violence, intention to kill, intentional crime sentenced to more than six months, life and death unknown for more than three years, an incurable disease, and a major incurable mental illness. Separation or irreconcilable differences are not grounds for filing for divorce. That is why Mathi cannot get a divorce even though she and her husband have separated for years. The mothers in the trilogy can neither get a divorce by consent nor do they have statutory reasons to file for divorce.

The dissatisfied party in a marriage still has an alternative to file for compulsory mediation with the court to seek a divorce. As early as 1934, when Taiwan Civil Procedure Law was amended, it was stipulated in Article 573 that the lawsuit of divorce should be mediated by the court, which is the so-called "mediation pre-ism" or "compulsory mediation" (Liu 2012, p. 3). However, mediation of divorce has taken a circuitous route to become possible for more than 70 years since 1934. In the meantime, especially after 1985, it was the long, gloomy period "prohibiting the establishment of divorce mediation." Consequently, the rate of divorce through mediation is meager. Take 1999, for example, only 1.4 % of mediations were successful (Liu 2012, p. 6), and child custody was usually given to the divorced father. In May 1998, the Domestic Violence Prevention Act was established to offer legal support to women and their children under the threat of violence in the marriage. Not until June 2009 was the above-mentioned judicial method that explicitly stipulates to "prohibit the mediation of divorce" finally abolished (Liu 2012, pp. 5–6).

1.2 Parental wedlock secrets and children's traumatic experiences

Based upon such a background context, this paper explores the relationship between traumatic experiences and female sexuality in the narratives of Chu's trilogy, where problems of female sexuality and resistance to parental wedlock tragedy become traumatic experiences. In Chu's trilogy, the traumatic past keeps haunting the child and hinders the pursuit and consummation of love and sexual desire as the child grows up. This study takes the traumatic symptoms as signs in the

process of Peirce's triadic semiosis. Through the model of Peirce's triadic semiosis, the process of tracing the negative influences of traumatic experiences together with their formation of personal identity and the associated depressive disorder of the protagonists could be analyzed.

The scenes portrayed in Chu's traumatic narratives of female sexuality are implications and representations of how female sexuality is conceptualized and confined by the traumatic events while backgrounded with regulations and restrictions of a traditional patriarchal society. The stories of Chu's female narrators unveil the persistent, resisting female power that probes into the mysterious dark corner of traumatic events and releases the imprisoned traumatic survivors' souls and bodies from their haunting reminiscences. While we adopt the intertextural reading strategy and place the fictional narratives under the spectacle of gender, the protagonists' symptoms of illness will act like Peircean representamen (signs). They do not stick to one meaning but represent different significations as the interpretants/traumatic survivors' perspectives and mindsets change their understanding of the Peircean representamen (signs). Behind the turns of the causes shifting from the physiological to the psychological, the semiotic approach and the reading strategy of textual analysis prove their worth. It demonstrates strength of compassion that brings forth a saving light to the protagonists who survive their traumatic past.

2 The dynamic and engaging power of the traumatic narratives

Roland Barthes in *S/Z* pointed out that an enigma is a hermeneutic code that marks the possible multivoices of a narrative (Barthes 1990, p. 19). Hence, solving the mystery weaved within the enigma is critical to understanding and interpreting a story narrative. Its solution depends on detecting and decoding the hermeneutic code incorporated as narrative voices in the textuality. To Barthes, the power of fictional textuality lies in the hermeneutic code, and the discovery of the enigma is the climax when the narrative reveals its multivoices and structural complexities.

2.1 Family secret as hermeneutic code

The stories of Chu's trilogy evolve around the same enigma – family secret. Chu's narrators projected these enigmas into their narratives as hermeneutic codes that deserve a sophisticated understanding and interpretation. When taken from a

broad and general view, Chu's trilogy shows its unique and pivotal success through unanimous consistency in delineating the quest for freedom in different walks of life. However, when we read the three novels as interrelated components of an organic texture of a fictional world, the traumatic symptoms of family secrets are the signs that combine the trilogy and cross-signify each other. The family secret that causes the traumatic event is the hermeneutic code in the narrative of Chu's stories. Once we discover the hermeneutic code, the truth implied in the textual network will be found.

While analyzing the narratives in Chu's trilogy, we find that all the traumatic characters refrain from telling their stories. Their traumatic experiences can only be recognized through the symptoms of trauma. As Judith Herman's research on trauma and its recovery pointed out, "The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event" (Herman 1992, p. 1). Although the traumatized characters resist telling their stories, there are certain clues for us in the narratives because the traumatic past tends to keep haunting their present life and leave some traces in the stories. The traumatic past interferes with their understanding and interpretation of their world and experiences. The repetition of the reminiscence becomes the traumatized characters' nightmare, and the impact of and reaction derived from the haunting traumatic experience change as the characters gradually construct their way of life and personality development.

The symptom or sign of trauma is, hence, a representation or an indication derived from a matrix of various significations of the traumatic event (object) to the interpretant (the trauma survivor) according to the survivor's current mental state. Herman noted this phenomenon in her long practices and research on trauma and its recovery and concluded, "Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor's lifecycle" (1992, p. 230). In the healing process, as the trauma survivors gradually learn how to recover from the impacts of the past trauma, the traumatic events and influences on them will consequently be observed and treated with different attitudes. Once the survivors' cognition of their traumatic experience is changed, the trauma and its haunting returns will represent quite a different signifying system to them. Chu's traumatic narratives firmly reveal the opportunities for the survivors' probable recovery. Although all the characters' recovery processes are at the initial stages, they represent the possibility of new understanding and interpretation of their traumas and new representative significance of the sign system in the traumatic narratives.

2.2 Peirce's tripartite semiosis

In the following sections, this paper will apply Peirce's semiosis of the triadic model of signs to analyze the trilogy narratives. The interrelated connection and bondage among sign (representamen) (a first), object (subject matter) (a second), and interpretant (mental concept/meaning) (a third) constitute an appropriate model for reading the traumatic narrative and interpreting the healing process because the dynamic features of Peirce's semiosis encompass possible variations and flows of change as interrelated actions and reactions of the tripartite are concerned (Atkin 2023; Nöth 2011; Peirce 1982, 1991, 1998, 2011).

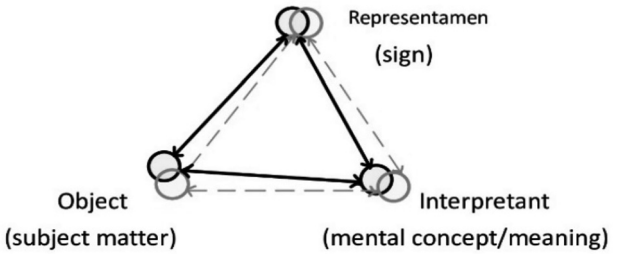
Traumatized people frequently feel abandoned and forced by trauma. Their reminiscences of the traumatic event force them to relive their earlier struggles over every construction phase of personality development, such as autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy (Herman 1992, p. 57). Trauma survivors go through various stages of recovery while their understanding of the trauma and its impact on them modulate through time. The process of recovery from the traumatic past will keep on going, and there is no definite resolution of when the trauma survivors can completely regain their health.

Herman's research pointed out a fundamental phenomenon: the symptom (sign) of trauma will signify different things (object) to the survivor (interpretant) according to the survivor's state of mind in different phases of personality construction. When a trauma survivor becomes an interpretant, the trauma symptom as a sign will incur various meanings, and the significance of the traumatic event, consequently, will not remain the same. Based on this discovery, we could apply Peirce's semiosis in the analysis of the trauma case because Peirce's semiotic theory allows a dynamic of significance based on the interrelated relations of the triadic model of signs. Peirce, in his 1867 paper "On A New List of Categories" (Peirce 1982), noted a dynamic and flexible relationship between representamen and interpretant, which leads to consequent varieties of the understanding of the object. Any changes to either one item of the triadic elements will bring forth a new approach and interpretation to the triadic model. The interpretation and performance of the sign model and significance are thus open to infinite varieties:

> In particular, Peirce thought that while our interpreting the signifying relation between sign and object relied upon understanding the basis of signification on any given case, he also thought that the generated interpretant itself functioned as a further, more developed sign of the object in question. And of course, as a further sign, it will also signify that object through some features, which again, we must interpret, and generate a further interpretant. (Atkin 2023)

Peirce's triadic model of signs is a dynamic system of significance. Once the interpretant (mental concept) generates a different interpretation of the sign

(representamen), the whole sign system and its significance will construct a certain level of shifting and adjusting as the interpretant, the representamen, and the object would dynamically and concurrently modulate with each other through the varieties of interpretations derived from the interpretant, and therefore, a change in the significance is to be expected:



The Dynamic Semiosis of Peirce's Triadic Model of Signs

Let us return to the trauma case. The unspeakable family secret (Peircean object) is the hermeneutic code waiting to be discovered. The traumatized character (interpretant) tends to repeatedly relive the traumatic experience and reinterpret the distress and powerlessness brought forth by the trauma. The unrepresentable and unspeakable family secret, therefore, can be traced by the reader through the traumatized person's remapping and restructuring of the traumatic experience. In the narrative, the traumatized character might gradually find a way to recover through the reliving and remapping process. In the reading process, the reader vicariously goes through the traumatized character's experience. The traumatic symptom as the Peircean sign (representamen) indicates the presence of the traumatic experience (object). As the reader (interpretant) gradually establishes his/her understanding of the narrative through the traumatized character's involuntary repetitive reminiscences of the haunting event, the enigma in the traumatic narrative is exposed, the discovery of the traumatic secret is not far beyond, and the traumatized character's possible recovery is no longer unattainable.

2.3 Gendered narratives

As the character's perspective and the narrative voice both contain specific individual differences, the gender of the narrator and the traumatized character play essential hermeneutic functions. Susan Lanser, while bridging the feminist approach into the circle of narratology, states that the female narrator, as long as she tells a story of other females or her own, whether she conforms to the strategy and confinement abided by the male narrator in the patriarchal society, will bring forth

complexities to the formation of diegetic scenes and narrative sounds. Lanser contends that the female characters might have personal reasons and worries that they would refuse and reject to let their secrets out through male narrators (Lanser 2018, p. 226). For Lanser, there are outstanding differences that would, in one way or another, distinguish her and her group ("we") from the male other(s) (Lanser 2004, p. 124). To extend her construction of gendered narratology, Lanser takes works situating "in the intersecting fields of feminism, gender studies, and 'queer theory' that has been concerned not only with the revisionists' constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality but also with questions of propriety, denotation, categorization, and fixity," to strengthen the foundation of feminist narrative studies (2018, p. 225). The differences in the narrative raise the positions and perspectives possessed by the female narrator and characters to the counterparts of the male narrator and characters.

In Chu's trilogy, all the narrators are female. Her first and third novels have a third-person narrator (intraheterodiegetic) (Genette 1980). Her second novel, *The Swallow*, has the first-person narrator (the autodiegetic narrator). The configuration of the three narrators increases the differences of voices in the narratives. While interpreting the hermeneutic codes in Chu's trilogy, the attitudes of every female narrator and every female protagonist play a critical role in reading the stories. Chu's female narrators have their narratives focusing on the female protagonists' traumatic sexuality and the male protagonist's bisexual or same-gender loving tendencies. The female narrator occupies an advantageous position to stand together with the female and male characters. The narrator's empathy toward the characters' traumatic sufferings allows them to get close to the characters' unspeakable anxiety, depression, fear, shame, and powerlessness.

2.4 Female resistance

As to the functions of differences that divide the female narrator from the male narrator, Shoshana Felman's discussion on the function of resistance as a strategy offers an inspiring perspective (Felman 1993). Felman explains female resistance with her own writing experience. It is not the flow of female sexuality that wells up to the writing of her book but the burgeoning conception of female resistance that appears and inhibits her writing.

Female sexuality, being repressed, disguises itself as a mythic mass to resist being portrayed or interpreted. Its silhouette reemerges in the foreground as Felman brings in the germination and execution of male domination and violence while discussing the question of female sexuality and resistance. The reason for the presence of this obscuring mist that shadows and covers the revealing, representing,

and interpreting of female sexuality, according to Felman, is that "we" as women do not act like ones, for we do not have our voice, and not even knowing from where we borrowed one. We must become the women who can "get personal" while shifting to the autobiographical and the confessional mode where one's lived experience and voice emerge. Felman says she solved her problem by adopting Nancy Miller's strategy in *Getting Personal* (Miller 1991). She takes up "a subtly nuanced feminist position" while reading through and identifying the autobiographical with the personal and the confessional (Felman 1993, p. 155).

Felman thus points out two possible ways to look at the problem. Firstly, women tend to disguise and cover up their actual sexual flow of desire with resistance. Secondly, the secret of female sexuality veils itself under the effects of patriarchy in education and social cultures. Resistance is thus the way to shun patriarchal repression and restriction. To get close and be compassionate and empathetic toward her characters, especially the traumatic survivors, the female narrator has to undergo this process of resistance in two ways. On the one hand, the female narrator needs to understand and identify with the "we" group, to share and be compassionate with this group to understand all their sufferings and unspeakable fears. On the other, the female narrator must conquer the resistance from her inner self that refuses to let out the secret, partially because her compassion and empathy with the traumatic characters move her to resist letting the secret out to be exposed and written down.

In the traumatic narratives of Chu's trilogy, the female narrators, while compassionate and empathetic toward the traumatic characters, vicariously experience the traumatic events as the characters relive fragmentally the traumatic experience. The narrators' sharing with the characters their resistance to letting out the secret and their suffering of the traumatic fragments are part of the traumatic survivors' recovery process. Herman noted the difficulty of having the traumatic experience revealed in linguistic expression for the observer while seeing what the traumatic survivor has endured:

> Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen. (Herman 1992, p. 2)

However, besides being a patient and empathetic insider and listener to stand together with the traumatic characters and take their traumatic experiences and impacts personally, the narrator is responsible for writing down the traumatic story. They carry with them no less anxiety, pressure, and resistance than the observer of the traumatic patient.

2.5 Narratives and sexual differences

Narrative as writing bears the becoming of a desire driven out of female sexuality and self-resistance. However, it is not a decision between two possible choices but a practice. It represents the dangling mood and dilemma that troubles women who suffer the revealing and covering of passion and desire. Such an ambivalent and vital exemplification of the practice of desire presents a situation in which Felman reads the secret of the entrapped female sexuality. The difficulty of self-resistance unveils the desire that refers to a woman's lack of awareness of herself as a woman and the lack of an identity of her own:

> The self-resistance, not simply of reading as a woman … but of *assuming* one's own sexual difference in the very act of reading; of assuming, that is, not the false security of an "identity" or a substantial definition (however nonconformist or divergent) but the very insecurity of a differential movement, which no ideology can fix and of which no institutional affiliation can redeem the radical anxiety, in the performance of an act that constantly – deliberately or unwittingly – *enacts* our difference yet finally escapes our own control. (The italics are original.) (Felman 1993, p. 10)

Self-resistance offers an opportunity to reclaim and resume the disguised female sexual difference. Self-resistance lays bare an identity lost, and behind it is an anxiety that never gives up the hope to reach out for security. The traumatic survivor tends to use self-resistance and repress female sexuality as self-protection. The communication and interaction between the narrator and the character are more intimate and obscure since the family traumatic event has its roots in wedlock, and the child becomes the scapegoat of the family trauma derived from the unhappy parental marriage. Female sexuality, through the power of self-resistance, demands a reclaim and retrieval of the female reader's and writer's genuine acceptance of and mutual trust in their sexual difference. It is not a story of "some other woman," but a story of "the traumatic woman" that demands her reader to both read and write with her – to bring significance to the story's narrative, to re-write her story, and to map out the hidden and hampered female desire and sexuality. However, the female narrator's awareness and rebirth of her sexual difference would nevertheless bring forth a sense of insecurity as well as her traumatic character, who senses the upcoming internal anxiety, whether it is from the unhappy wedlock of the parents or the teaching and regulations of the dominant reign of the social and cultural signs of sexuality.

Starting from seizing for herself the position of sexual difference, Felman uses the concept of the Other – the female Other – as the reading (and the writing) position for the female writer (who is also the female reader of the story). By seizing this position in reading and writing, Felman takes back the controlling power of

interpretation. This reading strategy takes the female Other and her voice into the reading of the text – the process of reconstructing and remapping cognition under the female perspective of re-vision. Felman's reading strategy of revising female resistance illustrates and enriches Barthes' textual network of the scriptable, writerly text – "the writerly text is ourselves writing" (Barthes 1990, p. 5). The textual network where the writerly text extends its possible networking textuality is where the decoding and recoding of the hermeneutic code reveal the mystery embedded within the polyseme of the text.

In the narratives of Chu's trilogy, the female narrators and characters share this kind of identity and the "we" position of the female Other. While the female narrators and characters stop resisting and concealing their femininity and sexual differences, it is time that the traumatic sensual and sensational embedded in the narratives reach out to the reader with a sense of sharing. This sharing of emotions, passions, and lived experiences of anxiety, powerlessness, shamefulness, and dissociation draws the reader into the circle of the traumatic "we group" where the domain and knowledge of the narrative under the female narrator's perspective encourage the emergence and flow of hampered and battered femininity and female sexuality to be revealed in the text.

The problem of female sexuality and resistance embedded in the textural enigma discloses the traumatic experience that keeps haunting the child and hinders the pursuit and consummation of love and desire. Tracing the signs and implications in the narrative initiates the discovery of various interpretations that link to sexual difference and identity. The following passages will illustrate the crucial functions of claiming traumatic experiences as a reading strategy in the study of Chu's trilogy.

3 Behind the neutral screen of the narrative

Chu's trilogy delineates three household traumatic stories. In *Sad Coffee Shop*, the story's mapping of the female protagonist Mathi's concept of ideal love and her adventure in wild Madagascar transforms the novel into a symbolic allegory for the ideal pursuit of freedom, as Sen Ma put it. With little reference to female desire and sexuality, Mathi's adventure is neutralized while praised as a trial of freedom in Ma's review. However, what lies behind Mathi's determination to explore alone in Madagascar is not purely the pursuit of freedom but of a more complicated cause. Not to mention that Mathi's sexual repression and social dissociation are disguised communications (Peircean signs/representmen) of her horrible childhood experience caused by her mother's disastrous marriage. She desired the love

of the bisexual male protagonist Hai-An. She planned to learn and practice under the guidance of the wandering guru in Madagascar, whom Hai-An highly respected as his mentor. Mathi believed she would thus find the secret key to winning the love of Hai-An. However, the neutralized and asexual interpretation of Mathi's pursuit of freedom in Madagascar, to some extent, deprives the traces of a woman's desire and the genuine power of female sexuality. Hai-An's influence on Mathi is not purely spiritual. His personality and attitude of laying bare his love and bisexual desire make him full of charms to Mathi. Hai-An's attitude sets a lively example for Mathi and ignites her ambition to pursue her unique way of freedom and become a different person. Mathi's desire for freedom, when taken as a sign together with her sexual repression and dissociation, invites further semiotic elaboration and re-interpretation. Mathi's journey to Madagascar expresses more than merely desiring spiritual elevation and allegorical sublimation.

The plot of *The Swallow* evolves around the daily practices of a group of modern dancers' lives and friendships. The exquisite performance of the dancers and their desperate search to reach the pinnacle of performance arts juxtapose with their search for desire and love. The goal of superb performance on the stage becomes a Peircean sign (representmen) of the corporealization of the soul of dance, and the female dancer Ah-Fang is its working model of the interpretant. In *The Swallow*, the focus of most reviews is on the delicate and exquisite performance of dancing, and the expression of corporality and sexual desire of the female dancers, for example, Ah-Fang and Feng-Heng, are suppressed. The body, sex, and sexuality of the dancers seem to form quite a different system isolated from the stage performance and living experiences. Ah-Fang shows no interest in man because of a traumatic family secret. The tragic love story of Fong-Heng and her pas de deux partner irritated the dance coach, Miss Zhuo, who deemed the dancers' sexual desire and corporal love a forbidden taboo during the practicing and performing of a repertoire. Miss Zhuo's concept of ideal and perfect dance performance celebrates the purity and the abstinence of the consummation of desire. The love story of Fong-Heng is a tragedy. Miss Zhuo forced her lover to leave the dance troupe forever. Fong-Heng was heartbroken, acted as a living dead for a long time, and finally survived by deciding to go abroad and embody her lover's soul and physical image within her body and dancing. She transforms her style of dancing from feminine to masculine.

The female narrator in *The Swallow* lays bare three different kinds of unfulfilled female desire and sexuality. We will have a different perspective if we take the abstinence of female desire and sexuality as the Peircean signs for trauma in *The Swallow*. There is no explanation for the secret of Ah-Fong's mother. However, it was a trauma and caused Ah-Fong's resistance to love, passion, and sexuality. Fong-Heng's story is a tragic transformation. She suffered the symbolic murder of love and

her lover. After the symbolic death of her ill-fated love, she suppressed, if not wholly killed, her desire and sexuality. The narrative in *The Swallow* does not offer the reader a consequential and detailed revelation of the three women's traumatic experiences. The female narrator's delicate but obscure expression of the female characters' sufferings, fragility, and sexual resistance after the traumatic events leave the narrative full of the power of depression and wretchedness. It is a lasting lament for the lost love and repressed sexual desire. The dancing performance of the repertoire as a treasured product of Miss Zhuo, the choreographer and dancing coach of the modern dance troupe, while celebrating the spiritual light, commemorates at the same time the death of sexual desire and love.

The main plot of *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*, the third novel of Chu's trilogy, places sexual desire at the very core of the novel. The complex subplots of the four characters' independent stories build a smokescreen for the bold themes of desire, sexual orientation, and same-gender sexuality. Characters as trauma survivors, while keeping their struggles with anxiety, depression, dissociation, and self-consciousness, finally develop a sense of compassion.

The female narrator of *Thirty Thousand Feet Under* is much more sophisticated than the female narrators of the previous two novels. She keeps shifting her stance when approaching and empathizing with the stories of the female and male characters. The female protagonist, Ji-Lan, needs to grow out of her traumatic past, where she suffered a disappointing period of unfulfilled love and shock because of her discovery that the man who rejected her was her brother's lover. Her hampered and injured identity, desire, and female sexuality are in a stalemate, awaiting the renaissance of a new life after the traumatic experience. Ji-Lan's sophisticated attitude and openness to confronting and embracing others' expression of sexual desire enlightens the male protagonist, Jun-Xia, to the initiation of facing his bisexual desire and sexuality. The female narrator does not explain Jun-Xia's family tragedy. Jun-Xia broke into homes and dreamed of relieving men and women with his violent intrusion and sexual power. He is the one that needs to be unleashed and redeemed. In *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*, the family secrets confine the female and the male characters in an inert situation and keep them struggling in the dungeon of distorted desire and the stalemate of sexuality. Taking the protagonists' misbehaviors and crimes as Peircean signs will allow us to probe deeper into the scenes and explain the interrelationships and various layers of differences and changes among the behaviors (representamen), protagonists' mental status (interpretant), and traumatic experiences (object), and furthermore, to reveal the probable psychological problems and solutions besides discovering the enigma in textual analysis.

4 Leaning against the abyss

Chu's trilogy tells the desire for a love that is undone and never to be fulfilled. In Chu's narratives, love always tantalizes and interrupts her protagonists on their ways to achieve their goals. The unattainable and unforsaken love is the consequence of the protagonists' childhood memories of the family secret. It keeps haunting the protagonists since childhood and later becomes an obstacle that hampers their pursuit of a love life. The lack is derived not from the dark corner of their desire but from the traumatic secret event of parental wedlock. It is a wound passed down from the parents to the younger generation. The secret becomes the cause that scourges the younger generation's hearts.

The narratives of Chu's trilogy reveal more than merely the struggles and conflicts in life and for life. The nonrepresented, undiscovered, and unspeakable secrets of the wedlock in her narratives glow and ache in the latent motifs. The narratives portray female sexuality and its resistance from the nonrepresented in the first novel, the undiscovered in the second, and finally, the unspeakable in the third. The narratives of her trilogy together weave a sequential dialog of family secrets into the textuality and mark the traumatic experiences of sexuality and gender problems as a social phenomenon hidden behind her protagonists' life-long conflicts and struggles.

The obscure and unrestrainable pursuit driven by sexual desire and the protagonists' constant resistance to acknowledging the existence and flow of sexuality display the contradictory and penetrating power in Chu's trilogy. The implied connections between the pursuit of freedom, the excellent performance on the stage, the frequent dating with different men, and the break-in rapes are the apparent representamen. Dissociation, fear of the crowd, disrupted identity, hampered self-esteem, lack of confidence, and powerlessness are the psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people, and asthma, asexuality, and rapes are the pathological symptoms that mask the obscure family secrets (the veiled trauma). The fragmented narratives emerging from the secret corner of the protagonists' memories are the Peircean objects. The family secret has a consistent and traumatic impact on each protagonist. As Nietzsche says, leaning against the abyss and gazing long into it, one cannot avoid the return gaze of the abyss (2009, Ch. IV., § 146). It is a contagious gaze, as Roland Barthes explicates in *S/Z* (1990, pp. 212–213), when Zambinella's secret is finally let out. The parents' unhappy, even tragic, marriages are ineffable experiences in their children's memories as the return of the contagious gaze that triggers specific traumatic effects while the children grow up.

It becomes a taboo within the family. The female narrator's identifying process with her feminine self through feeling and understanding the resistance from within

herself paves the way for her to turn outwardly to approach and empathize with the protagonist's unspeakable trauma. It is through the perspective of female sexuality and resistance that Chu's narrators reach out to the secrets while pairing up the main storylines of the protagonists' struggles with the fragmented narratives of their internal conflicts and traumatic experiences originating from the unhappy marriage of their parents. The traumatic event behind the wedlock would later become a symbol for the persistent theme(s) in the person's life story (Berntsen and Rubin 2007, p. 420). The constant retelling and reconstruction of the story is thus the result of the severity of the trauma.

5 Female resistance as voice of differences

The female narrators in Chu's trilogy are all sharing their understanding, acknowledgment, and respect toward the gender positioning of the characters. However, before they stand with their protagonists, they must distinguish the origins of differences and resistance, whether from "I" or the female Other "we." That is the first step to genuinely facing and dealing with the feelings and passions of herself and the female or male Other. The narrator's respectful understanding and recognition of gender issues in reading and writing her narrative help preserve a breathing space for the characters' repressed and restricted desire under the conventional social and cultural concepts of sexual regulations.

5.1 Sad Coffee Shop

In *Sad Coffee Shop*, Mathi is genuinely not a tragic character, though she feels her life is not satisfying. She is attracted to the bisexual Hai-An but refuses his invitation to have an affair with him. She has no prejudice against Hai-An's sexual orientation. Her hesitation and doubt derive not from any gender problem but from her fear of facing and admitting her sexual desire and taking any action.

The narrator of *Sad Coffee Shop* avoids putting women under an umbrella of common female experience because placing women within a specific continuum to emphasize their mutual support, affection, and commonality in their sisterhood risks ignorance of the precarious female bonds and the nuances of female friendship (Butler 1990, p. 19). The enigma can be revealed and truly understood only when the narrator understands and adopts Mathi's perspective.

Mathi was three years old when her mother took her to leave her father. Little Mathi suffered scary imagination when she was left alone by her working mother in a small and dark rented room with no window. The horrible nightmares scared little

Mathi of being deserted and abandoned. The childhood memories disrupt her from securing an identity. The experience left Mathi with a dark and cold void in her mind. Her mother could offer her no maternal love she desperately needed nor the brightness and warmth of a home to defeat the imaginary monsters hiding in the darkness. She was taken back to her father's house after her mother's death but found herself an outsider facing new family members – a stepmother and two stepbrothers.

It is Mathi's side of the story. Mathi, as a victim, suffers from the traumatic events of her childhood, fear of being abandoned, and surrounded by scaring loneliness. Mathi's hostile attitudes toward her new family members are the aftermath of her childhood traumatic experiences. The haunting memories as a never-ending nightmare disrupt her self-esteem and identity as a young woman and bereave her of the ability to establish a normal social relationship with others. According to the research of Berntsen and Rubin, traumatic experiences through involuntary repetitions will become the central component of the trauma survivors' identity. The survivors' rationale understanding of identity and social roles are sequentially and negatively influenced and contaminated by traumatic events and memories (Berntsen and Rubin 2006, 2007). The disrupted identity and hampered self-esteem become the symptom of childhood trauma, as the textual narrative reveals to us.

However, the narrative offers the reader another version of Mathi's life with her father's new family. The female narrator delineates several scenes to reveal quite a different aspect from Mathi's and allows the reader to peep into Mathi's relations with the other family members. This strategy offers other characters' perspectives as mirror reflections for the entrapped Mathi. Since childhood, Mathi has been accustomed to loneliness. She is not inclined to share personal feelings and passion with the new family members around her. She could never build up a normal relationship with them. Mathi takes herself as an outsider and treats her stepmother with open hostility. Mathi's homecoming does not offer her any opportunity to retrieve amicable relations with her stepmother and stepbrothers. The sweet and cozy at-homeness Gaston Bachelard portrays in *The Poetics of Space* (1992) cannot be found in Mathi's experiences of her various homes and shelters. At this stage, the childhood trauma preserves its original form of love and hate represented in Mathi's human relations.

Once, Mathi angrily accused her stepmother of taking her as an enemy all the time and said to her stepmother's face, "[You] hated me and took me as an outsider from the very beginning … you are not capable of loving anyone!" (*Sad Coffee Shop*, p. 146). Mathi's memory was challenged by her stepbrother, who pointed out that she was the one who was very hard to please and kept finding faults with all the other family members since she returned home to join their family. On another occasion, Mathi's stepbrother reminded her to beat the distortion the painful growth process

might have left in her memory (*Sad Coffee Shop*, p. 164). Mathi, as a grown-up, thought for the first time whether her growing experience distorted her judgment. Mathi then considered whether the restrictions that she believed seriously infringed on her freedom were derived from society or her distorted personality full of growth scars (*Sad Coffee Shop*, p. 146). The first part of the narrative ends with the revelation of the cacophony of human relations as symptoms of a traumatic past and its possible counterfeit as social maladjustment disorder. The second part of the narrative focuses on the journey to Madagascar. It offers us another aspect to relate to Mathi's anxiety and desire to take the trip with her practice and meditation to learn the way of life.

Judging from hindsight, Mathi's quest for freedom is a two-faced sign. On the one hand, it indicates a physical escape from the traumatic past of impacts and restrictions on desire and sexuality. On the other, it signifies a leap of spiritual transformation that allows Mathi to comprehend and fulfill the ultimate goal and joy of apprehending the way of love by sacrificing her life for the guru in Madagascar. What lies behind the curtain of the sign of freedom is not a fixed significance but a dynamic semiosis that incorporates various traumatic signs and the interrelated significances when different stages of Mathi's growing process are concerned and analyzed (Tsai 2007, 2013).

Will any lines of flight help Mathi escape the troubled past and the battered memories overloaded with her mother's unhappiness in marriage and the unknown scare of an abandoned child who desperately desires parental love and care? After a long travel adventure wandering in Madagascar, Mathi finds the answer to her quest when she finally establishes her identity and admits her desire and love with the flow of sexuality.

5.2 The Swallow

In Chu's second novel, *The Swallow*, the female protagonist, Ah-Fang, has no interest in men. The first time people in the dance troupe knew she had asthma was when she was taking a lesson guided by their dance instructor, Miss Zhuo, to practice deep meditation. Miss Zhuo demanded every dancer to imagine oneself as a baby in the mother's womb and thus feel the freedom and bondage within the maternal space and the unbreakable liaison with the mother. Miss Zhuo firmly believed that this practice provided good stimulation to strengthen all the dancers' imaginative experience of the mutual coalition of the spiritual and the corporal. The linkage between female sexuality and maternal love is vividly envisioned and emphasized in the narrative. However, this imaginative image of a mother carrying the baby in her womb triggers Ah-Fang's asthma attack. Dancers in the meditation class took

Ah-Fang's asthma as a sign of illness. However, asthma as a Peircean sign turns out to indicate the lack of a mother's love and care – the significance of Ah-Fang's trauma. Asthma is not a pure sign of illness but a symbolic sign of trauma. Ah-Fang's asthma is the imaginative linkage between the leaving mother and the abandoned baby. Ah-Fang had no image of her mother because her mother left her when she was born. For Miss Zhao, the imaginative womb correlates the fulfillment of female sexuality and jouissance with the joy of the expectance of the beloved baby. Nevertheless, for Ah-Fang, the mother's womb is the symbol of the threatening menace of deep sorrow and death of love transferred from mother to baby.

Later in the narrative, elements such as asthma, death, female sexuality, and jouissance will further develop to form a unique death-and-life correlation. Miss Zhuo related Ah-Fang's asthma to her resistance to passionate interaction and detestation of desires and sexuality. She firmly believed that the resistance to any physical contact with men makes Ah-Fang incomplete while her female sexuality is being "bracketed." Resistance to physical interaction is the symptom of Ah-Fang's willingness to bury her female sexuality, abandon her female identity, and imagine herself as a person of no sexual desire. In *The Swallow*, asthma changes from a sign indicating illness to becoming the enigma, the hermeneutic code, to open Ah-Fang's hidden family scandal. Ah-Fang had no memory of her mother. The trauma of losing her mother when she was born became an ineffable family secret. Rejection and resistance to sexual desire and female sexuality, therefore, become the protective layers that wrap up the family scandal, and asthma is the enigma and symptom.

While analyzing traumatic cases and the possible recoveries of the survivors, Herman describes the symptom of the traumatic event as the object that the trauma stands for. According to Herman's research, "The central dialectic of psychological trauma is the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud … But far too often, secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom" (Herman 1992, p. 1). In Ah-Fang's case, asthma, instead of the traumatic loss of her mother and loving care, becomes the symptom that signifies the trauma. Ah-Fang's mother stopped speaking when she was pregnant and left home immediately after her baby girl, Ah-Fang, was born. Ah-Fang could never fill the void caused by her mother's sudden leave without a goodbye. The loss of a mother's love turned into a physical "lack" of air instead. The desire to hide in her mother's womb becomes ineffable. Since the reason for her mother's sudden leaving was unknown, it finally became the untouchable family secret of her parents' marriage. Ah-Fang could not find enough air to fill the void in her body. It is an internal and spiritual void. Female sexuality is furthermore repressed and replaced by illness. As the autodiegetic female narrator,

Ah-Fang could delineate the lack of a mother's love, but the protagonist, Ah-Fang, never had the opportunity to fill the dark void (Tsai 2014). Asthma is the linkage Ah-Fang connects herself with her missing mother.

The autodiegetic narrator Ah-Fang, the narrative voice of the first-person narrator and protagonist in *The Swallow*, habitually refrains from revealing the cause of her mother's detachment and unsociability. The female narrator/protagonist constantly suffers inner resistance as she writes/reads her own story. As a narrator, Ah-Fang must relive her mother's numbness, understand herself (the voiceless little girl Ah-Fang), and conquer her resistance as a writer. While the female narrator Ah-Fang and the protagonist Ah-Fang can get a truce with their inner resistance and not blame themselves for the existence of the traumatic void that tortures the two pairs – the narrator and the protagonist as a pair, and Ah-Fang's mother and Ah-Fang as another – then the female narrator can stand together with the voiceless female Self/Other and to decode the enigma. Only when Ah-Fang obtains the power to love, appreciate, acknowledge, and accept others' love and errors can Ah-Fang, as a narrator, approach the narrator's inner world and that of Ah-Fang (as a protagonist). Consequently, as "we," the narrator and the protagonist Ah-Fang, can start re-reading the secret and solving the enigma.

5.3 Thirty Thousand Feet Under

If, as Herman pointed out, "an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history" (Herman 1992, p. 2), the female narrator faces a different challenge in Chu's third novel, *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*. The female narrator has to go through the traumatic past that troubled the female protagonist, Ji-Lan, and the bisexual male protagonist, Jun-Xia. Ji-Lan could not escape the history of being rejected by the same-gender loving man whom her brother loved. Jun-Xia could not release himself from the family trauma and kept committing serial crimes of home break-ins and rapes. Writing the stories of Ji-Lan and Jun-Xia becomes a process of rediscovering their family secrets. Ji-Lan's failures derive from the self-deny of her physical charms and female sexuality. Jun-Xia is imprisoned in his past inability, for he was too little and powerless to rescue his father from death. While Ji-Lan was too young to understand gender problems and sexual orientations, Jun-Xia was too little and weak to save his father's life. Ji-Lan and Jun-Xia are similar yet different in their response and attitude towards their traumas. They both suffer from traumatic events and involuntary, repetitive, haunting memories.

According to Garbutt, Rennoldson, and Gregson's research on shame and self-compassion, they found that childhood experiences of adversity brought trauma survivors the negative emotions of shame as a symptom of post-traumatic stress

disorder (Garbutt et al. 2023, p. 7194). Herman's research showed, "Shame is a response to helplessness, the violation of bodily integrity, and the indignity suffered in the eyes of another person … In the aftermath of traumatic events, survivors doubt both others and themselves" (Herman 1992, p. 58). This kind of trauma survivors has emotionally damaging memories of the traumatic past, which form sufficiently in them their central self-understanding and view of the world. Through repetitive trauma memories, the sense of shame will later bring forth depressive disorders (Thompson and Berenbaum 2006). In the novel, Ji-Lan tries to fight the trauma with frequent careless dating with men, although she lacks confidence in her charms. Jun-Xia suffers a sense of shame and uses the power of the scalpel in violent break-ins and rapes to arm his fragility. Shame as a symptom of trauma points to different kinds of personality development and leads to different kinds of consequent inflictions on the trauma survivors.

The narrative reveals many tiny yet lively interactions among Ji-Lan, her brother, and her brother's roommate, whom she liked. Ji-Lan frequently visited the dormitory room of her brother and his roommate. She tried to squeeze herself into the narrow space between her brother and his roommate. However, she cannot mix herself into the two boys' gendered space. The two boys' secret kept Ji-Lan out of their circle. The female narrator carefully reveals another layer of mutual understanding and harmony between the two same-gender loving young men in the narrative, entirely out of Ji-Lan's expectation and projection. The semiotic isotopic layer, though it seemed hetero to Ji-Lan, preserves its uniqueness or isotopy (Greimas 1983, 1987, 1990) of the same gender-loving young men.

The joyful interactions between Jun-Xia and his father are daily routines between father and son. However, the separate rooms Jun-Xia's parents respectively occupied tell us another story. The father's room is downstairs, and the mother's is at the upper level. Jun-Xia was too little to know the cause of the family tragedy. The innocent adoration of the boy toward his father, paralleling his mother's tears, his father's occasionally not returning home, and his mother's poisoning his father to death, makes the significance of the Greimasian semiotic square of the family a vivid construction of contradictory pairs (Greimas 1983, 1987, 1990). The narrator's intentional concealment of the horrible dying scene of the father shows her sympathy toward the little boy. The female narrator partially keeps the secret and reveals fragmented truth in the narrative, thus enabling her compassionate notice to flow between the lines.

Jun-Xia suffers the traumatic experience of his father's death. The last scene of his father's being poisoned and desperately struggling before death to get out of his room was a shivery nightmare to little Jun-Xia. This traumatic family secret becomes a scar that drives him to commit crimes under the excuse of relieving men and women from the prison house of shriveled desire and stagnant sexuality. His father's

tragic death dissolved the close relationship among the family members and destroyed the little boy's belief and trust in the possibility of love flow. When the two kinds of distrust and inability meet with the seemingly invincible power of the scalpel, the young and promising adolescent becomes a serial rapist and lover of home break-ins. Jun-Xia internalized the harm inflicted on him through repetitive traumatic experiences and memories. In the overwhelming release from traumatic powerlessness and the joy of break-ins, he turned his victimization into the mastery of violence and finally became a victimizer.

The narrator lays emphasis firstly on Jun-Xia's indulgence in the determination to open any closed door and set free the people and their passions as if he were releasing his father and a father's love for his son from the prison house. Every time Jun-Xia intruded into a house, he insisted on an inquiry with a tone of loving care to the victims whether they released their pressure and enjoyed the flow of sexuality after consummation as if he had provided the scenario as compensation to redeem his father's and mother's "prisoned" and "poisoned" desire and sexuality. The complex post-traumatic stress disorder, through the violence of home break-ins and rapes, ironically builds up a relationship with false hostage rescue and takes forced sex as the liberation of an imprisoned flow of sexuality (Tsai 2018, 2019).

Jun-Xia's mother never said anything to him. Her resistance to communication cuts all the possible exchanges of concepts and feelings. On the contrary, under Jun-Xia's threat, the raped women and men cannot but express what they want. The narrator compares and contrasts the two situations and points out the enigma behind the family tragedy. In this novel, Jun-Xia and Ji-Lan are mercifully allowed to begin with their recovery processes. They became each other's savior through a coincidence when Jun-Xia went to find Ji-Lan one evening and saw their neighbor, a moron boy named Sha-Di, outside her garden. Jun-Xia did not show up to the boy to accuse him of his wrongdoings as he saw Sha-Di peeping at Ji-Lan taking a shower. Ji-Lan gave Sha-Di her kind understanding of and comfort toward his physiological sexual reaction with a bosom hug when she got out of her bathroom. Jun-Xia witnessed Ji-Lan's open-mindedness and compassion toward Sha-Di's misdemeanor and desire. Ji-Lan's concern and loving care toward Sha-Di bring forth another kind of loving care, understanding, forgiveness, and compassion for Jun-Xia. This episode releases Jun-Xia from his traumatic restrictions and confinements of weakness and impotence. Jun-Xia's and Ji-Lan's handling of this event transformed the thing's nature and consequences. Shame not only triggers harm to others but could also mediate compassion toward others (Garbutt et al. 2023, p. 7198). Jun-Xia's distorted understanding of the family secret generated from his shame and desire for mastery stimulated him to violently release what he believed the "imprisoned" men and women from sexuality. However, Ji-Lan's compassion not only brought the moron boy an experience of the fulfillment of the drive of passion and the flow of sexuality

but also initiated Jun-Xia to another level of understanding how the need to fulfill a desire and release the flow of sexuality can be obtained not through violence and threat but compassion and altruistic love (Tsai 2018, 2019).

6 The reading/writing process and the power of the narrative

All the protagonists in Chu's trilogy crave one or more kinds of freedom, and freedom under Chu's pen is related to love, desire, and sexuality. Seeking to be free from any bondage to pacify the little trauma survivor from the rented prison house in *Sad Coffee Shop*, pursuing and expressing the spirit of a free soul and the corporeal representation of desire and sexuality in dancing in *The Swallow*, and desiring compassion and the soothing love that demands no return in *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*, all refer to the existence of a traumatic past and a possible way out. It is not accidental that all the protagonists in Chu's trilogy have trouble in their love life or are in the process of pursuing their ideal love. The reader of Chu's trilogy must be patient to reconnect fragments and reconstruct the protagonists' history. However, the cause of unhappy wedlock is kept unknown. There are no visible traces for the reader to judge the fathers or mothers. Nor are there any clear and precise signs implying the probable causes of the mothers' abandoning their babies and leaving their husbands and home.

The narratives of Chu's trilogy offer various fragments of the primal scene to help build up a history of a traumatic event in the family. The family secret is unspeakable and, for most of the time, cannot be touched upon; as Herman stated, "The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it" (Herman 1992, p. 47). In the literary narratives, the unspeakable secrets of the families are not easy to be traced. The traumatized person repeatedly relives and reinterprets the distress and powerlessness brought forth by the traumatic secret. However, the remapping and restructuring of the unrepresentable and unspeakable family secret are probable and essential because, in the writing and reading process, a traumatic scene or experience (the Peircean objects) might be implied or represented in the narrative and reveal the traumatic symptom as the Peircean sign (representamen). Through the involuntary repetitive memories of the haunting events, the reader's understanding and interpretation (the Peircean interpretant) of the narrative is composed. The enigma in the traumatic narrative can be solved, and the discovery of the traumatic secret and possible recovery is not unattainable.

The power of narrative and the repeated reading/writing process with the female strategy of resistance and compassion will bring light to the attic, to the dark corner, and let the drive of desire and sexuality commence its flow as the mourning of the past appeases the anger of the baby/child and soothes the powerless baby/child its anxiety that threatens its existence and control of life. Hence, the sufferers are finally given the redeeming time of recovery as Herman contended, "When they 'recognize' and 'let go' of those aspects of themselves formed by the traumatic environment, they also become more forgiving" (Herman 1992, p. 203). Felman's consideration of female resistance undercuts the mastery of the patriarchal reign. Herman's research on the traumatic symptoms points to the distorted rhetoric that would help uncover the hidden and forgotten traumas and contribute to the possible recovery.

Through the narratives of desire and sexuality in her trilogy, Shao-Lin Chu brings a line of light into the secret corner of unhappy marriages. Traumatic recovery is an ongoing process, as Herman observed that "the reconstruction of the trauma is never entirely completed; new conflicts and challenges at each new stage of the lifecycle will inevitably reawaken the trauma and bring some new aspect of the experience to light" (Herman 1992, p. 195). Peirce's dynamic semiosis of the tripartite model of signs (object, representamen, and interpretant) defines an interrelated connection that accommodates a generative method of deriving appropriate significance from the textual narrative. The traumatic effects ebb in and out as the phantoms of sexuality and desire fade out or emerge with the turns and stops of the reading/writing process of the narratives.

7 End code

Shao-Lin Chu, originally from Hubei, China, was born in Chia-Yi, Taiwan 1966. She was the Manager of the R&D Department of We Can Public Relations Consultants Company. Chu became a famous writer after her first novel was published. However, she keeps a low profile, not participating in public events, refusing to be interviewed, or responding to fans' and readers' questions, inquiries, and misinformation about her novels and private life. Before launching her third book in 2005, Chu finally accepted a few invitations to interviews and answered readers' questions on the blog. She admitted that all the character prototypes in *Sad Coffee Shop*, except Hai-An, were borrowed from real people around her, and she did not even give all the characters new names. She said she put some characteristics and personality of herself on Mathi, Jill (another female character in *Sad Coffee Shop*), and Ah-Fang. However, unlike these female characters, Chu said she "lives a good life" (Chu 2005b).

In *The Swallow*, we find some similarities between Chu and Ah-Fang: First, Ah-Fang is from Chia-Yi. Second, Ah-Fang worked at a public relations consultant company before joining the dance troupe. However, there is still something very different: Chu said she never learned to dance. Third, the narrative is autodiegetic, giving the reader the impression that Chu is telling her own story. Besides these related commonalities, Chu denied the speculative inferences that the creation of the character Ah-Fang was based on her experiences. When we turn to the pseudo-science fiction *Thirty Thousand Feet Under*, Chu's traces are nearly nowhere to be found. However, while we judge from the implied support she gave to her female narrators in the trilogy, we can confirm that Chu's stance as an author and her personal reading/writing processes of the trilogy are not merely shadowing but orchestrating, for Chu as an author stands firmly behind her female narrators and characters.

When we revisit Chu's disposition toward the novel characters, narratives, and socio-cultural contexts, we recognize that all her female narrators take the characters and their stories with warm tolerance, thoughtfulness, and unwavering empathy. We can see this attitude in the narratives of the three female narrators, as we can empathize with it in our understanding of Chu's novels through various approaches of semiotics models, narratological practices, literary theory, textual analysis, and the benefits from the research of trauma studies in multiple disciplines derived from psychology and pathology communities. Literary works mirror the world of life and offer representations from certain angles and perspectives. Its significance changes as the reader's background context and mindset change. In some sense, we are the Peircean interpretant, and the literary text is the object. Therefore, we could always meet with an enigma hidden in some corner of a literary text and give it new significance.

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