

Kitchen by Xu Kun, 短篇小说《厨房》徐坤 (1965-)

- The novella (1996) was written 75 years after *Regret for the Past* (1921) by Lu Xun, also devoted to the feminist movement in China. Zi Jun of Lu Xun is one of the first educated literary women on equal footing with their male sexual partners. Her plight and tragic end are archetypal and even perennial for women throughout the century who find themselves in the same situation as that of Zi Jun. Zhi Zi is thus the second generation of Zi Jun,
- This feminist movement is multigenerational and transnational. The genealogy of this movement in literature is incomplete without such masterpieces as *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, 1856, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tostoy, 1877, *Jane Eyre* by Emily Bronte, 1847, and *A Doll's House*, by Henri Ibsen, 1879, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, 1899. Zhi Zi is thus the great granddaughter of this literary quest for women's liberation. In China, she is the heir of such famous literary women in modern times as Sophia in *Diary of Miss Sophie* (1927) by Ding Ling, Wei Ming in the film *New Woman*, (1934), Qi Qiao in *The Rouge of the North* (1943) by Eileen Chang, Shanshan in *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* (1979) by Zhang Jie; Lin Shi in *The Butcher's Wife* (1983) by Li Ang.
- Zhi Zi is entitled to a full range of female choices that modern China afforded to women in 1990s: college education, free love, marriage, motherhood, divorce, singlehood, career woman, female leadership, over-achiever. Yet her public persona as a super-woman with some social privileges still leaves her feeling unfulfilled. Her career success is not enough to keep her satisfied as a private individual, which is where Song Ze comes in, an admirer and a trophy of her female power equal to that of Innana, the ancient Mesopotamian Goddess of war, love and fertility. But can even a super-woman have everything: a chair at the table of business decisions as well as a seat at the dining table in the kitchen?
- Zhi Zi's descent may be understood as a cautionary tale for those to whom feminism is a wish list. Her sexual frustration with Song Ze wakes her up to the fact that she cannot be a free woman and daughter of the Father (patriarchy) at the same time. Just like Lu Xun writing *Regret for the Past* to challenge a wishful thinking and dogmatic understanding of Western feminism ("I am my own mistress; no one has any right to interfere with my life"), Xu Kun here questions the naivete and plausibility of modern women returning to the kitchen, a.k.a. the feminine social spaces and gender roles as prescribed by Confucian tradition.
- The romance financed by Zhi Zi gives her a sense of in control. In actuality, her sponsorship of Song Ze's artistic career and her control of his fidelity to her as his love, are only forms of self-deception and narcissism that we have seen in Zi Jun believing that she is a modern woman, independent and free to love whomever she wants. Feminism is a mixed bag into which everything goes: pre-marital sex, child born out of wed-lock, free love, singlehood, women's right to education and financial independence. When Zhi Zi goes home feeling dejected, she must reimagine herself in relation to career, money, power, men, children, and kitchen.