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Christopher Rosenmeier¹

Abstract

This article analyses the representation of women in two 1933 short story collections by Shi Zhecun: *An Evening of Spring Rain* and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*. It discusses how the New Woman image was a site of contestation in Republican China, and argues that Shi Zhecun's short stories contain four basic stereotypes: the enigmatic woman, the estranged wife, the prostitute, and the inhibited woman. Using these narratives of women and how they were perceived by men, Shi Zhecun deconstructed the New Woman image by subverting the various ways modernity was projected onto women.

Keywords

Shi Zhecun, New Woman, gender, modernity, modernism

In the preface to the 1933 short story collection *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* (*Shan nüren xing pin*), Shi Zhecun (1905–2003) explains that “the women in the short stories of this collection are practically all stereotypes (*dianxing*) that I have seen over the last few years” (Shi, 1996: 796). To understand the role of the female characters in Shi's writings, it is necessary to identify those stereotypes and analyze how they relate to contemporary

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cultural representations of women and gender issues. The goal of the present article is to analyze and compare the various representations of women in two of Shi Zhecun's short story collections, both from 1933: *An Evening of Spring Rain* (*Meiyu zhi xi*) and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*. The collections are remarkably different. The first is oriented toward more extreme cases—prostitutes and delusional madmen. The protagonists lose their grasp on reality as they are haunted by fantasies, visions of ghosts, or images of the past. *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* is nearly its diametric opposite. It is characterized by gentle portraits of bourgeois urban couples discussing mundane matters such as whose turn it is to do the cooking. The characters of this collection are more restrained and they do not suffer from neurasthenia and various nervous conditions with the same dramatic consequences. This makes the second collection generally more realistic than the first—to the extent of being nearly autobiographical in some cases.

Shi Zhecun is probably best known for his modernist psychological short stories and his editorship of the influential literary journal *Les Contemporains* (*Xiandai*) during the 1930s. As a writer of fiction, he is usually grouped with the New Sensationalists (*Xinganjuepai*) alongside Mu Shiying (1912–1940), Liu Na'ou (1900–1939), and Ye Lingfeng (1905–1975)—the foremost practitioners of modernist fiction in Shanghai (Lee, 1996: 161). The group's characterizations of modern women have been accorded some attention before. Shu-mei Shih (2001: 278) and Leo Ou-fan Lee (1999a: 198) write about how Liu Na'ou's modern women derive from Hollywood stars and the Japanese “modern girl” (*modan gaaru*). The New Sensationalist writers' works frequently revolve around modern mores and sexuality in urban settings such as coffee shops and dance halls and contain femmes fatales who seduce and ultimately reject the young men who fall in love with them (Stevens, 2003: 92). Sexual desire is indeed an important subject in much of Shi Zhecun's creative work, but his treatment of it differs from that of the other New Sensationalist writers—most importantly by achieving greater psychological depth and, as argued here, by challenging the New Woman stereotype.

Two Short Story Collections, Four Stereotypes

After becoming the editor of *Les Contemporains* in 1932, Shi Zhecun started cementing his position in the literary field. He also began arranging his short stories into collections that formed thematic wholes. Each collection was supposed to show a certain facet or direction of his versatile authorship (Shi, 1988: 2).

Disregarding his early first publications, Shi has always maintained that *Spring Festival Lamp* (*Shangyuan deng*) from 1929 was his first proper short story collection (Shi, 2000). It was issued by the small publishing house Shuimo shudian, which Shi had just opened with Dai Wangshu (1905–1950) and Liu Na'ou. In 1932, a revised edition was published from which three stories were excised: “Pastoral Song” (*Muge*), “My Wife’s Birthday” (*Qi de shengchen*), and “An Evening of Spring Rain.” In the preface to the second edition, Shi (1996: 791) explains that he felt “Pastoral Song” was “laughable” and therefore unworthy of republication. The other two stories were removed so that they could be included in other collections planned for future publication. In their place, Shi included three other more recent works that he felt were more in tune with the rest of the volume. With these alterations, the stories of the new edition of *Spring Festival Lamp* fit together in a way which Shi Zhecun (1996: 791) now considered “far more orderly.” As promised, these alterations also came to bear on Shi Zhecun’s next two short story collections published in 1933. “My Wife’s Birthday” was included in *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* and “An Evening of Spring Rain” became the title story of yet another collection.

This shuffling of short stories between collections has two implications: First, one should be very careful when attempting to divide Shi’s oeuvre into separate periods based on the differences between the collections, such as, for example, Leo Ou-fan Lee (1996: 162–63) attempts. Second, that Shi already in 1932 was simultaneously planning his next two collections—*An Evening of Spring Rain* and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*—indicates that from the start he intended them to be distinctly different and to form thematic wholes in which each short story fits into a greater context. Comparing the short story collections as wholes is thus also an exercise that Shi Zhecun might well have imagined the reader to undertake. Apart from simply reading each short story in the context of the collection it is in, I also approach them by looking at the gender of the narrator or person from whose perspective the narrative is told. Here the term *focalization* is useful. This term, taken from the field of narratology, is used to replace what traditionally is called the “point-of-view,” e.g., omniscient, first-person, and so on. In the words of Gérard Genette, the focalizing character is the one “whose point-of-view orients the narrative perspective” (Genette, 1980: 186). Genette distinguishes between three types of focalization (1980: 185–94; 1988: 72–78): (1) *Zero focalization*, in which the narrator’s focus is indefinite and panoramic. This is generally the case with the omniscient narrators of classical literature. (2) *Internal focalization*, in which the narrative is oriented by one or several of the characters. This

leads to the subdivisions (2a) *fixed*—everything passes through a single character, (2b) *variable*—the narrative focuses in turn on different characters, even within a single sentence, and finally, (2c) *multiple*—in which the same events are recorded several times but by different narrators, such as, for example, epistolary novels in which different letter writers recount the same events. The last type is (3) *external focalization*, in which only sequences of events are recorded and the narrator has no access to the inner minds of the characters. In the following, unless specified otherwise, “focalization” refers to fixed internal focalization. This is the mode of focalization used in most of the works treated here since the vast majority of Shi Zhecun’s short stories are told in the first person or from the perspective of a single character.

The gender of the focalizing character is thus another way to approach these short stories. Shi Zhecun himself was quite conscious of switching between various narrative techniques. He experimented with various modernist techniques and the narrative voice in his short stories tends to call attention to itself. There are numerous experiments with interior monologue, free indirect discourse, and so on. Combining these two approaches to the short stories—two short story collections and two genders of the focalizing person—results in four groups of short stories:

1. *An Evening of Spring Rain* with male focalization
2. *An Evening of Spring Rain* with female focalization
3. *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* with male focalization
4. *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* with female focalization

This division is purely mechanical since it bears little relation to the actual content of the short stories. But these categories show the principal ways in which Shi Zhecun’s short stories represent female characters. The narratives with male focalization invariably concern the male gaze on women and their incomprehension of them. The narratives with female focalization are more concerned with how women construct and delimit themselves in accordance with their own sense of duty or social expectations. In each of these four groups, Shi Zhecun portrays a female stereotype, which I have named the “enigmatic woman,” the “prostitute,” the “estranged wife,” and the “inhibited woman.” These four stereotypes occur in multiple configurations caught between modernity and tradition throughout Shi’s work. In order to see how these stereotypes relate to the New Woman image, a quick historical overview is useful.

The New Woman in China

The New Woman stereotype was constructed by inscribing the modern onto women, thereby creating new ideals of femininity. The New Woman represented the idealized personification of modernity, incorporating concepts such as rationalism, individualism, and faith in temporal progression. In the West, debates over suffrage and women's emancipation—the so-called woman question—raged throughout Europe and America during the late nineteenth century. Eventually, the New Woman was co-opted by popular culture, producing various glamorous stereotypes such as the tomboyish flapper epitomized by actresses like Colleen Moore and Clara Bow. Utilized in film and advertising, the New Woman image was sexualized and commercialized, thus spreading it far beyond questions of women's emancipation and suffrage.

The image of the New Woman in China followed a similar development. In a parallel trajectory, her meaning gradually changed from a symbol of female emancipation to become a popular icon of glamour and leisure as well (Edwards, 2000: 116). Numerous Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the century were influenced by scientific Western ideas and came to oppose traditional ideals of femininity, such as the “three obediences and four virtues” (*sancong side*) (Croll, 1995: 14). Liang Qichao (1873–1929) argued that women must become productive citizens instead of illiterate wives bound to the home (Dooling and Torgeson, 1998: 5). In 1918, Hu Shi (1891–1962) introduced the American New Woman phenomenon to Chinese readers, describing her as a person “who doesn't believe in religion or adhere to rules of conduct [*lifa*], yet who is also a very good thinker and has very high morals” (Harris, 1997: 287). Mao Dun (1896–1981) published copiously on women's problems and was a founding member of the Women's Review Study Society (*Funü pinglun yanjiuhui*) in 1922 together with Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) and others (Gálik, 1969: 49). Several journals were devoted to discussions of the Woman Question and new female role models. One of the more influential journals was *Ladies' Journal* (*Funü zazhi*), which started in 1915 and ran until 1931. These periodicals attempted to debunk traditional concepts of chastity and morality by describing sexuality, reproductive cycles, fetal development, and such matters in modern scientific medical terms (Chen, 1993: 138).

Eventually, the New Culture Movement discourse on new feminine ideals was drowned out in Shanghai by popular culture, which by the late 1920s produced new commodified images and ideals of modern life and progress (Yeh, 2007: 69ff). Foreign movies presented Hollywood screen icons as new

ideals of femininity and beauty. Calendars, advertising, and movies featured well-known women—often actresses—who sported the latest fashionable garments, hairdos, and accoutrements (Lee, 1999a: 65). In this manner, a struggle to appropriate and represent the discursive symbol of the New Woman had begun. With the introduction of large department stores and advertising, women were addressed as consumers who were required to stay abreast of the latest trends in clothing, dance, and culture. The modern nuclear family was idealized and in various articles, motherhood was rationalized and endowed with qualities vital to the future health of the nation (Dikötter, 1995: 109ff).

Popular fiction helped readers grapple with modern life by demonstrating the continued validity of frugality, filial piety, and other such traditional values in a rapidly changing world (Link, 1981: 198). In these representations, “good girls” supported their parents and suffered countless miseries stoically, whereas “bad girls” became femmes fatales as prostitutes or seductive modern women. Some popular authors set their stories in the brothels and presented the miserable lives of prostitutes in highly melodramatic narratives (Hershatter, 1997: 257ff). In such stories, the prostitutes were self-sacrificing victims who were simply forced into their trade due to extreme poverty. The most famous example of this is perhaps to be found in the popular film *The Goddess* (*Shennü*) (Wu, 1934) in which Ruan Lingyu (1910–1935) plays a poor streetwalker who struggles to put her son through school. Others singled out prostitution as the primary source of national weakness and racial degeneration (Hershatter, 1997: 252–53). An example of the New Woman as femme fatale can be found in the 1935 novel *Shanghai Express* (*Ping Hu tongche*) by the popular author Zhang Henshui (1895–1967). The novel was serialized in the travel journal *Lüxing zazhi*, and appropriate to the content of the journal, the story takes place on a train—a symbol of modernity in itself—and describes all the amenities of the dining car, various classes, and stops en route (Zhang, 1997). Taking the reader from Beijing to Shanghai, the novel features a seductive modern Shanghai woman who predictably turns out to be a professional con artist. The protagonist and victim is a naïve Beijing businessman who in his blind infatuation is cheated out of his money. Femmes fatales also feature in several of Mu Shiyong’s short stories, for instance, “The Man Who Was Made a Plaything” (*Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi*) in which the protagonist falls madly in love with a woman who considers men to be simply “playthings” (Mu, 1996: 153).

To many, “modern woman” acquired a negative connotation, implying “superficial Westernization, hedonism, even avarice” (Zhang, 1996: 294). When the popular movie star Ruan Lingyu was divorced from her husband in

court—shockingly modern—she was depicted in the press as a threatening “modern woman” (*modeng nüxing* or *modeng guniang*) (Harris, 1997: 294). The New Life Movement (*Xin shenghuo yundong*), launched in 1934, was a reaction against this perceived moral decline that aimed to advance the social and moral regeneration of China.

In the early 1930s, after the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, many intellectuals set out to represent the proper New Woman as a militant workers’ heroine as opposed to the fashionable consumer. This new role for women was presented among other places in the movie aptly titled *The New Woman* (*Xin nüxing*) from 1934, which ends with an exhortation to women to participate in shaping modern society and reject the more traditional feminine virtues of submissiveness and filiality (Harris, 1997: 284). On the contrary, women are configured as a social vanguard fighting alongside men, and the virtues idealized are markedly masculine.

The masculinization of the New Woman was paralleled by a shift in emphasis from women’s emancipation to class struggle. Xia Yan’s (1900–1995) famous essay “Indentured Laborers” (*Baoshengong*) from 1935 describes the plight of countless young female factory workers who were kept toiling at weaving machines in conditions little better than those of prisoners (Xia, 1980). But typical of the shift in tone at the time, class is presented as the basis of injustice rather than gender. Similarly, strong-willed autonomous New Women protagonists disappeared from Mao Dun’s fiction in the 1930s (Chen, 1993: 133). And in 1931, the journal *New Woman* was ordered to close by leftist leadership. Yingjin Zhang (1996: 204–5) concludes that films of the 1930s abandoned the discourse on love and aesthetics that had prevailed in previous decades. Love was subsumed by the greater causes of revolution and national salvation. When Shi Zhecun started writing about women caught between tradition and modernity in Shanghai, he was clearly entering a contested field. The role of women in modern Chinese society was a topic of much discussion and it provides an important backdrop to reading Shi’s fiction.

The Enigmatic Woman

In *An Evening of Spring Rain*, the male protagonists are constantly pursuing women whom they cannot understand and who eventually unravel their modern, rational, cosmopolitan outlook. The short stories with male focalization fall into two distinct subgroups determined by the setting: the short stories in the countryside are distinctly gothic, while those set in Shanghai are more contemporary. But the male’s uncomprehending gaze remains similar. The

woman who is object of his desire tempts him toward delusions and irrationality, but in the end she is not a simple femme fatale—she only appears that way to the beguiled male narrator. Instead, the unattainable woman is partly a figment of the protagonist's imagination. She is conjured up as a result of his neurasthenic state of mind and sexual desire.

The gothic short stories have been treated well by Leo Ou-fan Lee (1999a: 130–50), so there is little need to go into great detail here. The main short stories are “Yaksha” (*Yecha*) (Shi, 1996: 327–40) and “Demonic Way” (*Modao*) (Shi, 1996: 271–88). In these short stories, the modern urban protagonist is confronted with his inner fears—often sexual—in a voyage away from Shanghai. The countryside becomes a place of darkness and tradition juxtaposed with the city. In the countryside, the protagonists' modern urban rationality and logic are unraveled, replaced by fear, madness, and displaced desire.

In “Yaksha,” the protagonist had left Shanghai to take care of the burial of his recently deceased grandmother. Here he encounters a beautiful woman whom he believes to be a *yaksha*—a shape-changing demon from popular Buddhist legend. He pursues her through the night to a graveyard where he follows her into a tomb and strangles her. Freed from his fantasies, he realizes that she is just a normal country woman. In “Demonic Way,” the narrator leaves Shanghai to visit an old friend. On the train, the narrator becomes convinced that the woman sitting across from him must be an evil witch. Throughout the remainder of the story, he is haunted by visions of her that blend together with an imagined kiss with his friend's wife. Once again, the boundary between reality and fantasy becomes a blur.

Shi Zhecun's gothic short stories align the countryside with darkness, sexual desire, and death. Here the modern, educated, urban male is wholly unraveled by his sexual desire, which is partly induced by the change of setting. In both “Demonic Way” and “Yaksha,” the mystical woman whom the male narrator desires is both horrifying and alluring. But, more importantly, she is also wholly imagined. Outside the confused world of the protagonists, there is no witch and the *yaksha* turns out to be a deaf-and-dumb girl who had run away from home the night before. Away from the city, male sexual desire becomes a matter of dreams and projected illusions, superimposed upon elusive women who remain incomprehensible to the supposedly modern male protagonist.

The other group featuring “enigmatic women” is set in Shanghai. Here the countryside is replaced with the streets of Shanghai or movie houses, but in a similar manner, the male narrators desire women whom they cannot

comprehend. Similarly, they fantasize and attribute to them thoughts and emotions that they do not have.

Shi Zhecun's best-known short story remains "An Evening of Spring Rain" (Shi, 1996: 247–58). The male narrator is a Shanghai resident who gazes upon an unknown beautiful woman in the rain. His sexual gaze likewise blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, revealing the confusion of his eroticized psyche. And, almost inevitably, the woman vanishes in the rain without a trace. The narrator works in a Shanghai office and enjoys strolling home in the rain "watching the city with a temporarily easy mind" (247). He sees an attractive young woman as she is getting off a bus, and as an urban voyeur, he stops to watch as she gets drenched in the rain while trying to hail a rickshaw in the empty streets. Imagining that she is beckoning him with her eyes, he finally summons the courage to approach her. They begin to walk together, but soon the narrator becomes convinced that she is his first girlfriend from school many years ago. Continuing his stream of consciousness, she then reminds him of Japanese painting and classical poetry. Only when the rain finally stops does he begin to regain his senses. They part on the street with the narrator wishing that it might have rained just a little longer. The rain is the frame of the narrator's dream world and when the rain stops, he slowly returns to the world of reality. This mental return is also paralleled by his physical return home to his wife.

Much like the countryside settings in the gothic short stories, the rainy background here seems to create a space separate from normal daily life. In a sense, the protagonist's brief erotic adventure falls into a rift between the two parts of his ordinary life: his office and his home. While walking home in the rain, he is suspended between these two blocks of reality in a transitory state open to the irrational charms of dreams and erotic desires. Throughout, the protagonist is attempting to guess the woman's thoughts or identity. Yet she always defies him, and in the end he knows absolutely nothing about her other than her name: Liu—one of the most common. She has few individual traits. The woman is elusive, unfathomable, and therefore unattainable. As an object of erotic desire, she is constructed entirely in the mind of the narrator.

The woman who remains incomprehensible to the male protagonist is also the basic subject of "At the Paris Cinema" (*Zai Bali daxiyuan*) (Shi, 1996: 259–70). This short story was originally published in 1931, and again it deals with the repressed sexuality and self-doubts of the male protagonist and narrator. The setting is once again modern Shanghai but now in the darkness of the cinema. Like the sheets of rain, the cinema forms the outer boundaries of a space within which fantasy and desire preside. The simple plot consists of the

regular components of an outing to the cinema and seeing a foreign movie with a young female companion. The cinema, shrouded in darkness, was a favorite place for such secret trysts. As was the custom, the couple buy the tickets, sit in the dress circle, read the plot-sheets, discuss the movie, and finally go their separate ways agreeing to meet again the following day. These are the standard components of a trip to the movies in Republican Shanghai (Lee, 1999b: 79).

The short story is also one of Shi Zhecun's experiments with new modernist styles of narrative expression. Shi here turns to an unbroken interior monologue and stream of consciousness throughout the narrative as a means to reveal the irrational depths of modern urbanites. The story begins *in medias res* with the narrator's date going to the ticket counter to buy the tickets—an act that immediately throws him into deep suspicion that all the people around him are all staring at him wondering why he didn't buy the tickets himself. The beginning of the narrative is carried by questions:

What, is she really rushing over to buy the tickets? That brings shame on me. Isn't that guy looking at me, the bald Russian? That woman is also staring at me. Yes, and so is that man there who took out the cigar in his mouth. They're all looking at me. Right, I know what they're thinking. They look down on me, no, they're ridiculing me. I don't understand why she had to rush over and buy the tickets . . . How could she not know that this would make me feel ill at ease? (Shi, 1996: 259)

The interior monologue foregrounds the narrator's self-doubts and demonstrates that the protagonist is failing to understand the woman he is with. At first, the narrator, who is married, is wondering how the woman feels about him, whether she loves him or not, and he recalls the other outings they have had the preceding few days. He feels that she is secretly watching him and leaning toward him. In the darkness of the movie house, the narrator's concerns shift from apprehensive self-doubts to sexual desire. During the intermission, he buys ice cream and she passes him her handkerchief to wipe his fingers:

She passed me a handkerchief. Has she been watching me all along? Such a small handkerchief and so warm and moist that she must have wiped a lot of sweat with it. Good, now I have wiped my fingers clean . . . Just a minute, I want to smell it. If I pretend to be wiping my mouth, then I could smell it as much as I like and who could possibly tell? . . . Ah, lovely. This is certainly her scent. This must be the scent of her

perfume mixed with sweat. I'd like to give it a lick and see what it tastes like. I imagine that must be very interesting. I could wipe the handkerchief from the left side of my mouth to the right and when it passed, I could stick out my tongue and lick it. I could even suck it a little and nobody could tell. Isn't that clever? Good, the lights have all gone out and the movie has begun. This is the perfect opportunity to suck it all I want . . . It is very salty here. Is that the taste of her sweat? . . . But what is this here, this sharp fishy taste? . . . Phlegm and snot, perhaps? Yes, phlegm and snot. How sticky it is. This is really a new delicious flavor to discover! It is as though the tip of my tongue has started quivering. How odd, I practically have the feeling of embracing her naked body . . . Couldn't I perhaps keep the handkerchief? (267)

Finally, he returns the handkerchief and returns to wondering about what her feelings are for him. As the hero of the movie takes off his wedding ring and throws it away before embracing his lover, the narrator likewise takes off his ring, but does not make the same commitment. The woman asks what he is doing, and he takes offence, replying, "I'm not doing anything." As the movie ends and the audience leaves, she slips and nearly falls. Clearly, she is miserable due to his lack of commitment, but the narrator thinks she perhaps did it deliberately, so as to lean on his arm. As in the beginning, the narrative consists of rows of questions to himself. They part outside the cinema with the narrator trying to guess her thoughts. Overly stressing the point, the final sentence is: "I don't understand" (270).

As in the previous short stories, the narrator's sexual fantasies are linked to a change of setting. Here, the dark cinema becomes a separate space within which the narrator's mind runs free. In the darkness, his apprehensions are gradually overcome by his desire. The story begins with the narrator thinking about the buying of tickets and their prices, and it ends with his thoughts about the air-conditioning of other theaters and the late hour. The narrative style begins and ends with questions. Thus, the narrator's erotic imagination is limited to the darkness of the cinema, while the rest of his life is characterized by his apprehensive confusion about modern urban life.

Shi Zhecun's short stories about men being tormented by women have much in common with the typical *femmes fatales* in other literature: the desired object is considered sexually attractive and is ultimately unattainable. Eventually, she is the man's undoing. Yet there are important differences as well. The *femme fatale* of 1930s Chinese literature is always an urban modern woman contemptuous of the foolish men who are behind the times. But in Shi's fiction, the woman always turns out to be an ordinary person who

happens inadvertently to become the object of passionate male fantasy and desire. Her status as New Woman or femme fatale is an invention of the male gaze upon her.

The enigmatic woman is the man's undoing. In his failure to understand her, she becomes a source of his self-doubt and anxiety. In his quest to comprehend and attain the woman, the protagonist crosses into a world of his own imagination that is separated from the daily routines of modern Shanghai. This is the world of illusion and dreams, which are the domains of the woman. In this separate space, rationality no longer presides. In the countryside, past and present are blurred together with myth, legend, and reality. Likewise the confines of the movie house and the heavy sheets of rain create separate domains in which modern reasoning no longer holds.

The Prostitute

In *An Evening of Spring Rain*, there are only two stories with female focalization. Both stories are about women who are caught in professions where it is their duty to be available to male desire—hence “prostitute.” One woman is a Shanghai taxi-dancer and the other is a prostitute in the capital of the Song dynasty, Bianjing. Both women dream of being liberated by their customers, but their dreams are invariably futile. They fail to understand that their position is unchangeable and that they are locked into place in their profession and social standing as the objects of male erotic desire. The prostitute's existence as a commodity and easily attainable object of male desire means that she is locked into place, physically and mentally, without hope of escape. Unlike the enigmatic woman, she is deprived of her sexuality by her position.

The story “The Twilight Taxi Dancer” (*Bomu de wunü*) (Shi, 1996: 315–26) tells of the dreams and hopes of Su Wen, who works at the Xi Hua dance hall. The taxi dancers (*wunü*) worked for the dance halls and were hired to dance and converse with the customers. In this short story, the narrative covers a single evening in a single room, where Su Wen has decided to stay home for the night. She has decided to stop dancing and settle down in a respectable married life. Yet her dreams are crushed as her uncaring lover—who is already married—leaves her due to financial trouble. In the end, Su Wen realizes the futility of her dreams and returns to her profession. Throughout the story, she never leaves the room. The narrative focuses on her phone calls—four of them—which carry the story forward.

Staying home for the first evening in two years, Su Wen rearranges the furniture and feels that a “splendid new life” has already begun (315). This refurnishing symbolizes a departure from her previous life. Already, the white

bedspreads seem to reproach her for her previous lasciviousness. Later, while caressing her cat Mousha, we learn that she is dreaming of settling down with a man. Su Wen's reveries are interrupted by the first phone call. It is the manager of the Xi Hua dance hall asking why she has not come to work. She pleads illness and announces that she will not renew her contract, which terminates the following day. His arguments to keep her on the job can be surmised from her reply.

Perhaps you're right, but I really hate that old free life. Now, I've become a person with no need for freedom. I wish to be held in a room by somebody. I wish that my things from now on belong to a master. I wish that only one man can frequently enter my room. I wish . . . What? You're laughing at me again. (318)

Su Wen guesses the manager finds her plan to become respectable ludicrous. In the second phone conversation, Su Wen brushes off a customer from the dance hall who is in love with her. She laughs at his ideas of eternal love and tells him that she intends to marry a man in order to escape from her present circumstances. In the third conversation Su Wen phones Ziping, the man she is intending to marry. It turns out he has completely forgotten their date and is now headed for Suzhou. Mousha, representing his image, is angrily pushed onto the floor. Su Wen learns that Ziping is suddenly bankrupt, having lost his fortune on government bonds. They decide to split up. In the fourth and final conversation, Su Wen finally gives up her pretences altogether. She phones another man, Mr. Shao, with whom she sets up a date at a restaurant later the same night. The story ends with Su Wen changing her clothes.

"The Twilight Taxi Dancer" is primarily a story about disappointment and broken expectations. Yet there are also clearly noticeable parallels with much of Shi Zhecun's other work. The underlying theme of dreams being limited to a separate space delimited from reality is continued. Su Wen's room becomes the physical space of her dreams, which are opposed to an outside reality that continues to intrude. The beginning of the story briefly portrays Su Wen's daily life in order to stress that her staying in her room this evening is entirely different from her normal routine. Moreover, her rearranging of the furniture also underlines the theme of recasting her life within the confines of the room. But with every intrusive phone call, Su Wen is awakened from her fantasies to face real life—her manager with the contract, her customers, her lover's bankruptcy, as well as crossed lines and telephone operators. The telephone becomes the invasion of modern reality outside.

The narrative format further emphasizes the room and the telephone. The room becomes the boundary of the narrative voice. In the phone conversations, we only hear Su Wen's part of the dialogue, never the words of her interlocutors, which must be guessed from context. This is very different from "At the Paris Cinema," in which all conversation is recorded in the narrative. The first sentence begins with a "You know, . . ." informing us confidentially that Su Wen never gets out of bed before two o'clock in the afternoon. This confiding tone establishes the presence of a narrator while marking a certain distance between the narrative and the protagonist. The narrator is merely an observer of Su Wen—a knowing voyeur. Yet it is not a case of external focalization, since the narrator also has access to the thoughts of Su Wen. Given this vantage point, it is remarkable that we do not hear the other half of the dialogue. The narration seems to be calling undue attention to itself. Yet the purpose of this narrative experimentation is clear. The reader is kept strictly inside the room—the world of fantasy established by Su Wen.

The short story "Li Shishi" (Shi, 1996: 289–97) is set in the Northern Song dynasty and builds upon a well-known legend. Li Shishi is a recognized semi-historical figure and ranks among the historical Chinese femmes fatales who brought dynasties to their fall. She was a prostitute/courtesan and her relation with the Huizong emperor is recounted in the *chuanqi* tale "Li Shishi waizhuan," but she also figures in the *Water Margin* and other Chinese novels (Gushu renwu cidian, 1994: 1427). Shi Zhecun's short story builds on a composite of these fictions. Like Su Wen, Li Shishi dreams of escaping from her position as a commodified object of male desire. She dreams of becoming the emperor's concubine, but her dreams are invariably dashed and futile. Like Su Wen, Li Shishi cannot cross the social boundaries into respectability.

These short stories deal with the self-imagined delusions and dreams of women who value their worth through the eyes of the male gaze. As prostitutes, these women are judged from the outside by their male customers, but more importantly, the male gaze also defines their very identities for themselves. Their dreams concern being configured differently by men who rescue them from their present profession. Inevitably, these dreams are crushed as they find that their saviors fail to live up to their unrealistically high expectations.

Compared with the males who pursue "enigmatic women," the "prostitutes" reflect themselves in the male gaze and hope to be saved from their present position by unreal men. Both the pursuing male and the prostitute launch into unfounded dreams and desires. But where the males recast the woman into an unfathomable object of desire, the prostitutes recast themselves. They delude themselves into believing that they can become respectable, without realizing that they are trapped by the way they are configured sexually by men.

The Estranged Wife

In the other short story collection, *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*, the short stories with male narrators or male focalization are of a completely different nature. These short stories are mellow pieces about married couples negotiating the problems of mundane daily life. Like the short stories in *An Evening of Spring Rain*, the males consider themselves modern enlightened intellectuals. And again, they cannot cope when confronted with the inscrutability of women. But the “estranged wife” is configured differently from the “enigmatic woman.” The wife is likewise the object of male contemplation and imagination, but in these stories it is entirely without sexual attraction and nervous delusions. The wife is frequently considered a nuisance by her husband, who has higher ambitions and fails to understand that she, likewise, has her own dreams and aspirations.

“Madam Butterfly” (*Hudie furen*) (Shi, 1996: 446–56) is a portrait of a married couple and the tension that gradually develops between an academic husband and his vivacious outgoing wife. Professor John Li (Li Yuehan) is an entomologist who has specialized in the study and collection of foreign butterflies. His foreign name and field of study reveal his alienation from traditional Chinese life and customs. He is a serious scholar who spends his time cataloguing and perusing his vast collection of butterfly specimens. He considers his wife a foolish young woman who spends her time shopping, doing her hair, and going to the cinema. The short story follows the gradual deterioration of their relationship in the first years of their marriage. He complains that she spends far too much money shopping, and she regrets that he does not spend enough time with her. The couple have no common interests and their inability to communicate eventually leads to Li’s wife having an affair with the sports professor, Chen Junzhe. Unlike Li, Chen enjoys swimming, dancing, and driving. He is young and vigorous and peppers his speech with English words and phrases. Chen and Li are each other’s opposites in every respect. Chen is a modern man who enjoys the pleasures of urban life.

When Li one spring day resolves to take his wife out for the evening, it is too late. She is not home so he wanders into the park where he finds her sitting with Chen on a park bench. Watching from a distance, he sees Chen casually swatting butterflies with his tennis racket. The story ends with Li picking them up afterward and thinking of determining their names.

Butterflies are a Chinese symbol of love which Li clearly deadens with his dry scientific study of them. His eternal study of dead butterflies also signifies his incomprehension. At first he appreciates their beauty, but later he spends his time cataloguing them and naming them. His inner fragmentation is hinted at by his having to read foreign books to learn about Chinese

butterflies. This is paralleled by his failure to comprehend his wife and eventually he alienates her. She is described sympathetically and respects him deeply but longs for another, livelier life. Like him, she tries to make the marriage work. There are no furious arguments between them, merely a failure to communicate and find common ground.

Like the short stories about enigmatic women, "Madam Butterfly" is concerned with the male failure to comprehend women. Yet the mood and setting of this piece are entirely different from the dramatic fantasies and nervous collapses in *An Evening of Spring Rain*. "Madam Butterfly" is quiet and reserved both in narrative and story. The well-meaning husband who alienates his wife is also the basic theme of several other stories in *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*, such as "Crescent Moon at the End of Autumn" (*Canqiu de xia xian yue*) (Shi, 1996: 416–22) and "Water Shield Soup" (*Chun geng*) (Shi, 1996: 423–31). "Crescent Moon at the End of Autumn" only spans a single evening and tells the story of a couple where the wife is lying sick in bed and the husband is an author trying to write a short story. The wife has been sick for months and continually tries to get her husband's attention. Mechanically, he goes through the motions of serving her tea and fulfilling her wishes, but all he really wants is to sit down at his desk and try to write. She, on the other hand, wants to talk and reminisce about their past. Through the course of the story, he gradually becomes more and more testy, but they both remain outwardly polite and reserved. He is suffering from writer's block, which represents the deadlocked state of their relationship. He is serious and somewhat stern, whereas the sick wife is a dreamer who longs for carriage rides in the park. Yet the husband refuses to engage with her and concentrates stubbornly on his writing. Toward the end, the story suddenly takes a darker turn as the wife brings up their daughter who recently died but is not yet buried. The wife dreams of decorating their daughter's grave and asks him to open the curtains so that she might see the moonlight. Finally, she falls asleep in the bed, which by this point seems ominously reminiscent of a deathbed.

The story is certainly tinged with a gothic touch. The wife's illness is particularly telling. Yet the story as a whole has a gentle mood and one understands the respective concerns of both the husband and the wife. The basic relationship of serious husband and emotional wife is carried over from "Madam Butterfly," but this short story also contains another deeper dimension: the couple's joint repression of their child's death. It is an issue that they obviously try to avoid confronting but one that continually lurks beneath the surface as the source of their problems. He has repressed it altogether by immersing himself in work whereas the wife—partly through her dreams—is closer to coming to terms with the daughter's death. Her final insistent desire

to watch the moon through the curtains seems also to be a desire to die and see her daughter in another world.

The short stories about married couples all explore recurrent themes. The males are overly restrained and serious, while the women are more spirited and emotional. The husbands basically do not understand their wives, and naturally misunderstandings occur. Thus, the relationships in these stories follow a predestined course. Both parties have the best of intentions, but the differences between them inevitably become the basis of marital strains.

Generally, the wives are far more complex than their husbands presume. The husband generally presumes his wife to be spoiled and wholly without serious pursuits. He considers her frivolous and therefore refuses to react seriously to her dreams and wishes. The husband fails to understand her because he cannot engage with her directly. Instead, he operates within a restricted world of rationality and restraint that prevents him from connecting with her. In these short stories, the husband and wife occupy opposite positions with respect to rationality. In "Crescent Moon at the End of Autumn," the wife inhabits a world of dreams and darkness that the husband cannot comprehend.

The male intellectual protagonists consider themselves modern, rational, and enlightened but cannot realize that this delimits them. Their wives represent the irrational and the unknown, which they cannot grasp or control. Yet the male does not cross into irrationality and madness as in Shi Zhecun's other pieces. Instead, irrationality intrudes upon their lives, and they find that it cannot be avoided, despite their efforts to keep it away. Like the short stories about enigmatic women in *An Evening of Spring Rain*, the wives in *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* are sources of frustration and bewilderment for the men. The stories mostly end in melancholy loss. Eventually, the husband must realize that Madam Butterfly is having an affair and that the daughter has irreversibly died. The conflicts between husband and wife are not resolved and there are no easy solutions.

The Inhibited Woman

In *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*, the short stories with female focalization are about "inhibited women." Like the prostitute, the inhibited woman dreams of breaking free of her fetters and recasting herself in another way. But unlike the prostitute, it is not male sexuality, but rather her own inhibitions and sense of female duty that impose the principal restraint.

In these two stories, the inhibited woman comes to Shanghai from the country and finds that her traditional concepts no longer hold. Modern

Shanghai induces fantasies and erotic awakenings that are repressed when the women realize that reality does not conform to their expectations. Thus, the underlying theme of crushed illusions is carried over from the stories about prostitutes, but there are also clear differences. Most importantly, these women are not restrained from the outside but by their own sense of propriety and social decency. These women restrain themselves and are the victims of their own illusions.

In the short story “Fog” (*Wu*) (Shi, 1996: 394–406), Shi Zhecun explores the confrontation between modernity—here in the form of a movie star—and the outdated prejudices of the female protagonist. Su Zhen is the daughter of a Catholic priest (an unexplained anomaly) in a little fishing village. Having reached the mature age of 28 without yet having married, Su Zhen and her father naturally worry about her uncertain marriage prospects. Still, Su Zhen considers herself far above the uneducated fishermen of the village and constructs a mental image of the ideal scholar husband for herself, which she bases on the romantic literature in her father’s library.

The narrator stresses that both she and her father are old fashioned, having trouble adjusting to fashionable qipaos and short haircuts for women. But on a train ride to Shanghai to meet some relatives, Su Zhen sits across from a cultivated gentleman who attracts her attention. He is reading poetry, and she feels that he is a man who “completely matches her criteria for an ideal husband” (398). During the ride, they converse and Su Zhen is smitten by his attention. Before getting off the train, he gives her his card. His name, Lu Shikui, means little to her, but later, when she shows the card to her family, her nieces are absolutely thrilled. They inform her excitedly that Lu Shikui is a famous film star (*dianying mingxing*). She, on the contrary, is gravely disappointed.

He makes movies? What did she say? Lu Shikui makes movies. An actor (*xizi*), a simple actor! How could he be an actor? It was as though Su Zhen had received an unexpected blow. She suspected that she must have misheard, or else they were mistaken about him. (405)

Su Zhen slumps back and claims that nothing happened and they didn’t speak on the train at all. We sense that she is embarrassed at confessing her relation with a mere actor. The story ends somewhat crudely, by emphasizing her complete incomprehension:

Suddenly, she seemed to be back on the train: “It is really a heavy fog today. One cannot see clearly at all!” (406)

This reference to the fog in quotation marks echoes a remark Su Zhen had made earlier to Lu Shikui on the train. In both cases, the fog symbolizes denseness on the part of Su Zhen. She was guided by her own ideals when she became enamored of him and later, when she hears that he is an actor, she again brings her prejudices to bear on him. The function of the fog in this story parallels the incessant rain in "An Evening of Spring Rain." It carves out a separate world where normal restraints and rationality are lifted, opening a window into repressed desires and fantasies.

Basically, this story is about a naïve girl's confrontation with modernity. The train is the vehicle that transports Su Zhen from her old world of fiction and dreams into the "real" world of modern Shanghai. Interestingly, she is not simply a woman of the country, for she is an outsider in the fishing community in which she lives. Her father's status as Catholic priest similarly implies that they are both aliens there. Thus, this is not a simple confrontation between country and city values. Rather, Su Zhen's prejudice is a product of romantic literature and her own imagination. She considers herself rational and enlightened, but her romantic reading induces fantasies. Suddenly faced with the modern urban codes of social class and love, she finds that her previous conceptions no longer hold. In Shanghai, a "movie star" is not a "simple actor" but rather the most modern and glamorous partner conceivable. This reversal is sadly incomprehensible to Su Zhen, who must carry on her solitary life.

In "Spring Sunshine" (*Chun yang*) (Shi, 1996: 437–45), the weather is once again used to signal a certain state of mind. In this story, the sunny weather affects the protagonist quite directly. Unlike rain or fog, the sunlight of spring symbolizes enlightenment and sexual awakening. The story consists simply of a woman's brief visit to Shanghai, which lasts less than a single day. As in the previous story, the woman lets down her guard when confronted with modern life to which she is not accustomed. Aunt Chan has come to Shanghai from her hometown Kunshan in order to make a withdrawal from her bank to cover living expenses. She decides to stay in town for a few hours to enjoy the sunshine, but soon, despite her injunctions to herself against being too frivolous, she is caught up in the pleasures of window shopping and browsing in luxurious department stores along Nanjing Road. Her fiancé died before their wedding, but swayed by financial considerations, she proceeded to marry him posthumously and was now the wealthy owner of his family's estate. Yet she had adopted a very frugal life, not wearing make-up and saving money whenever possible. Her marriage to a dead husband connects her country life to death and stagnation as well as the values of tradition. These bonds are lifted momentarily, as she is confronted with modern Shanghai. After leaving the bank, Aunt Chan soon feels tired

and decides to have a quick lunch before returning home directly. Suddenly, she changes her mind. The sunny weather makes her feel like enjoying herself a bit in the city.

Aunt Chan proceeds to have lunch at a more expensive restaurant than the noodle shop she had originally intended. Looking at a couple with a young child, she envies them their domestic felicity. She imagines other men in the restaurant becoming interested in her and she has an imaginary conversation with a gentleman who invites her out for a film. In her fantasies, she walks along the street with a boyfriend and the sun is shining. She remembers the bank clerk who was looking at her while she opened her deposit box. Suddenly, she fears that she might have forgotten to lock the box, so she rushes back to the bank to make sure. Here, the clerk treats her in a courteous but cool manner, shattering her dreams as he calls her “Mrs.” (*taitai*) instead of “Miss” (*xiaojie*) as she had imagined in her fantasies. As she leaves, he addresses another woman “Miss Chen” (*misi Chen*), even adopting the foreign titular address, signaling that Miss Chen truly appears a modern woman unlike Aunt Chan. As she heads home, the weather turns cold, naturally symbolizing the end of her brief explorations of fantasies and sensuousness. The story ends with her checking the receipt and change from the restaurant while waiting for the train.

The similarities between the two stories are striking. Both revolve around a country woman who comes to Shanghai and must confront her own inhibitions there. Su Zhen and Aunt Chan have both established mental barriers that they find they cannot surmount. Su Zhen’s fantasy of love takes place with an actor in a train and in the end, it seems that the events were merely a play or an act wholly separated from her normal life. Her refusal to recognize what happened accentuates this. Aunt Chan, similarly, has elaborate fantasies in which she meets the perfect man and these dreams are likewise shattered when she finally speaks with the actual person—the bank clerk. Like Su Zhen, she retreats to the country and reestablishes her own inhibitions focusing on pecuniary matters. In the end, both women deny their aspirations.

I believe these stories are meant to be read as the opposites of the stories in *An Evening of Spring Rain*. Where the male protagonists of those stories leave Shanghai to confront the irrational in the countryside, these stories do the same in reverse. The female protagonists leave their country homes to face the unknown in the city. To them, it is the city which is at once both irrational and tempting. While the situation is reversed, there are also similarities that carry over. Like the urban male who carries with him an imagined preconception of the countryside, the inhibited woman likewise brings her own hopes with her to the city. This shapes her understanding of events and

prevents her from engaging constructively with her new surroundings. Confronted with reality, she finds herself at a loss and must return to her starting point, physically as well as mentally. Like the uncomprehending husband, the inhibited woman cannot cross into the world of the irrational.

From the male perspective, the woman belongs to an alien world of dreams and illusions. The opposite side of this divide is explored in the short stories with focalization on female characters. The female characters in Shi Zhecun's stories dream of liberation rather than sexual adventure. They are not on the path to nervous collapse or moral transgression. They only transgress against their own self-established obligations. These are stories of lost opportunities and unrealized dreams. The women are unrealistic dreamers with pent-up yearnings and desires that they cannot express. Both the "prostitutes" and the "inhibited women" seek greater individual freedom. Unwittingly, they are the victims of male sexuality and self-imposed restraint. They are not concerned with understanding men but with understanding their own situation. They wish to establish new identities for themselves but find that they are delimited, either by the expectations of society or by their own inhibitions. Inevitably, the stories end bleakly, with the women mired where they are. When reality collides with their fantasies, the women are disillusioned and return to their set ways.

The New Woman Subverted

Shi Zhecun's two short story collections from 1933, *An Evening of Spring Rain* and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*, both explore the multiple ways in which the representation of women is framed by the male perspective. The first collection focuses on sexually driven males. It revolves around sex and neurasthenic delusions. The second collection is concerned with repressed longings and dreams, focusing on couples and restrained women's sexual awakenings.

In *An Evening of Spring Rain*, modern, educated men from Shanghai pursue women whom they desire but cannot attain or understand. Their incomprehension makes them create a delusional image of the woman that reflects their own disturbed state of mind. It is the male protagonist's lack of understanding that causes him to project various fantasies onto her. He tries in vain to guess her identity and thoughts or to define her in relation to myths and legend. In the stories outlined above, the woman is not only inscribed with sexuality but also with legend, fantasy, and death, making her an object of attraction but also of self-doubt and repulsion at the same time. It is these conflicting female constructions that reveal the inner psychological divide of the male protagonists.

In *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*, on the other hand, the obsession with sex is toned down in favor of dreams about love and the search for marital harmony. In this short story collection, there are no seductive women who lure males toward nervous collapse. The characters in this collection likewise have their dreams and fantasies, but they are of a different nature, and they do not act upon them with the same self-destructive results. The short stories with male focalization are mostly about stern husbands who fail to understand their wives. Again, the woman represents the irrational and the unknown, but in these pieces the males consider their wives bothersome. The husbands go through the motions required by marriage but do not understand their wives or the relationships they are in. Here it is not sexuality that drives the men to their undoing but male narrow-mindedness that becomes the source of crisis and self-doubt. When the woman refuses to remain within the boundaries he has established, she becomes a source of incomprehension and anxiety. In the short stories with female focalization, the women are dreamers who long for other and happier lives. Most of the stories end in a sort of status quo, with little actual change. They are well intentioned but too conservative and therefore fail to understand modern urban ways.

Despite the marked differences between the two collections, they still have a fundamental theme in common: how the clash between modernity and its opposite—fantasy, tradition, and myth—leads to delusions and misunderstandings. In Shi's fiction, this clash is inscribed by the male perspective onto women. Women are bewildered by modern life or misconstrued as seductive vixens by deluded men. This also has implications for the idea of the New Woman. As seen earlier, the struggle to appropriate and represent the New Woman stereotype reflected how various groups in China envisaged modernity for the nation. By projecting various and competing visions of modernity onto women, the New Woman stereotype became a contested symbol that remained in flux. But in Shi Zhecun's short stories, the very link between women and modernity is challenged as the result of individual delusions, misunderstandings, fantasy, and dreams. The women in Shi's short stories are never in and of themselves modern. They are only imagined to be so or nurture naïve dreams of their own advancement toward liberation. In every case, it is the (usually uncomprehending) male perspective that ultimately governs the female characters' status as they are caught between modernity and tradition. In this manner, Shi repeatedly highlights and subverts the link between women and modernity that produced the New Woman stereotype.

I have outlined a classification of the short stories in *An Evening of Spring Rain* and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* which divides them into four groups based on the division between the collections and the division

Table 1. Overview of Stereotypes

	<i>An Evening of Spring Rain</i>	<i>Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women</i>
Male focalization	Enigmatic woman	Estranged wife
Female focalization	Prostitute	Inhibited woman

between male and female focalization (see Table 1). I have named the women in these four groups the enigmatic woman, the prostitute, the estranged wife, and the inhibited woman.

It should be mentioned that a few short stories do not conform to this schema. For example, there is a “prostitute” story—“A Xiu”—in *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women* (Shi, 1996: 468–84). But on the whole, I believe this division can serve as a useful framework with which to analyze the role of female characters in these two short story collections.

Each of the four female stereotypes discussed here has distinctly different meanings with respect to contemporary discourses on female emancipation, agency, and sexuality. Shi is not concerned with creating role models of modernity or revealing the debasement of moral values. Instead, he presents sexuality as a source of dreams, legends, and delusions juxtaposed with rationality and modern progress. The New Woman image became the embodiment of modernity’s drive toward rationality, progress, and individualism. In Shi Zhecun’s short stories, these concepts come under attack, as the modern enlightened characters submit to repressed fantasies of sex and love, which they cannot control or understand. For the female characters in Shi Zhecun’s short stories, modern life stands as the very opposite of rationality and progress. Shanghai becomes a bewildering place of dizzying illusions that presents prospects that cannot be attained. For the modern urban male, his preconceived ideas of women lead to a loss of rationality and, ultimately, reality.

In the end, the illusions are inevitably shattered and the beginnings of sexual awakenings are repressed. In this respect, the outlook of Shi Zhecun’s stories is quite bleak. But here we see the subversive aspect of Shi Zhecun. By constantly mixing his modern urban narratives with underlying themes of the repressed and the irrational, Shi is attempting to disrupt the fixed representations of women in contemporary Shanghai. Most importantly, he attempts to sever the link between representations of the feminine and the idealization of modernity—the link that produced the image of the New Woman. In Shi Zhecun’s fiction, the New Woman is undone and rational modernity becomes a questionable mental construction that unravels from within.

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Biography

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