Narrative as Therapy: Stories of Breast Cancer by Xi Xi and Bi Shumin

With Lu Xun’s celebrated story “A Madman’s Diary” (“Kuangren riji,” 1918), modern Chinese literature started off in a medical approach often interpreted by critics as national allegory. The therapeutic function of storytelling on the personal level, however, has largely been ignored until recently. This paper focuses on the fictional writings about breast cancer by two contemporary Chinese women writers, namely, Xi Xi’s Elegy for a Breast (Aidao rufang, 1992) and Bi Shumin’s Save the Breast (Zhengjiu rufang, 2003). In light of Susan Sontag’s cultural critique of medical metaphor and post-Freudian, Foucauldian deconstruction practices of narrative therapy, these masto-texts have emerged as investigative reports to re-author or re-story female fears of the malignant tumor that is not only incurable but also unspeakable because of its perceived relation to sexual characteristics.

Buttressed by postmodern literary and poststructuralist therapy theories, this research undertakes a narratological analysis of the clinical stories to address issues of ethics and subjectivity. Advertized as the first Chinese psychotherapy novel by a psychologist, Save the Breast relates an experimentation of talk therapy with a group of patients to deal with the biopolitics of breast cancer as both social stigma and physio-psychic trauma against the tide of medical marketing in today’s China. Its precursor from Hong Kong, Elegy for a Breast, the first literary effort of a Chinese woman writer describing her own experience of cancer treatments, draws readers into discovering their physical corpore as well as her textual corpus, suggesting an alternative authorship in the first-person narrative of a patient text. Though composed in different styles, both works examine the doctor-patient and author-reader power/knowledge relationships by seeking therapy in narrative and reinventing narrative as therapy.

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a lecture by

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Bio
Howard Y. F. Choy, Associate Professor of Chinese Language and Cultural Studies, received his Ph.D. in comparative literature and humanities from the University of Colorado. A journalist and theater critic from Hong Kong, he joined the Wittenberg faculty in the Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures and East Asian Studies in 2007. His research interests focus on Chinese culture and literature, with the most recent project being a comparative study of political jokes across mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. Currently editing a book of Liu Zaifu’s selected essays, he is the author of Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng’s China, 1979-1997 (2008) and the assistant author of The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Confucianism (2005). He has also published a number of articles and translations in major scholarly journals, including positions, American Journal of Chinese Studies, and Asian Theatre Journal. Dr. Choy has also taught at Stanford University and the Georgia Institute of Technology. His teaching includes all levels of Chinese, business Chinese, and courses in Chinese cinema, culture and literature. He serves as the faculty advisor of The Wittenberg University East Asian Studies Journal.