

NEEDS DEPRIVATION, FEMALE MADNESS, AND THE PRE-OEDIPAL MOTHER IN LI ANG'S *THE BUTCHER'S WIFE*

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256 Since its original publication in 1983 and English translation in 1986, *The Butcher's Wife* (*Sha Fu*), by Taiwanese author Li Ang, has taken its place as an important addition to Chinese-language literature on gender relations and female madness. At least one scholar has termed it "one of the most powerful works in the history of Taiwanese literature" (Chien, "Women Crossing" 9). Although it has yet to inspire major critical activity in the West, it has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in Asia, engendering more than ten academic articles published in English and many more in Chinese. These studies seem to have reached a consensus that this novelette, although often viewed negatively by the public and branded "outrageous," "immoral," and "perverse" by conservative commentators (Chien, "Deconstructing Patriarchy" 268),¹ is a major work of contemporary Asian "feminist" writing on the patriarchal oppression of women living in a traditional culture. Such a focus renders it ideal for feminist critical approaches, and a number of thought-provoking scholarly studies (e.g. Chien, Chu, Ng) of the novelette based on such approaches has already been published. With few exceptions, these essays emphasize the protagonist's attempts at self-affirmation in the face of overwhelming opposition, reading the murder of her abusive husband as a triumph of the will. They pay little specific attention, however, to Lin Shi's descent into madness as a result of the systematic denial of her human needs. In our interpretation, we see this inexorable psychic deterioration as the center of the work. Extreme physical and social deprivation eventually fragment Lin Shi's consciousness to the point that she reverts to a pre-Oedipal psychic world in which the law of the father has no place. At that point, the pre-Oedipal mother, unfailing source of *all* the child's needs, takes over as the omnipotent controlling force. The protagonist therefore no longer functions according to the logic of the symbolic order, and the culturally unthinkable (murdering one's husband) becomes possible,

perhaps inevitable, since the fathers have deprived Lin Shi of her humanity while the mother has provided it. Seen in this light, *The Butcher's Wife* is a chronicle of how an ostensibly mild, timid, "traditional" woman caught in an extreme form of patriarchal oppression can be deprived of her basic human needs to the point of committing the "inhuman," "illogical" act of butchering her husband as if he were a pig.

In her preface to the English translation, Li Ang indicates that she was writing under the influence of "feminist ideals,"² that her conscious purpose was "to show the tragic fate that awaited the economically dependent Taiwanese women living under the rules of traditional Chinese society" (x). She further explains that her interest in writing such a novel was kindled during her stay in the United States where she completed an M.A. in Drama at the University of Oregon. During her travels about the country before returning to Taiwan, she came across a news story about "the sensational murder of a man by his wife in Shanghai in the 1930s..." (ix). The story fascinated her because there was reason to believe the murder had not stemmed from an adulterous affair, as traditional Chinese society led people to presume was always the case whenever a woman killed her husband. Li Ang was outraged by such demeaning traditional attitudes toward the moral character of women, prejudices held by many Chinese for thousands of years leading to the dictum that any woman who kills her husband is wicked and promiscuous, a "bitch," and no other interpretation is possible. The "good" Chinese wife must be so subject to her husband that any form of infidelity is impossible. Only a wicked woman would even think about it.

The fact that the murderess in the Shanghai case denied any extramarital relationships and that the prosecution was never able to prove she had ever had a lover clearly fascinated Li Ang. Along with the woman's insistence that the killing had resulted from her husband's abuse, these facts led the novelist to see the case as that of "a woman who had suffered the oppression of traditional society" (ix). The story, she explains, was written according to her desire to expose such abuse and oppression, to counter the human tendency to turn away from such cases rather than confront them and what they imply about society as well as the individual. Because she "knew virtually nothing about Shanghai" (ix), Li Ang set her narrative in provincial Taiwan where the reader follows the central character's systematic dehumanization at the hands of "old Taiwanese society" (x), a patriarchal world in which men, and the women who act as their agents, sometimes resort to extreme measures in order to maintain supremacy. The story of Lin Shi reveals such measures as the reader follows the ruthless denial of her human needs from childhood through the murder of her husband. In essence, her ability to live in the world as a "normal" member of society is never allowed to develop.

Although it may in some respects be considered outdated, superficial, even relatively naive by some contemporary psychologists, Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs may prove helpful in our analysis of Lin Shi's dehumanization.³ As a practical approach to the study of personal experience, this theory lends itself well to an analysis of systematic dehumanization based on the intentional withhold-

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ing of food, safety, affection, esteem, etc. as we see in Lin Shi's life. Her story, in fact, may be read as a virtual case study for Maslow's theory as she is denied her humanity through the frustration of every level of need Maslow includes.

First in dominance, since "all other needs may become simply nonexistent or be pushed into the background" as long as they remain unsatisfied, are the needs for food, clothing, and shelter (Maslow 37). Second is the need for safety, the need for freedom from physical danger and for a sense of security that one's physiological needs can be met. Once these two levels of need are fulfilled, the individual can move on to higher needs, those related to esteem—the need for self-respect, self-esteem, or the esteem of others—and self-actualization—the need to do what the individual "is fitted for," to attain self-fulfillment. It is at this level, Maslow points out, that "individual differences are greatest" (46), that true individuality flowers. We may add that it is on these higher levels that the individual attains a "voice," an actualization of self so far beyond possibility for Lin Shi that she seldom speaks at all during her brief existence and is almost immediately silenced whenever she does.

The first level of need—for air, water, food, sleep, clothing, shelter, and sex—comes immediately into play as the chronicle begins. Lin Shi lacks food, clothing, and shelter when she and her mother are evicted from their home after her father's death. Because no female can be an heir in traditional Chinese/Taiwanese society, the deceased father's brother exercises his male right to dispossess mother and daughter of everything they own once their man is gone, leaving them to forage through the streets looking for scraps and odd jobs to survive.¹ They are allowed to use the abandoned ancestral hall for shelter, but when winter arrives in a time of war their situation grows so desperate that Lin Shi's mother is reduced to submitting to sex with a soldier for two balls of rice. This scene clearly illustrates Maslow's point that "If all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply nonexistent or be pushed into the background...for consciousness is almost completely preempted by hunger" (37). Lin Shi's mother, who would ordinarily be intensely conscious of the grave results of sexual impropriety in her society, loses sight of that ultimate social injunction—and therefore expression of a higher, less prepotent need—as a result of deprivation of the most prepotent of all needs, the need for food. As the narrator describes it, "for the last few days she had eaten nothing but sweet-potato mash and pig slop....She'd been too hungry, that was all, too hungry to think about the consequences" (8). She has been forced by patriarchal rule into a situation in which "all capacities are put into the service of hunger-satisfaction, and the organization of these capacities is almost entirely determined by the one purpose of satisfying hunger" (Maslow 37). As the narrator declares in reference to Lin Shi later in the story, "hunger can win out against any fear" (128).

After the mother's "sin" has been discovered by the uncle and other clansmen, whose physiological needs are sufficiently satisfied that they can indulge in such higher needs as that of guarding the family's position in society, Lin Shi is taken

away to make sure the clan bloodline will not be "contaminated" and never sees her mother again. She and the reader never know exactly what happens to the mother, but she is rumored to have "drowned in the river" or been "soundly beaten" and forced to flee, never to return (9). The mother's sin is particularly grievous because of its public nature and consequent social implications for the entire clan. The fact that it takes place in the ancestral hall, the family temple, strengthens these implications.

The relationship between food and sex in *The Butcher's Wife* suggests that Li Ang does not fully agree with Maslow's inclusion of sex on the same level of need as food, or at least that she sees it as a need that cannot be so simply categorized. As a traditional Chinese saying puts it, "Fed and clothed, therefore wanton."⁵ In other words, after the primal needs for food and clothing are satisfied, sex becomes possible if not likely. This saying, and the attitude toward food, clothing, and sex upon which it is based, is clearly part of the patriarchal Chinese social structure.⁶ According to its logic, the need for sex becomes higher than the need for food. Throughout *The Butcher's Wife* this relationship is clearly maintained. The gender power structure of the traditional Chinese society Li Ang depicts is enforced through male control of food and sex as men use food to barter for sex when Lin Shi's mother submits to the soldier and again when Lin Shi's husband establishes a clear tie between the two in his relationship with his wife: "On the days that Chen Jiangshui wanted her, he would come home with fish, oysters, and, now and then, some meat" (42). When the sex is not to his liking, he withholds the food. After Lin Shi attempts to subvert this patriarchal linking of food with sex by finding her own food and further asserts herself by refusing to scream during sex, Jiangshui tells her, once she is hungry enough, "You just moan a few times, like before, and if I find it satisfactory, well, I'll reward you with a bowl of rice" (126).

The second level of need, that for security and safety, is constantly threatened by men in Lin Shi's community. After the mother's disappearance, Lin Shi becomes the responsibility of the uncle who dispossessed her after her father's death. Thus she returns to life in the same house he had forced her to abandon. He otherwise does little, however, to provide for her security. He would have sold her outright on several occasions but is restrained by other clan members. Finally, he arranges a marriage with "Pig Butcher Chen," who, according to local gossip, pays for his bride by regularly providing the uncle with pork. It is therefore understood that Lin Shi has in effect been sold as a form of punishment for being her mother's daughter. On the other hand, she is also considered lucky since she has gained a husband who can easily provide for her physical needs. For the local community, then, the arrangement is thought to benefit all. The family has disposed of a social burden, the uncle has made a profit, Butcher Chen has gained a wife who must be eternally grateful for his willingness to take her, and Lin Shi has found a good provider for a husband.

Unfortunately, Jiangshui takes advantage of his side of the bargain by forcing himself upon his wife whenever he pleases, and what pleases him most is her agonized screams as he in effect rapes her repeatedly.⁷ In essence, Jiangshui forces himself into

Lin Shi's body much as he forces his knife into a pig. The knife is thus symbolically double-edged: It is a killing tool both in the sense of slaughtering animals and of sexually "killing" the female. It is at the same time destructive and procreative. Chinese men often use a word meaning "kill" when speaking of the sex act, and for Jiangshui intercourse is an act of killing much like slaughtering pigs. Both actions give him an orgasmic thrill. At the slaughterhouse, "As the knife was withdrawn and the blood spurted forth, he was infused with an incomparable sense of satisfaction. It was as though the hot stream coursing through his body was converted into a thick, sticky white fluid spurting into the shadowy depths of a woman at the climax of a series of high-speed thrusts. To Chen Jiangshui, the spurting of blood and the ejaculation of semen had the same orgasmic effect" (75).⁸

260 Lin Shi is never safe from such attacks throughout her marriage except for brief periods when Jiangshui ignores her in favor of Golden Flower, a Backstreet prostitute. Rape thus becomes an almost constant source of pain and fear as well as a horrible dilemma. She cannot live with it; she cannot live without it. Her very life, physically as well as socially, depends on her sexual relationship with Jiangshui. In effect, it turns her marriage into a series of rehearsals of the scene in which her mother, in order to save her and her daughter's lives, submitted to sex with the soldier for food. That submission, too, had been a result of an impossible dilemma orchestrated by the traditional patriarchal culture: Mother and daughter were literally starving to death. The soldier offered food in exchange for sex, an act that would mean expulsion from the clan and community, perhaps even execution. As Maslow points out, however, the need for physical survival overrules all other needs, so the soldier had his way just as Jiangshui does later.

Michel Foucault's suggestion that rape is not necessarily a sexual act may be particularly enlightening at this point in our discussion because Jiangshui's sexual activity with his wife seems more an assertion of power than an act of sexual expression. When he wants "sex" in response to sexual need he patronizes Golden Flower. When he wants to establish or fortify his position as master and/or feel a surge of personal power, he rapes his wife, thereby dispossessing her of a sense of security/safety in "her own home" as well as of personal worth. This power play merges in Jiangshui's patriarchal strategy with similar acts such as the withholding of food. Rape in this sense, according to Winifred Woodhull in "Sexuality, Power, and the Question of Rape," "should be seen as a logical outcome of political, economic, and social processes that generate and foster men's domination over women in every cultural domain" (170). Certainly it seems clear that Jiangshui does not rape Lin Shi simply as an "inevitable result of a supposedly innate male aggressivity coupled with an uncontrollable sexual need" (Woodhull 170) since his sexual needs are well taken care of by Golden Flower. Rather, Jiangshui uses rape as a tool for control and particularly to establish his absolute ownership and domination of his wife.

Maslow's third level, the need to be loved, accepted, and belong is one Lin Shi attains only fleetingly after her mother's disappearance. Perhaps the most traumatic

moment of her life takes place when she is "led away" from her mother at the ancestral hall. Failing to convince the clansmen that her actions were a justifiable result of starvation, the mother is bound as a criminal to a pillar of the edifice. She has in essence given her life for her child as well as herself in exchanging sex for food, and now her child is being torn from her. Both mother and daughter are losing forever the one person who truly loves them. Having no other clothes left, the mother is wearing her red wedding dress. The pillar and the dress become the central images of a recurring dream that will haunt Lin Shi for the rest of her life as she desperately grasps for the sense of being loved, cared for, accepted, and belonging her mother had provided. The scene and the dream are redolent with symbolism: The pillar, a central support of the ancestral hall, signifies the all-powerful phallus. The bonds that secure the mother to the pillar may be read as the "law of the father," the patriarchal rules that bind all females to the phallocratic order. The red marriage dress signifies sex and the myriad rules and practices concerning it in a patriarchal culture.

The death of Lin Shi's father, her mother's disappearance, and her uncle's declaration after her marriage that she no longer has any ties to him or the rest of the family leave her with no one to turn to for third-level needs. She is in effect sold to Jiangshui much as a farm animal is sold. Once the sale is complete, the previous owner no longer has any interest in the animal, and the former relationship is entirely terminated. Such a break leaves Lin Shi without the benefit of a family to help her solidify her sense of identity and to adjust to marriage, to understand and deal with her role as individual and wife within the conjugal home as well as the community. The role of luck in the life of a female living in such a traditional patriarchy stands in stark relief at this point in the narrative: If Lin Shi's father had not died, or she had had a brother, her life as well as her mother's would have been vastly different.

It is especially telling that the author never speaks of love in Lin Shi's relations with her uncle or any other member of her clan. Correspondingly, the narrative never refers to love in her relations with Jiangshui. Li Ang usually uses some form of the term "assault" for sexual activity between them. Additionally, the narrative never implies that Lin Shi wants sex or enjoys it in any way.

Concerning her need for acceptance and belonging, Lin Shi is sometimes victimized more directly by women than men. She soon takes it as a matter of course that she can hope for little more than food and shelter from Jiangshui in return for her wifely obligations, but after she first goes to live with him, there is a period when she hopes for acceptance among the women of the community. Unfortunately, the gender power structure influences women's relations with each other in ways that Lin Shi, without female relatives to help her learn to survive in the patriarchal culture, knows little about. Her relationship with the older woman next-door, Auntie Ah-wang, is the main case in point. At first the older woman seems prepared to take on the role of "big sister" with her newly-wed neighbor. She gives her ointment to relieve the pain of her first night of sex, invites her to do laundry together, and often talks away the afternoon sitting before the door. It is the first time in Lin Shi's life after the loss of

her mother that she has seemed to have a real friend. Always before, an unbridgeable gap had existed between her and others because of the scandal of her mother's sexual "sin." As we read between the lines, however, we come to see the relationship between the two women as more like that between a new wife and a mother-in-law intent on preserving her son's control over his bride. Given her on-going difficulties with her own son's wife, who has not fulfilled the role of dutiful daughter-in-law, Ah-wang sees Lin Shi as a defenseless young woman she can dominate as a surrogate daughter-in-law. This relationship peaks, and begins to disintegrate, at the point when the conflict between Ah-wang and her real daughter-in-law explodes. When Ah-wang makes a show of hanging herself, Jiangshui, acting as surrogate son, comes to her rescue, an act that lends credence to the suicide attempt. As a consequence, the son's wife, terrified of "offending Auntie Ah-wang's hanging ghost," becomes "a study in obedience" (96), and Ah-wang no longer needs Lin Shi to play the role of devoted daughter-in-law. Now she can repay Jiangshui and simultaneously strengthen her position in the community by expertly switching the roles played by Lin Shi and her actual daughter-in-law.

With Lin Shi now recast as an ungrateful, rebellious daughter-in-law, Ah-wang bitterly, sarcastically criticizes the shocked young woman to her face and behind her back. Her jealousy over Lin Shi's apparent situation with Jiangshui rises to the surface. The young woman has youth, sex, a ready supply of food, and the possibility of a better life than Ah-wang has had. "She has no parents-in-law to lord it over her," Ah-wang tells the women at the village well, "no brothers or sisters-in-law to care for, and no need to go to sea or work in the fields. She could eat whatever she wanted without lifting a finger" (142). Such comments are highly ironic in light of the fact that, at this very moment in the narrative, Jiangshui has been starving Lin Shi as punishment for refusing to play her role as terrified virgin being raped. Ah-wang, then, joins the uncle and Butcher Chen in depriving Lin Shi of essential human needs. She has been starved of food, shelter, and love by these men. Now she is starved of acceptance and belonging by the village women acting under Ah-wang's influence.⁹

A paradoxical element of the gender power structure in traditional Chinese/Taiwanese society is the fact that a widowed mother who has reared her son at great personal sacrifice takes the position of father and thereby becomes a part of the patriarchy. This is the case with Auntie Ah-wang who was widowed in her youth and raised a son alone. She essentially acts as a man in the narrative, judging Lin Shi more as a man might than as the sympathetic sister or mother figure Lin Shi craves. By becoming in effect an honorary man, Ah-wang achieves power and its attendant humanity unavailable to the other women in her community. Of course such a position requires her to hold up her end of the patriarchal power structure by helping to keep other women down.

As Ng reminds us (184), when Ah-wang realizes that Lin Shi has seen her spying on her and Jiangshui having sex, "her face screwed itself up into a smile, a very strange smile....Inexplicably, Lin Shi was reminded of the look in Chen Jiangshui's eyes when-

ever he drew near her" (43).¹⁰ Although it is inexplicable to the naïve Lin Shi, it isn't at all to the reader who understands that Ah-wang's eyes reflect her love of patriarchal power. Ah-wang's assumption of a male role is clear. That it should symbolically be the role of rapist as well helps us understand more clearly Ah-wang's role in the community as agent for patriarchal domination. Like any rapist, she wields power by taking rather than giving. She consciously deprives Lin Shi of any chance she had at achieving at least some extent of female bonding and/or sisterhood, the most precious form of acceptance and belonging available to a woman trapped in an abusive marriage.

Maslow's fourth level of need—the need to be heard, to be appreciated, and to be wanted—also has little chance of fulfillment for Lin Shi. She lacks voice throughout the novel except at two crucial junctures: the weeks following her mother's disappearance and just before she kills her husband. Obsessed by the image of the pillar and red dress first impressed on her subconscious by the harrowing scene at the ancestral hall, she continually talks about her recurring dream dominated by this image until silenced by villagers sick of hearing about it. Forbidden to speak of the main topic of interest to her at that point in her life, she becomes taciturn, which is taken as a sign of "love-sickness." This putative longing for sex is in turn seen as a disturbing sign that she may be a "slut" like her mother. The reader understands, however, that the need for love pervading the dream is not sexual. It is a need, rather, for what Helene Cixous terms "the first nameless love," the love of the mother, "that omnipotent figure that dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby" (qtd in Moi 114). This need, this desire, originates in Lin Shi's having been loved once by the all-powerful source of all basic needs. It is a dramatization of her desperate need to be loved again, to return, in effect, to the mother. Believing that Lin Shi is a budding slut, however, fits much better with the overall aims of the patriarchy. All women, after all, are morally weak and subject to just such venality.

The community view of Lin Shi is thus based on patriarchal discourse that fixes her and her mother in social roles neither deserves but that serve well the needs of the gender power structure. As Chiu sees it, "before Lin Shih's life story begins, she has already been defined by a language whose nature is essentially public and patriarchal" (723). Seen according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's explanation in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Lin Shi and her mother are "sentenced: fated, jailed" by a patriarchal authority that uses misogyny as a strategy to solidify its absolute ownership of women: "The roots of 'authority' tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property" (13). The family fear of being tainted by this "sentence" directly leads to Lin Shi's being married off to Pig Butcher Chen. Thus the community narrative concerning Lin Shi and her mother continues to develop, "framed," as Kuei-Fen Ciu puts it, "within stories already told by other people" about them (722). These other people, often women, act as key keepers of the patriarchal edifice that serves as women's "jail."¹¹

The principal author in the development of this community narrative concerning Lin Shi and her mother is none other than Auntie Ah-wang. Clearly sexually frustrated, having lived for years without a lover, Ah-wang apparently hates Lin Shi for getting what she herself so much wants and needs. Significantly, although the novel gives little information about Ah-wang's sex life, it does mention that she once had an adulterous affair. It is also clear that she takes great interest in her neighbor's sex lives, spying on them whenever a good chance presents itself. Capitalizing on the contradictory attitude toward sex characteristic of traditional Chinese society according to which a woman is supposed to meet her husband's sexual needs without herself deriving pleasure, Ah-wang interprets Lin Shi's cries of pain and fear while being raped by her husband as evidence of sexual passion. "Like mother, like daughter" (103), she tells the village women, comparing Lin Shi and her mother to prostitutes who scream to please their clients while enjoying the sex as much as the men do. Here is a "daughter following in her mother's footsteps," Ah-wang declares.

264 "What's the difference between a woman like that and those bitches in Backstreet?" (104). Language thus becomes another patriarchal tool used to deprive Lin Shi of yet another human need.

After overhearing Auntie Ah-wang saying such things to her neighbors, Lin Shi loses all hope of being accepted in the community and loses her ability to face any of the village women. As a result, she leaves off doing laundry in the morning when they are at the well. Instead, she goes in the middle of the day when the glaring sun serves as a symbol and catalyst for physical symptoms of madness. Her social isolation and loss of voice are now complete. Ng explains Lin Shi's situation thus: "The patriarchal monopoly over naming leaves no voice whatever for women. The female is reduced to the level of the silent, the unconscious" (190). According to this view, Ah-wang's voice is not that of a woman but part of the patriarchal chorus that has pummeled Lin Shi into silence by naming her "slut," "whore," "bad wife," etc.

This scene in which Lin Shi overhears Ah-wang's vicious accusations marks the beginning of the young wife's descent into madness. At this point in the narrative, the deprivations suffered by the protagonist begin working together to erode her subjectivity. Significantly, it is Ah-wang's comments on Lin Shi's own role in her mother's disappearance that triggers the initial "explosion" of madness:

"I'm sure her mother never imagined that neglecting her daughter's education when she was a child would be the cause of her own death—you see, the little one ran off to get help while her mother was having the time of her life."

With what felt like an explosion in her head, Lin Shi's scalp began to tingle, and her whole head seemed to swell. (104)

From this point forward, Lin Shi experiences increasingly frequent losses of consciousness: "Lin Shi stood there, no longer able to distinguish one voice from another....Once in a while a random recognizable word or sentence penetrated her

head and filled her ears, reverberating so violently it sounded like a long shrill shriek" (105). Eventually, the heat of the blazing sun joins with the vicious gossip to create in Lin Shi "an earth-spinning dizziness" (105). Later, she reflects on what Ah-wang has done to her: "Auntie Ah-wang must have been secretly watching her and Chen Jianshui all this time, Lin Shi thought, just before she was overcome by a wave of pain. Her stomach felt as though it were a boiling mass, as though all her blood were about to gush forth. Then everything went black and she lost consciousness" (110).

After such difficulty fulfilling the first four levels of need, it seems that Lin Shi would have no connection whatsoever with the fifth—"self-actualizing"—and yet she makes a number of valiant efforts to attain it. Three of these are especially significant. The first comes after she hears Ah-wang telling the neighbor women that Lin Shi loves sex so much she literally screams for it. As a result she determines to stop screaming no matter how much Jiangshui hurts her. Her sense of self rears itself stubbornly here, but her refusal to scream or moan "drove him into a wild fury. He hit, he choked, he pinched, he prolonged the time he was inside her, but she just gritted her teeth and bore it all in silence—except for the panting hisses that escaped from between her teeth, like the gasps of a tiny animal in the throes of death" (109). Her self-assertion here is remarkable, but in the end it costs her too dear.

Later, as part of her attempt to subvert the patriarchal linking of food and sex by achieving some level of economic independence, Lin Shi undertakes to raise and sell ducklings, but her husband goes into a murderous rage when he discovers them, butchering every one in a frenzy that frightens even him. His extreme rage may be interpreted as a result of his subconscious realization of what his wife is trying to do, of her rebellion that would seriously erode his power over her and his standing in the community as a "man." Later, even after Jiangshui has starved her to the point of desperation because she continues to refuse to moan and scream during sex, she resolutely continues her attempt to thwart the food/sex/power association. This resistance, which can never be allowed to succeed in the community since it targets not merely Jiangshui but the patriarchal tradition as well, may be futile, but Lin Shi nevertheless refuses to give it up. When Lin Shi begins looking for work in order to obtain something to eat, however, Ah-wang once again acts as the patriarchy's enforcer, telling Jiangshui what his wife has been doing. Recognizing that his tactics to this point have not succeeded in stemming his wife's rebellion, consciously interpreting her actions as intended to embarrass him and make him seem like a bad provider for his wife, he does not beat Lin Shi as she expects. Instead, he forces her to accompany him to the slaughterhouse to undertake the job of cleaning the entrails of slaughtered animals.

At the slaughterhouse, all the deprivations Lin Shi has been suffering come together to force her mind below the level of normal consciousness: "She stood dazed. For a brief moment she truly believed that she had entered a dream world and that what she was witnessing now could be nothing less than the hell so often described to her by Auntie Ah-wang" (134). When Jiangshui thrusts an armful of pig innards at

her the trance dissolves, and reality becomes too much to bear: "With an agonizing scream, she keeled over backwards before she even had time to toss away the things in her arms; her eyes rolled back in her head and a white froth began drooling from her mouth" (135). She is taken home on a cart used to carry pigs but ends up at the suicidal well where she confuses her mother's disappearance with Chrysanthemum's jump.

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That the well should be the location for this crucial scene is particularly important to our interpretation of the novelette. The well is the center of Lin Shi's community, especially for the women doing their laundry, a quintessential "women's work," a staple of their domestic responsibilities and an overt symbol of their servitude to the patriarchal order. On the other hand, it also serves as a place where women can get together, tell stories, gossip, and perhaps even commiserate. As the scene of Chrysanthemum's suicide, the place where her ghost is thought to appear on occasion, it serves to remind the reflective reader of the difficulties females face in traditional society. A suffering woman like Lin Shi can feel a sense of kinship with Chrysanthemum and pray to her spirit for protection. Beneath the surface, however, even this momentary respite from the rigors of the symbolic order is illusory since Chrysanthemum is apparently restless in her underworld existence. She has not found happiness in death anymore than in life. Even a woman who throws herself down the village well hoping to exact revenge on the patriarchal culture, as may have been the case with the narrator's aunt in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, is fated to fail in the end. After all, even in the underworld she will be subject to the power of male gods. In Chrysanthemum's case, assuming that she hoped to escape the misery heaped on underclass women by such ruthless men as Lin Shi's uncle and husband, suicide would be futile as well since she would immediately come under the sway of those male gods in her afterlife.

At the well, Lin Shi has apparently lost her hold on material reality. She seems to confuse her own famished state with that of her mother before her disappearance. She pleads to passersby:

"Kindhearted people, have pity, be merciful! Give me a coin so I can offer a decent sacrifice to my mother. My mother was raped, so she killed herself by jumping down a well. The tongues in my stomach tell me she's drenched from head to toe. She has no clothes, nothing to eat. She's famished. I have to burn some clothes for her, fix her a big meal, let her have something to wear, not let her go hungry" (135).

A psychic reunion has taken place between mother and daughter. In her delusion, a blurring of her own subjectivity and consciousness, Lin Shi seems to be hearing echoes of the pre-mirror stage, pre-Oedipal semiotic chora, the "tongues" in her stomach, within which her psyche had functioned before it was split by the symbolic order. She seems to have somehow rejoined the umbilical chord, to have found her way back into the "bottomless well" of her mother's womb.

When she leaves the well, Lin Shi returns home to set up an altar for her mother with sacrificial food. Upon his arrival, after being told by neighbors of Lin Shi's erratic behavior, Jiangshui attacks his wife immediately: "I've had enough of your phony concern, all that crap about praying for your mother. Up your old lady's cunt. Fuck her!" (137). Outraged, Lin Shi becomes more self-assertive, more self-actualized than ever before: "Don't you say bad things about my mother'...she said slowly: 'Don't you dare fuck my mother...'" (137). The radical change here in Lin Shi's tone is crucial to the turn events will now take. She has seldom had the courage to defend herself from Jiangshui's outrages, but now that her mother is directly threatened, she herself becomes threatening. Perhaps the memory of her mother's courage reinforces her own to create a strong, if short-lived, voice. As Toril Moi, discussing Helene Cixous, explains it, "The voice in each woman...is not only her own, but springs from the deepest layers of her psyche: her own speech becomes the echo of the primeval *song* she once heard, the voice the incarnation of the 'first voice of love which all women preserve alive,'" her mother's voice. For Cixous, the pre-Oedipal mother is the god-like figure who, as Moi puts it, "dominates the fantasies of the pre-Oedipal baby" (114). Her voice is "The Voice, a song before the Law, before the breath [*le souffle*] was split by the symbolic, reappropriated into language under the authority that separates" (qtd in Moi 114).¹² The voice of patriarchal authority embodied in her uncle, Jiangshui, and Ah-wang has kept Lin Shi separate from her mother from the crucial moment in the ancestral hall until the murder scene.

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The recurring dream of the pillar and red dress has enabled Lin Shi to maintain at least some semblance of unity with her mother, but now her husband has gone too far in threatening to rape the mother, to "kill" her, as well as the daughter. It is as if the mother somehow returns through her daughter to exact revenge for the atrocities the patriarchy levied upon her. Now Lin Shi acts with far more purpose and courage than ever before. She has reunited with her mother, found her voice, found herself. Now the culturally impossible becomes possible, even inevitable, because "patriarchal culture" is to be challenged by the overwhelming power of the pre-Oedipal mother.

The drunken Jiangshui, however, is incapable of seeing this ominous change. As a product of traditional patriarchy, he cannot imagine his wife becoming dangerous for him in any way. Laughing in derision, he declares, "I'll fuck your mother, then I'll fuck you!" He forces Lin Shi to the bedroom, "tearing her clothes off," and threatens her with his butcher knife: "If you don't scream and yell this time, I'll fix you good with this knife" (137). Her very existence is now at its most precarious: she is starving, she is being viciously attacked sexually, and she is threatened with murder, the weapon at hand. Her voice once again stifled, she doesn't scream but merely whimpers "like a small animal" (137), what to her husband sounds like moaning. He imagines that she is sexually enthralled, and thus he is satisfied. Finished, he rolls off her and falls asleep. At this point the progress of her madness reaches its culmination as her mind loses all contact with objective reality. As Dean and Juliet Flower MacCannell point out in "Violence, Power and Pleasure: A Revisionist Reading of Foucault from

the Victim Perspective,” “the most violent acts are those resulting in long-term or permanent damage to the victim’s subjective functioning...” (205). Chen’s repeated raping of his wife clearly fits these authors’ characterization of serious assault as that which “fragments subjectivity or constantly ‘breaks in’ on the inner dialogue of the victims...to the point that they can no longer conduct themselves in a way that can be termed ‘normal’” (205).

In her definition of madness, Lillian Feder asserts that “unconscious processes” begin to “predominate over conscious ones...” (5). Maslow, as we have already noted, declares that “consciousness is almost completely preempted by hunger” (937). Thus Lin Shi’s consciousness, as was her mother’s in order for her to submit to sex with the soldier for rice, is depressed to a point where she is in essence no longer herself, no longer controlled by the logical processes imposed by the symbolic order of patriarchal rule. Just as her mother frenetically stuffed one of the rice balls into her mouth, seemingly unaware that the soldier was taking her sexually, Lin Shi hungrily hacks away at her husband as if he were a pig she is about to devour while the dream of the pillar and red dress returns: “The geysers of blood began to converge, and for a brief moment, what looked like a single blood red pillar penetrated the inky darkness.... Suddenly the convulsions started, crumbling the pillar, and sending its thick blood spattering in all directions” (138). Symbolically, the patriarchy has crumbled, freeing her mother and herself from its bonds. In the reality of Lin Shi’s life, however, it is a freedom that can culminate only in death.

As the narration moves into the carnage of the murder scene, Li Ang’s style subtly shifts from a relatively simple objective recounting of events to a more lyrical description of images passing through Lin Shi’s delusional mind.¹³ This lyrical mode emphasizes the timeless quality of Lin Shi’s “mad” state. She has lost touch with patriarchal time, with the logical reality of the symbolic order, because her psyche has reverted to the pre-Oedipal stage of her existence, a time when she and her mother were still as one. She now operates according to what Julia Kristeva refers to as “women’s time”: “the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable *jouissance*” (191). Susan Stanford Friedman explains such “lyric discourse” as an attempt to replicate “the desire for the imagined early mother-child bond while narrative discourse reflects the later story dominated by the father” (165). “Lyric moments in a text,” she continues, “may encode an unbounded, boundless desire for a timeless union with the mother, while the linear progression of the narrative may invoke the child’s separation from the mother and initiation into the world and law of the father” (165).

The images passing through Lin Shi’s mind combine the central-most motifs of the narrative: Jiangshui’s butcher knife lies on the bed next to his hand. She sees a flash of light as a moonbeam passes over its blade.¹⁴ Picking it up and stabbing downward as if by habit, she seems to imagine she has taken Jiangshui’s place at the

slaughterhouse.¹⁵ She sees the soldier who took advantage of her mother. He becomes a “squealing, struggling pig with a butcher knife buried at an angle in its gullet.” Blood gushes everywhere, and “she couldn’t figure it out” (138). She thinks she must be dreaming since there isn’t so much blood when the pigs are being butchered at the slaughterhouse. She decides to open the abdomen to see what’s wrong but finds more blood. She scoops out the innards, which, in her famished state, are transformed into noodles as she listens to “countless bright red tongues” babbling noisily. She hacks with the knife until they stop.¹⁶ Once she has completely dismembered Jiangshui’s body, just as she saw the pigs cut up in the slaughterhouse, she enters the kitchen and eats all the sacrificial food she can stuff into her mouth. Her apparent lack of concern about eating the food meant for her mother’s spirit is particularly significant. Her mother had often warned her about eating sacrificial food, saying “that no matter how hungry they got they were never to eat the sacrificial food” (128). In this case, however, she seems to have reached an understanding with her mother that it is all right. It is almost as if the two women have come back together at the height of their suffering from patriarchal oppression.

In *About Chinese Women*, Julia Kristeva declares that a female child must make a choice between father and mother: “either she identifies with her mother, or she raises herself to the symbolic stature of her father. In the first case, the pre-Oedipal phases...are intensified” (28). Clearly, Lin Shi has finally overthrown the father at this point in the narrative. As Moi points out in her discussion of Kristeva, “mother-identification...will intensify the pre-Oedipal components of the woman’s psyche and render her marginal to the symbolic order” (165). Since the community patriarchy has so thoroughly marginalized Lin Shi and her mother to begin with, the daughter has a short distance to travel in order to be thoroughly on the mother’s side of her psyche.

Feminist interpretations of *The Butcher’s Wife* often argue that Lin Shi’s madness is in fact a revolt against the traditional patriarchy that victimizes her. Paolini argues that “Her sufferings and hunger deprivation drive her to the destruction of her tormentor and herself” and that “Through killing, she attains a measure of self-actualization because she defies her husband and her society” (704). Such a view suggests, however, that her delusion in the killing scene is not real, not complete, not truly a domination of subconscious processes, that, instead, it is a final, desperate attempt at self-assertion, even an act of revenge or an integral part of a “deconstruction” of patriarchy in which Lin Shi is playing a role. Such reasoning suggests that Lin Shi’s will remains intact at least to some extent through the murder scene. We agree with Joyce Liu’s declaration that the breakdown represents no “triumph of her self-awareness or self-assertiveness,” that it is instead “a total collapse” (73). Her madness, like Dainty’s in Hsien-Yung Pai’s “Love’s Lone Flower,”¹⁷ is real, not a ploy. We see no reason to believe that Lin Shi succeeds in fulfilling any human need or reversing any of the systematic deprivation she has suffered, by butchering her husband. We argue that the deprivation literally destroys her human consciousness to the point that she

in effect loses herself at least temporarily and becomes truly mad, entirely unable to control her actions according to “normal” (patriarchal) human considerations, that her unconscious mind, responding to the voice of the pre-Oedipal mother, takes over, directing her actions according to a script made up of the repeated horrors of rape, butchery, and the dream of the pillar and red dress.

Any sense of hope we might feel at the end of *The Butcher's Wife* must be grounded in the author's purpose of dramatizing the unjust female suffering possible in traditional patriarchal society, of bringing readers to an awareness of the systematic dehumanization possible in such circumstances. We agree with Ng that “Li Ang seems to be concerned only with exposing the injustice women suffer in traditional Chinese society” (197). It is true that Lin Shi timidly asserts herself on several occasions before the murder, and thereby does, like her mother, threaten patriarchal hegemony in the community, but the systematic, relentless deprivations finally break her completely. Thus the murder is not an act of will but rather an act of madness that emphasizes Li Ang's theme of the power and ruthlessness of traditional patriarchy more effectively than would a murder as an act of rebellion or defiance. As Li Ang herself avers in the preface, Lin Shi suffers a “tragic fate”(x). We can learn from our knowledge of her tragedy, and perhaps be mobilized in defense of other such victims, but Lin Shi herself ends the story as yet another in a long line of female victims of ruthless and overwhelming patriarchy.

After the murder has been discovered, Ah-wang becomes a local celebrity who repeats the story endlessly to anyone who wants to hear it. Her role as porte-parole for the patriarchy is at its most triumphant. She concludes that Jiangshui could no longer satisfy his wife's lust and so she took a lover: “You know the old saying,” she declares. “There's no murder without adultery....Just look how it turned out—mother and daughter both in trouble for the same reason. I tell you, we women really have to watch our step” (141). Whatever the men may be saying, Auntie Ah-wang's pronouncements must seem oracular to local women steeped in the traditional Chinese culture Li Ang decries in her preface. All females must hold themselves severely in check to stifle their evil natures. Look what happened to two women who did not. Thus the story ends with another installment of the community Lin Shi narrative: a wicked, worthless slut goes the way of her wicked, worthless mother. The patriarchy has once again won a total victory, leaving nothing for a surviving female member of the community to use as inspiration for revolt. On the contrary, as we learn in “News Report #2” covering the Shanghai case upon which Li Ang based *The Butcher's Wife*, the absolute submission of the murderess has been thoroughly confirmed. She has been “sentenced to death for the heinous crime of killing her own husband” and paraded through the streets to serve as “a warning against immorality....Surely all the women who saw her will take heed and refrain from imitating foreign women, who are always clamoring for equality....Such demands...comprise a mockery of the code of womanly conduct and destroy our age-old concepts of womanhood” (4).

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ENDNOTES

1. The translator, Howard Goldblatt, points out that as a result of *The Butcher's Wife* and a number of her short stories that he characterizes as "sexual fiction," Li Ang "has been one of the most controversial writers on the Chinese literary scene for a number of years" (150).
2. See Chien for more specific comments concerning feminist influence on Li Ang.
3. Shirley J. Paolini, in "Eros and Thanatos: Psychological Perspectives on *Madame Bovary* and *The Butcher's Wife*" also applies, very briefly, Maslow's theory to *The Butcher's Wife*.
- 272 4. In an interesting parallel, Golden Flower, Jiangshui's favorite prostitute, was deprived of her home by her husband's family after his death just as Lin Shi's mother was. In her case, however, she had no daughter to look after and worsen her personal economic situation. Auntie Ah-wang also lost her husband early in life, but because she had a son who could become an heir, she did not lose her home or her position in the husband's family. Golden Flower's experience is crucial to the social theme of the novel since it helps forestall any tendency in the reader to see Lin Shi's dispossession as an isolated case.
5. We are indebted for this translation to Professor Huang, Qin of Huazhong University of Science and Technology.
6. Goldblatt, referring to comments on the novelette by Zhang Xiguo, points out that this "'food for sex' theme" echoes "the Confucian aphorism of *shi se xing ye* (food and sex are man's wants)" (158).
7. Goldblatt sees "the violent nature of sex" as "the overarching motif" of *The Butcher's Wife* (158).
8. Ng points out that "'Dying' is...a common euphemism for 'coming,' the ecstatic moment of orgasm. Lin's morbid fear of death in ravishment may thus be read as a parody of the masculinist ethos that women enjoy being raped" (184).
9. Symbolically, Ah-wang walks with a pronounced limp because her feet were once bound. She literally embodies old Chinese society and its overwhelming submission of women to men. "As women," she once declares, "we're supposed to be tolerant and put our husbands above everything else" (102). The fact that the Chinese word for *husband* is linguistically related to that for *heaven* may help us understand some of the underlying cultural forces at play.
10. Ng suggests the significance of Ah-wang's "look" by calling it a "male gaze, which establishes a power relationship between the knowing subject (Ah-wang/Chen) and the known object (Lin)" (184).
11. Chien points out that the "gossiping villagers who blindly accept and spread rumors about Linshi [sic] and her mother for being 'tainted' and 'possessed' by evil spirits also reinforce the subtle control of that society" ("Deconstructing Patriarchy" 277).
12. English translation by Moi. See note #1, p. 178 in *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
13. Discussing style in a translated work obviously raises many troubling questions since it can be objected that the style being analyzed is that of the translator(s), not of the original author. We nevertheless persist in our comments on style at this point in our study because we are focusing on the novelette in its English incarnation and believe the translators have painstakingly attempted to at least approximate the stylistic characteristics of the original insofar as that is possible in transforming it from Chinese to English.

14. The moon imagery here is reminiscent of that in many fictional scenes in which the moon presages, or is thought or said to incite, acts of madness. The "flash" of moonlight comes at the very moment when Lin Shi's mind breaks the hold of objective reality. Once Jiangshui is dead, "the ghostly white moonlight" retreats to the doorway (139) as if lighting the way for his spirit's departure.
15. MacCannell and MacCannell point out that "Victims of ongoing assault experience, as the most salient fact of their lives, the need to identify with their oppressor. Under conditions where situations and psyches are organized in such a way that there is no alternative to be other than either a master or a slave, the victim of violence necessarily derives her sense of herself from the cruelty inflicted upon her" (216).
16. In "Deconstructing Patriarchy," Chien explains that Lin Shi's hacking at the tongues "serves as a symbolic act of counteracting malicious gossip of the village women who internalize patriarchal values and vent their anger, resentment, and jealousy on their female 'others'" (278).
17. Unlike Lin Shi, who never seems to entirely give up before the murder scene, Dainty accepts degradation and violence as her "fate": "This is my lot, Sister," she tells the narrator (307) before literally bashing out Yama's brains with a flat iron. Indeed, the concept of fate is thrust upon Lin Shi and her mother as part of the controlling, judging patriarchal narrative. Again Ah-wang serves as oracle: "It was her cruel fate, that's what it was....It was in the cards, I tell you, it was divine retribution" (142).