Beyond Detective Fiction: A Brief Study of Natsuo Kirino's *Gyokuran* (Magnolia)

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Natsuno Kirino (b. 1951) is a female detective fiction writer from Japan. She has published more than 20 novels and several of them, including *Out* (2004), *Grotesque* (2007), *Real World* (2008), and *What Remains* (2008), have been translated into English. Due to her close attention to female psychology in a patriarchal society, Kirino is often considered as a feminist writer. J. Madison Davis comments on Kirino's rich imagination in *Out* in an article published in a recent issue of *World Literature Today*, in which he points out that her fiction creates not only fascinating plots but also a rare sense of reality, especially reality that women face in contemporary Japan.[1] *Out* centers on a murder-mystery case, which involves a housewife killing her abusive husband with the help of three female coworkers from a *bento*-box factory. Behind the murder mystery there is a shocking depiction of reality—although Japan is among the most industrialized nations in the world, women still suffer social and economic inequality and violence within the family.

Compared to her successful detective fiction, less is known about her untranslated novel *Gyokuran*, which focuses on the main character Yuko Hirono traveling to Shanghai to escape from gender discrimination she experienced in Tokyo and from her boyfriend Yukio's mistreatment of her. Kirino uses the trope of women's international travel to reveal the persisting gender inequality in Japanese society. Kirino says in an interview: "A few years ago, many female college graduates in Japanese companies began to realize their limitations as women in Japanese society. As a result, they traveled to New York or

Hong Kong to obtain certificates or working experience abroad. However, they often found it difficult to achieve their dreams abroad and had to return to Japan [without achieving their dreams]. I was concerned about why they went abroad and what obstacles they encountered there when I was writing *Gyokuran*."[2] Kirino does not idealize women's transnational mobility as a sign of women's freedom and improved social status but uses it as another scenario of women trying to escape from social inequalities in Japan.

What makes this novel distinctive is that Yuko's journey to Shanghai connects her to an earlier generation of Japanese who traveled to Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of the novel's mystery results from such an unimaginable connection. While living in Shanghai, Yuko's unexpected encounter with the phantom of Tadashi—her paternal uncle—makes her want to learn more about his life in Shanghai. Yet Tadashi's phantom soon disappears from her surroundings. The novel then picks up a new plot. Tadashi's love relationship with Namiko in Shanghai and his life in postwar Japan are narrated in a separate story line. Both Tadashi and Namiko were from a low social class and suffered from discrimination in Japan. Their migration to Shanghai was linked to their dream for freedom and social justice. Yet for these poor people the foreign city was not a new world but another testing ground for their will, perseverance, and human relationship. Namiko was abused and abandoned by her first husband and fell into becoming a prostitute in Shanghai. Although migration did not help her raise her social class it did enable her to develop consciousness about her economic, political, and gender situation.

Gyokuran shares certain elements with other detective fiction by Kirino—crime and mystery. The criminal in the novel is Namiko's common-law husband, Inoue Shozaburo, who brought her to Shanghai to do socialist activities but completely disappeared a few years later. In fact, he abandoned her and returned to Japan. After the war, he became an important businessman in Japan with the money he embezzled from the Comintern, which sponsored his activities in Shanghai. The

helpless Namiko became his direct victim and died of illness in Shanghai. Although Inoue's crimes are moral crimes beyond the surveillance of law, his character and behaviors not only show male privileges in society as an important reason for women's suffering but also suggest other social elements, such as class struggle, political hypocrisy, and postwar conservatism in Japan that have shaped women's lives.

It remains mysterious how the phantom of Tadashi could appear in front of Yuko. Tadashi is in his late nineties and lives in Japan at that time. He has long ago lost touch with his family, and he may not even know he has a niece named Yuko who is now visiting Shanghai. Yet what Yuko sees in Shanghai is clearly the ghost of Tadashi who appears still in his twenties. In their conversation, Tadashi encourages Yuko to search within her true self and tells her that the new world she is looking for in Shanghai does not exist externally but internally. Another mystery is when Yukio comes to Shanghai to visit Yuko he encounters the images of both Tadashi and Namiko in his dream. He finds himself in their house in Shanghai in the 1920s. In his dream Namiko is dying of TB, and the desperate husband Tadashi asks Yukio—the doctor— when the cure for TB will become available. It remains mysterious to Yukio why he dreams about two people he has never met before. It is even more mysterious that Yukio becomes Tadashi himself in his dream. He is both Yukio and Tadashi at the same time.

Besides these two explicit mysterious incidents, the novel frequently depicts a mysterious symbol—the magnolia flower, which blooms everywhere in the streets of Shanghai in summer. It is the flower that indirectly connects Yuko and Namiko—Yuko loves watching and smelling the flower, and Namiko has the flower on her chest when she dies. The magnolia flower also connects them to Tadashi. At the end of the novel when the 96-year old Tadashi wakes up from a dream in which he meets with a certain young woman, he smells the magnolia flower nearby that reminds him of his nostalgia for Shanghai. It seems that the image of magnolia not only represents Shanghai but also symbolizes Yuko and Yukio's unconsciousness, which is closely related to the past. They no longer have direct and

intimate connection with in the present because their unconsciousness has been suppressed by the collective consciousness of contemporary Japan. Yet their search for self-identity seems to guide them once more to the suppressed unconsciousness and history.

Gyokuran is not a typical detective fiction because it does not solve any mystery but presents human life itself as a mystery that connects one with history and others in unexpected ways. There is no detective figure in the novel to solve the crimes and mysteries and to combine the stories together to reach a coherent conclusion. It is up to the reader to make connections between the separate story lines and decide what messages the crimes and mysteries convey. It is not difficult to find that crimes are manifestations of the social ills of male-dominated Japan. The agents of the crimes are men and victims of the crimes are women, specifically Namiko and Yuko, who suffer from TB and insomnia, respectively. Their physical illnesses are the concrete manifestation of the negative effects of social problems on their bodies. The novel emphasizes that despite all the problems in social reality the characters are interconnected, and they cannot achieve self-identity without understanding the others. Although Namiko suffers tremendously from her marriage with Inoue she gains sympathy and love from Tadashi. In turn, Tadashi's suffering in postwar Japan is rescued by the love and companionship of another woman—Tomiko. Although Yukio's infidelity and arrogance hurt Yuko and make her flee Tokyo, he later realizes his own inadequacy and wrong assumptions about Yuko. His dream about Namiko and Tadashi during his trip in Shanghai in fact shows his suppressed unconsciousness. Although he is not aware of this on the conscious level he is worried deep inside that as a medical doctor he can only cure certain physical diseases but not all of them and that he has little understanding of human sufferings. His transformation into Tadashi in fact shows his fear and uncertainty deep in his unconsciousness. True crimes in the novel suggest social problems that cause individuals to suffer. The mysteries underline the fact that each individual is connected

with others consciously and unconsciously across temporal, spatial, and personal boundaries.

Besides the historical context, we also need to situate the novel in a larger literary context in order to understand its significance. There are a large number of Japanese literary works set in Shanghai in the early twentieth century, corresponding to the mass migration and travel of Japanese intellectuals, businessmen, and other civilians during Japan's colonial and military expansion in Asia. This type of transnational literature disappeared with the end of World War II and the repatriation of the Japanese. The continental experience itself was nearly forgotten in postwar Japan. Since the 1990s, with the increase of travel and migration of a new generation of Japanese to Asia, there once again appeared literary works set in major Chinese cities such as Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Xi'an. Different from the earlier writings, which are situated in the colonial and war context and are written by male writers, the new transnational writings are written by female writers and about the private life of the individual in the global context. Moreover, in contrast to the modernist nature of the earlier writing about Shanghai, contemporary writings are more autobiographical and personal. There is no preconceived Japanese subject in their writing, but often exists a self searching for identity in a global context.

There is a gendered division in modern Japanese literature's description of Shanghai. Male writers tend to portray Shanghai symbolically as a sign and a racial Other for Japan. An example is the novelist Yokomitsu Riichi's famous novel *Shanghai* written in the late 1920s.[3] Written in the modernist style, the novel portrays Shanghai as the decadent Other against which a modern Japanese identity is constructed and questioned. Women writers, on the contrary, tend to describe Shanghai as a concrete space in which their characters live their everyday life and negotiate their fluid identity with what they encounter in Shanghai. In the female literary tradition in modern and contemporary Japan, the domestic space has been portrayed as the restrictive space that oppresses and stifles women. In contrast, spaces outside of the domestic sphere, such as a foreign

locale, nature, or a mythical space, are linked to women's spiritual liberation and freedom. This helps to explain female writers' different attitudes toward Shanghai than male writers. An example would be Hayashi Kyoko's novels and short stories about her childhood experience in Shanghai in the 1930s, such as *Mitchell's Lipstick* (1980) and *Shanghai* (1983).[4] For female writers, Shanghai is less a national space than an everyday life space, and less about encountering the racial Other than about rediscovering the self. Kirino's *Gyokuran* needs to be situated in such a literary tradition. She does not use Shanghai as the cultural and racial Other for Japan to construct its own identity. Rather, Shanghai, together with magnolia flowers, symbolizes the unknown part of the Japanese Self—its unconsciousness.

In light of the historical, social, and literary contexts discussed above, we understand that *Gyokuran* is not simply a detective/mystery novel but a serious investigation of the unconscious and the unfamiliar realm of the postwar Japanese subject. The search for self-identity leads the individuals to cross the temporal, spatial and personal boundaries and arrive at the collective unconsciousness found in a foreign locale and in the reminiscence of a recent past.

Endnotes

[1]J. Madison Davis, "Unimaginable Things: the Feminist Noir of Natsuo Kirino." World Literature Today, vol. 84, 1 (January/February 2010), 9-11.

[2]Natsuo Kirino, "Afterword for the bunko edition." *Gyokuran* (Tokyo: Bungei shunju, 2005), 378-379.

[3] Yokomitsu Riichi, Shanghai.Trans. Dennis Washburn. (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2001).

[4]Hayashi Kyoko, *Shanghai·Missheru no kuchibeni* (Tokyo: Kōdansha bungei bunko, 2001).