

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This thesis examines the totalizing violence of the Same and the ethical relationships between Totality/the Self and Infinity/the Other in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. In order to discuss the features of totality, I utilize Foucault's observations about madness, western medicine, and history, and Said's about Orientalism and the connection between western imperialism and its culture. After investigating totality, I turn to scrutinize the ethical relationship in the novel in light of Levinas's ethical philosophy. The following paragraphs will give a summary of the main discussions in Chapter Two, Three, and Four.

Chapter Two focuses on the discursive violence of psychology, of western empiric medicine, and of historiography presented in the novel. Historically madness did not assume the same pathological status it has in modern psychology. Rather than paying attention to what madness really is, Foucault claims that the point is to analyze the context that determines how madness is viewed. Contrary to the conventional notion, which holds that modern psychology possesses the truth about madness, Foucault asserts that it is madness that determines the truth of psychology since the latter has based itself upon the study of the former. Assuming itself as the representative of reason, psychology always views "madness" as the opposite of reason—unreason—by following reductionist logic of binary opposition. By reducing madness to the simplified opposite of reason, psychology establishes itself as a totalizing system in which knowledge about madness can be produced. In order to tame and assimilate madness into its system, psychology adopts three principles of exclusion—prohibition, a division and a rejection, and the division between true and false knowledge—to formulate knowledge about madness, and establishes mental institutions as the domain where its power over madness is embodied in the

psychiatrist's sovereignty over the madmen. Kwan's yin talk is misunderstood as a symptom of mental illness and her intentional silence as "catatonic;" Kwan's doctor forces electroshock treatments upon Kwan to cure her "illness." The relationship between the doctor and Kwan as a patient is one of domination—Kwan is totally at the mercy of the doctor's order. As a matter of fact, the doctor's treatment contains no less disciplinary meaning than a therapeutic one. The treatment does not really cure Kwan's "illness;" she just pretends to look normal. Contrary to Kwan's reception in the United States, her yin talk and Du Yun's delusion are generously tolerated in China. The comparison of different receptions of the same case exposes the fact that psychology is not universally valid and that it is only valid within specific time and specific space.

Western medical discourse predominates in western society by oppressing alternative medicines such as Chinese medicine Kwan practices. Western empiric medicine is regarded as the only authentic and legitimate medicine in western society. Legally only a medical school graduate having passed the qualification test can be recognized as a real doctor to make diagnoses and write prescriptions. Alternative medical practitioners like Kwan are not admitted the same respected status medical doctors enjoy even though their therapies may work as well. Kwan is good at pointing out people's sores in their muscles and bones and easing them, but unlike a regular physician who can practice in a hospital or private clinic, she can only help her customers, most of whom are gay, in the pharmacy where she works. The medical theory she adopts and the "healing touch" she has might be seen as unscientific because they are not proved valid by western medicine. Besides, Kwan never receives any formal education in medical school, which is required for someone who wants to be a qualified medical practitioner.

The same discursive contestation is also seen in historiography. People tend to

believe what official documents say about the past because they are kept by the authorities. What we usually read in history books are records of a series of historical events with clear causality and an absolute distinction between the good side and the evil side. Levinas notices and criticizes this totalizing tendency in history writing. Against traditional historiography, Levinas proposes the concept of “interiority” to break with the absolute and universal time of history. “Interiority” gives credit to personal memory, granting that everyone has his own perspective about historical events. Only when heterogeneous voices are heard can we prevent the violence of totality in history. Likewise, a genealogical view of history shows that history is just a battlefield with countless forces struggling against each other, and so is history writing. Foucault’s concept of “counter-memory” proposes a new way to investigate the past; it argues that history is discontinuous, with no definite beginning and no teleological end. The official archives always describe the challenging forces as rebels or traitors of the country. The Taiping Event in the novel offers a good illustration. By juxtaposing some official documents about the Heavenly Kingdom with Nunumu’s personal account about the event, we can see two conflicting points of view. The Qing authority viewed the Taipings as rebels but Nunumu thought they were just ambitious God Worshippers who failed to keep their promises and ideals. Similar contestation about the truth of historical facts can also be seen in minor issues like the controversy over the identity of Olivia and Kwan’s father. No one can have the last word about history and all perspectives shall be respected equally.

In Chapter Three I point out that by adopting reductionist Manichean binary opposition, westerners have created a huge tradition of Orientalism, in which Europocentrism serves as the key concept to construct a series of contrasts: Westerners/Oriental; civilized/barbarians; rational/irrational, etc. All these contrasts are constructed representations, viewed from westerners’ perspectives, yet they are so

effective that they not only influence the way westerners see the Orientals but also the way the latter view themselves. As an adult immigrant to the United States, Kwan appears so strange to Olivia's family and her friends that sometimes cultural differences such as represented by Kwan's Pidgin English are viewed as signs of inferiority of intelligence. As a discourse, Orientalism penetrates into various areas of human activities. Orientalism penetrates into various disciplines such as area studies and other fields of human life, such as photography. When Olivia reflects upon her job as a photographer, she is aware that she always presents and edits reality for her readers in her country to satisfy their exotic fantasies about foreign cultures. Also Simon's and Olivia's experiences in China offer many examples of their pre-conceived Orientalist bias. As they stay in China for a while, they begin to shake off their former prejudice against Chinese culture and learn to become opener to it.

Kwan's narrative about the nineteenth-century China presents how western imperialism, as a historical realization of Orientalism, dehumanizes non-westerners and exploits their countries. The appearance of Miss Banner and her fellow missionaries in China was made possible by the unequal contract between western empires and China. As Said and Hobson note, humanistic charities by the Christian Church is only one of many western imperial enterprises in the non-western world. Deep within the intention to convert the pagans lies a discrimination against the non-westerners and a disrespect for non-Christian cultures. The racism embedded in western imperialism also affects intercultural friendships and blood relationships. Nunumu always seemed inferior to Miss Banner, and Yiban's father and General Cape regarded Yiban as an exchangeable personal property. What is more, as Said indicates, the novel as a literary genre has an affinity with western imperialism in that the novel exercises its power over things through representations. In Tan's novel Olivia is the main narrator of the whole story even though her narrative is juxtaposed with Kwan's.

Readers of the novel will tend to believe what Olivia says or represents about China.

Chapter Four shifts the focus to Levinas's discussion of the ethical relationship between the Self (the Same) and the Other. Western philosophy and epistemology in general have been a tradition of "I think" thought since classic Greek period. In the cognitive process the knowing subject always tries to tame the unfamiliar of the object, and thereby to oppress the object's alterity. In interpersonal relationship we tend to use the same strategy: judging someone from the impression we have of him/her. Unless we spend time being together with someone long enough, we cannot really know that person. But even if we do, we can still never know a person *completely* because each of us has his/her personality and set of values, which influence how we evaluate a person. It is banal to say that in a group of people no one has completely the same feeling about a person. That is, "we" or the Self cannot truly comprehend the Other because the Other's alterity is beyond the totality of the "I think" thought. In what Levinas terms as the ethical relationship, "the face" of the Other commands the Self to respond to the Other and awakens the subjectivity of the Self. Hence subjectivity is initially for the Other. By responding to the Other the Self realizes he has a responsibility for the Other. The nakedness/destitution of the Other's face demands the Self to feed the Other, to keep him warm, in a word, to save him from dying. In the face of the Other lies both the strength and weakness of the Other—the face of the Other resists the assimilation of the Same/Self with its "ethical resistance," but still the Self can do harm to the Other. In ethical relationship the face speaks. Its first sentence is to command the Self not to commit murder. The command is not prohibiting, but it is *better* not to kill. The ethical relationship is best realized in the form of discourse. Levinas distinguishes a Saying from a Said in discourse. When one speaks, one does not just speak something; what is more important is that the speaker is addressing an *interlocutor*, that is, the Other. This addressing to the Other is

the *Saying*, which signifies the Self's responding to the Other. And in speaking the speaker fully presents himself; he cannot be represented. As long as the two parties talk to each other, the Self can never assimilate the Other into his system of the Same. This ethical relationship is "asymmetrical" in that the Self is responsible for the Other, but the Other's responsibility is not the Self's business. The Self can substitute himself for the Other, but no one can substitute himself for the Self because the Self's responsibility is not transferable. And in reality because there are so many others—the "third person"—to think about, it becomes necessary for the Self to divide his responsibility equally to all others, including himself, for at this moment he is also someone else's Other. The ethical relationship now becomes a social one; justice for all becomes the central issue at this moment. Justice in Levinasian sense, however, is not like the justice we usually talk about, in which the concern for the self-interest is the guiding principle. The justice in Levinas's ethics is based on the responsibility for the Other: it is ethical justice.

The concern for the Other is an important theme in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Kwan is always generous to Olivia, without expecting Olivia to give her anything in return. When Kwan asks young Olivia if Olivia thinks she is retarded, Olivia feels she is obliged not to hurt Kwan's feeling. In answering Kwan's question Olivia also responds to Kwan's ethical demand by the Saying of her answer. In college Olivia and her classmates criticize the provincial idea of salvation only for Christians in Christianity as unjust because it is discriminatory to other religions. In Kwan's narrative about the nineteenth-century China many characters showed the concern for the Other when danger was upon them. Nunumu and Lao Lu stayed in the Ghost Merchant's House because they were afraid that without them the foreigners could not survive. The Missionaries stayed for one another. When Zeng offered to save Nunumu's life, Nunumu was worried about the others' lives. And because of his love

for Kwan Zeng promised to save the foreigners. Miss Banner ran into Cape's arm in order to save the other's life. In order to realize her promise to Miss Banner, Nunumu needed to lie to Yiban so that he would flee with Nunumu. These characters truly live out Levinasian ethical relationship. They put the Other's safety prior to their own. What they do is otherwise than caring for their own beings.

Before putting an end to this thesis, I want to make a clarification. This thesis mainly utilizes the preliminary discussions of the ethical relationship between totality and infinity in Levinasian ethics, which is in fact far more complicated and profound than my summaries in this thesis. In this thesis, which claims to investigate the ethical relationship, I do not investigate much about the idea of "infinity" itself. But I make this omission with reasons. First, as some critics (especially Feminist ones) point out, the association between Levinas's idea of infinity and the feminine is highly controversial.⁴³ Second, as Levinas admits, the concept of "infinity" is hard to comprehend simply because it resists any efforts to achieve a complete understanding of it.

In conclusion, I would like to share some personal feelings here. Recently I saw a TV miniseries called *Band of Brothers*,⁴⁴ a story about a Company of paratroops of U.S. Army in Europe during World War Two. There are severe battle scenes in which many soldiers die. These scenes demonstrate how shocking and horrible war is. Although death is always upon these soldiers, the men of that Company always take care of each other. Many times a soldier would risk his own life to save a wounded fellow. This kind of scene always reminds me of Levinas and what he says about ethics: the Self is responsible for the Other; to be responsible for the Other is "not to let the Other alone" (*EI* 119). I imagine Levinas might have experienced many terrible

⁴³ For feminist discussions of Levinas's ethics, see Tina Chanter, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 2001.

⁴⁴ *Band of Brothers*. Dir. Richard Loncraine. HBO, 2001.

scenes of death in World War Two, including the genocide of his people. In the film there is also a scene about the Company finding one of the concentration camps in Germany. The terrible sanitary condition and the skeletal bodies of those confined Jews shock all soldiers. The commander orders his men to give food, water and clothes to the confined. When I saw this scene, all of a sudden some words flashed into my head: the poverty of the face of the Other commands the Self to feed him, to keep him warm, and not to let him die. The film makes me truly *feel*, not just understand, what “goodness beyond being” is. After I saw this film, I began to think that Levinasian ethics is not just a hypothetical or abstract theory; it is in fact very practical. Many things Levinas says can happen to our real life. There are times when we think people are all selfish, but there are also times when we see people risk or sacrifice their own lives to save other people. Every time I see or hear about such selfless deeds I always feel that this world is not without hope. *The Hundred Secret Senses* teaches us many convincing arguments and examples about the ethical relationship. If we can be fully aware of the ethical responsibility we bear for the Other, I believe our good will can make our world *better*.