

Crossing Liminal Spaces: The Journey to Freedom in *A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop*

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ABSTRACT

Madagascar, in Shao-ling Chu's *A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop* (1996), is the symbol of freedom for the young, divorced protagonist Mathi. Working in the highly modernized Taipei city, Mathi believes the city's visible and invisible confinements result in her lethargy and aimlessness in life. In Mathi's daydreaming, Madagascar becomes Taiwan's counterpart, its enlarged self and its lost conscience. She finally sets out in quest of freedom in the desert of Madagascar where she believes the ultimate symbolic sign of self-identity and the idealistic concept of freedom in life converge.

In this paper, I would like to examine firstly the close semiotic connection and signification between the sign of freedom and the signification of the geographical and economic situations of Madagascar as Taiwan's "reflection of the mirror," and secondly I would address Mathi's detour in Taiwan and her quest for freedom in Madagascar as experiences of crossing liminal spaces (Gennep, Turner) that prepare and initiate her to a broader sense of inter-subjective relationship. After passing this liminal phase, Mathi at last approaches the resolution to her traumatic puzzlement in life through her final realization of nature's extreme "non-interference" delineated in the

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intermittent episodes of liminal spaces as significant semiotic sign process of social, cultural and special crossings in *A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop*'s textual narrative.

KEY WORDS: semiotic connection, liminal spaces, identity, freedom, Madagascar, *A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop*, Arnold van Gennep, Victor W. Turner

A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop (1996), a story written by Shao-ling Chu about a divorced woman's expedition from Taiwan to Madagascar, has had a wide readership in popular literature since its publication.¹ The female protagonist Mathi proves to us in the novel that despite one's traumatic childhood memory, disconsolate love relationship and the pressure of dehumanization caused by the capitalistic competition and urban over-development in modern Taipei, true freedom can be obtained if one really probes into the heart of life and attempts to relate one's subjective identity to a broader scope of knowledge of the world.

Losing her job, separating from her husband and forced to live with her husband's parents in a small room in an attic, Mathi suffers in loneliness and desperation. She could fully sense the suffocating atmosphere of the city's visible and invisible regulations and confinements, but could find no way out of her sense of lethargy and aimlessness in life. Since her childhood, Mathi

¹ *A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop* is Shao-ling Chu's first novel. She wrote the story in her twenties while she was working at a company. The novel was first launched as a serial story posted on the net in 1995 and soon aroused great attention and reflections from the younger generation surfing the net. The first paper edition of the novel (1996) sold very well and remains popular among young people. Many readers and reviewers on the website and blogs acclaim Chu's narrative skill and also admit that the novel's plot and what the characters go through in the story vividly represent what they desire and feel—their anxieties and frustrations about a monotonous quotidian life in a modern capitalist society. Later in this paper, the novel will be referred to as *The Sad Coffee Shop*.

was fascinated with the imaginary concept of Madagascar as a twin island to Taiwan, and now, in her desperation, Madagascar becomes the symbolic sign of hope and salvation. It is Taiwan's counterpart, its enlarged self and its lost conscience. After enjoying a brief, momentary, new-found, true friendship with a few friends frequently getting together in a coffee shop, she gradually gathers up her courage and energy, and finally sets out in quest of freedom in the desert of Madagascar where she believes the ultimate symbolic truth of life could be found and where the significance of retrieving one's genuine self-identity and the sign of the idealistic concept of freedom in life will finally converge.

In this paper, I will approach the question of freedom from a social and spatial semiotic perspective concerning the detours, expedition and traveling in places known or unknown to Mathi as experiences of space-crossing. My argument is this kind of space-crossing experience is a special initiation for the wanderer/traveler to the Foucauldian heterotopias—"a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault 24). The heterotopias Mathi encounters both in Taiwan and Madagascar are the in-between, liminal (from Latin *limen* "threshold") spaces that are characteristic of a certain ritualistic conceptualization of leaving, moving and returning. They confine and regulate Mathi; however, they also provide her with the contest any liminal space would allow the initiate to face up to. The space-crossing experiences of Mathi can thus be regarded as both a temporal and spatial journey of the female selfhood and a trajectory of desire that moves the female self to the world so as to encounter the other in the dynamics of inter-subjectivity. Therefore, besides analyzing how the social and cultural elements a society could structure, influence and regulate the social beings in its spatial milieu, I will take from the story plot Mathi's literal and textual excursions in order to explore how Mathi's own wanderings, not

just the one from Taiwan to Madagascar, but her major spatial detours in Taipei, could be interpreted as tours and processes of crossing the liminal spaces which serve for the preparation of the scenario that Arnold van Gennep named as *liminaire*² (Gennep 11), or what Victor Turner called, the “transition rites” (Turner 1974, 231). The trajectories perform the function of initiating her into the liminality, or liminal space of a transitional or initial stage. She could therefore, as a consequence, obtain the key to re-enter the familiar social and cultural structuration of her hometown/homeland:

Only in a liminal situation, spatially separated from familiar experiences, both perceptual and intellectual, can heightened expectations make it possible for unfamiliar features to evoke a new and deeper understanding of the unfamiliar and familiar alike. (Rudwick 150)

Such kind of new, deeper and higher level of sophisticated understanding for re-incorporation into the social community can only be obtained after passing or crossing the liminal phase. Hence, Mathi’s aimless wanderings in the unknown places in Taipei city and her travel experience in Madagascar are full of signification as the structural and re-structural process of the self within the community and the elevation of the cognitive and affective concepts of subjectivity are concerned. Only when Mathi could pass the trial of this

² In *The Rites of Passage*, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep pointed out that there was some universal significance and regularity embedded within the functions of the cultural and social ceremonies or rituals a man went through during the transitional phases in his life, which Gennep termed as rites of passage. Gennep divided the rites of passage into three stages or phases, namely, *preliminary*, *liminaire* and *postliminaire*, each signifies a distinguishing phase of separation, liminality and re-incorporation, or aggregation. The very functional features and characteristics of the rites of passage embody the dissolving, disorientation and re-orientation of one’s identity in a community. Later on, in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner developed the concept of the liminal into the phase or stage of transition in life, characteristic of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy.

transitional phase, by crossing over the liminal spaces—the threshold of various different social and cultural structurations, could she be initiated into a higher level of understanding and be re-united into her social and cultural structuration with a different perspective after the transcendental epiphany and revelation of inter-subjectivity are being incorporated into her body and mind.

Mathi's ultimate initiation in the novel is an experience of crossing, a revelation of the performance of heterogeneity—full of ambiguity, difference, openness, indeterminacy and diversity. It is what Victor Turner called *communitas*, an experience of “social interrelatedness” (Turner 1974, 231). At the end of her journey, as an innovative geological explorer Mathi finally reaches a new and deeper cognitive and affective understanding of the shared characteristics between her familiar “home” features and the cosmopolitan experience in a more relativistic context of a broadening range of new and unfamiliar features.

In the following sections, I will address firstly the close connection and signification between the sign of freedom as an imaginative reconstruction of an unknown space and the signification of the locality and cultural identity of Madagascar as a symbol of Taiwan's “reflection of the mirror.” Secondly I would suggest that as Mathi seeks freedom and a clear conscience, she is in effect trying to approach the world and through the encountering with others to reconstruct her own female identity, the achievement of which is in large part due to her self-consciousness of the regulative and confining forces tenaciously clutching her body and mind through cultural and social structuration. Mathi can only obtain her freedom and claim her independent identity when she finally disengages herself from past confinements and gets initiated into and embraces the revolutionary concept of her final realization of nature's extreme power of “non-interference” as evidenced in many episodes of *The Sad Coffee Shop's* textual narrative.

While the conceptual recognition of the quest for freedom is emphasized, it is important that the bodily affect Mathi experiences in her detours in Taipei and the journey in Madagascar should not be overlooked. The function of affect in the liminal phase is to be emphasized because the intensity of affect, as Brian Massumi points out, different from the vivid, recognized intensity of emotion, has “the irreducibly bodily and autonomic nature,” (89) and according to Simone Fullagar, affect as “the passionate spark of action and corporeal expression” in the detour and travel, would “escape self-consciousness, occupying the liminal realm in between mind-body, activity-passivity” (65). The affect, as one of Spinoza’s basic definitions of affect delineates, is an “affection of (in other words an impingement upon) the body, *and at the same time the idea of the affection*” (Massumi 92) and thus contains the incipience of the action and reaction of body and mind, and should not be left out of the discussion on the initial experience of the liminal:

the liminal space of travel offers a way of thinking through the tensions in-between, mind and body, mastery and abandon, movement and fixity. This liminality enables us to conceive of a positive desire to move towards the world, not in order to grasp, but rather in the wish to engage openly with the world in its difference. (Fullagar 66)

Through the inter-relation and confrontation of Mathi’s experiences on the two islands, cultural differences are revealed not as the fruits of geographical, economic, or social territories, but as a kind of travel writing of the female self (with both her body and her mind)—the production of the vision and envisioning power of a woman who dares to look high above the differences

and sufferings caused by social and cultural regulations, the traumatic past and high modernity, and firmly set her eyes on the realm of infinite time and space.

Rites of Passage: From Taiwan to Madagascar

Although Mathi's quest for freedom might be superficially dismissed as an escape scheduled by any young modern urbanite under the excessively high pressures of modernity, nevertheless, there is a latent sophisticated cause behind such a tenacious desire and quest as Mathi's. It derives from an ambiguous anxiety complex and a strong desire to possess an identity of one's own. However, Mathi's inner anxiety and desire to possess a home of her own only increase her sense of loss. She is raised in a broken family and finds it really hard to establish a sound relationship with others. The more she desires to possess a sense of security through establishing an identity and claiming a home of her own, the heavier she falls from her expectations. The traumatic past where she buries the memories of the broken home of her childhood is hard to mend. The modern capitalistic city in which she dwells does not help her evade the question, but only makes things worse, for the city hardly cares what changes it effects in people's inner desires, much less the frustration and indifference it engenders. As modernity and capitalistic development bring forth regulations and more flexible specialization, they also generate problems for the social space and its reproduction, leaving their mark on the quality of daily life. Self-identity thus becomes problematic as lifestyles and human relationships are challenged by the temporal and spatial distancing introduced by high modernity:

Modern social organization presumes the precise coordination of the actions of many human beings physically absent from

one another; the “when” of these actions is directly connected to the “where”, but not, as in pre-modern epochs, via the mediation of place. (Giddens 17)

The urban social space becomes a fantastic spectacle where a great swarm of people work hectically without noticing each other’s existence. The mediation of place, as Giddens points out, is lost in high modernity. The confinements and ontological anxieties Mathi, as an office worker, feels and confronts in her daily life in Taipei seem to ruin her idealistic notion that one’s dwelling and life can compensate for a broken family.

Mathi obsessively takes “Madagascar” as the sign of a new space and place and as a replacement of her bleak home and hometown and finally turns Madagascar into a sign of salvation for a banal and aimless urban life and thus allows this sign of salvation to prompt a series of events and encounters that change her life. When Mathi first learns about the island of Madagascar from a textbook, she is shocked to find an uncanny familiarity between Madagascar and Taiwan. Because of its geographical similarities, Madagascar becomes the symbol of freedom for Mathi. In her imagination, Madagascar begins to exude the exotic, inspiring radiance of a dreamed space which outshines the wearisome, monotonous life in Taipei. Madagascar, in Mathi’s daydreaming and imagination, becomes Taiwan’s counterpart, its enlarged self and its lost conscience.

Entrapped within her locality and traumatic past, Mathi is at the first phase of the rites of passage, a kind of separation which “comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both” (Turner 1982, 94). Mathi’s journey to Madagascar paves the way for an unfamiliar encounter with an unknown place and for an

indication of a possible transformation in life.

In traveling, one gains a sense of lavish abandonment and unboundedness quite similar to that when one lingers in a transitional period. The simultaneous being and non-being, the experience of betwixt and between, gives form to liminality: “During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner 1982, 94). Mathi’s expedition to Madagascar hence could be viewed in this perspective as a passage of home-leaving and home-coming for she undergoes the same passage that is “both a negation of one social order and an affirmation of another order” (Birkeland 74), the experience of the in betwixt and between, and through this liminality, one could arrive at the “aggregation,” the third phase of the rites of passage, and “behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions” (Turner 1982, 95). However, besides the aggregation in the social structure, there is something more to be expected from the explorer/initiate. The experience of the liminality enriches their understanding of the world: “Through travel as place-making, human beings bring peripheral, mythic place into their lived world as a part of their life-world” (Birkeland 73).

Through Mathi’s interpretation of her habitat and her traveling experience in Madagascar, the novel’s narrative offers a possible reading of the excursion from Taiwan to Madagascar as a trip to freedom—a trip to search for self-identity under the influence and interference of spatial experiences of various places. Mathi’s journey vividly draws out the conflicts derived from the tension and contradiction between the senses of familiarity and foreignness. Through combining the spatial social problems of capitalist modernity in Taipei with the formation process of the female protagonist’s

quest for identity, the story narrative of *The Sad Coffee Shop* aligns several places and spaces with co-related mirror reflections. The novel's narrative weaves the sense of homelessness perceived in Mathi's homeland Taiwan and the sense of familiarity in foreignness experienced in Madagascar into a fabric of intertextuality, where multiple identities foreground the inter-relationship of beings and non-beings. The real expedition to Madagascar and the confrontation and the shock of the region's hybridity and familiarity, makes the imaginary geography not only a reflection of Mathi's homeland, but an inspiring catalyst of a higher level of realization.

In *The Sad Coffee Shop*, the exotic foreign place is first formulated as an imaginary geography, just as the ordinary travel writing "which began as a discourse, a way of seeing and talking about a place" while reworking it as the picturesque, "and ended as a reconstruction of that place, as a concretization of that new imagined geography" (Duncan 151). But quite contrary to the ordinary travelers' interests towards an exoticizing place, the journey to Madagascar is from the very beginning believed by Mathi to be a sign for the true significance of life and a process of re-learning and relocation of the self on earth. What Mathi experiences in her expedition to Madagascar is a "process of spatial re-emplacement" (Dubow 241) to her home and homeland and what she goes through there is how one could try to negotiate one's presence in a new space, while at the same time, still preserving the characteristics of the old space—a stage of changing, transition, in a rite of passage. The process of reconstruction and concretization of the new imagined geography and inter-subjective relationships among beings initiates her into different layers of understanding of the concepts of home, homeland and cultural, social self-identity. Mathi's separation from "home" is arranged under the act to "destabilize fixed notions of shared history and ancestry" (Dawson and Johnson 319) as the transient self-exile determines to take in as

many cultural differences and heterogeneities as possible.

The following discussion will particularly focus on how the narrative describes and represents Mathi's quest for self-identity and the process of her identity formation from Taipei's high modernity to Madagascar's natural geography, and also, on the modern quotidian experience that Taipei inhabitants, especially Mathi, undergo while the novel's narrative keeps tracing the locality and local identity from one geographical location to another. In *The Sad Coffee Shop*, Taiwan and Madagascar, whether viewed as spatial sites or as spiritual/intellectual territories, become each other's mirror reflection. From Mathi's tour and experience in Madagascar, the metropolitan and capitalistic culture of modern Taipei are re-examined and re-interpreted by way of the social cultural identification of its inhabitants. Feeling bored and trapped in her own hometown locality, Mathi goes off to Madagascar and creates for herself a new identity, new roots. Mathi's later realization in Madagascar makes her transient life significant, for she finally dares to take action and to resist her old identity through reconstructing a new identity and locality with a variety of literal and metaphorical roots and routes.

The Flight from the Wedding: Reflexive Awareness and Self-Identity

The story of *The Sad Coffee Shop* begins when the twenty-nine-year-old Mathi is attending her college roommate Linda's wedding ceremony. She arrives too early. The red reception table at the entrance has not yet been set up when she arrives there. The receptionists who are supposed to collect the wedding guests' red envelopes are nowhere to be seen. The big, red, round tables for the wedding guests, and all the other typical decorations for traditional Chinese wedding feasts, flash out crimson colors in the almost

empty hall. The red envelope in Mathi's pocket-book, the gift not given, stings Mathi secretly, inwardly, just like the red colors in the spacious hall; all the red colors surround her victoriously.

The wedding ceremony, a traditional occasion for re-uniting with old friends and acquaintances and establishing new social relationships with strangers, is no rejoicing for the poor lonely Mathi. Rather, it is but an empty reflection of her lonely and miserable college days. The red envelope in her pocket and the red colors all around remind Mathi of her failure to show her hospitality to the wedding couple and her inertness to react to the old acquaintances coming later. The common social greetings and courtesies among the guests only become more and more unbearable to Mathi, especially when the topics are all circulating around one's work, marriage and spouse. She has to lie about a job that she has already quit for more than a half year and a husband she has been separated from for over three years. A married woman's identity is taken as an attachment to one's husband and marriage, and there is even less space for her subjectivity, not to mention her career, achievements or ideals. The social and cultural space around Mathi is thus immediately shrinking to an unbearable level. As more and more guests arrive, Mathi consciously notices that she is still a stranger and loner while everyone else is busy reweaving the web of friendship and making the wedding hall such a noisy place.

Mathi is never good at building a relationship; she is not the sociable type and nor does she ever try to become one. She deliberately shies away from establishing any connection with those around her: family members, college classmates, colleagues, her only lover—Jason, and her husband. No matter where she goes or whom she meets and works with, the detachment encloses her. She is always as far away as a star. Deep down in her heart, there is no chance of adopting any beliefs, or in identifying with any group of people.

She is used to living in places of cold darkness and dead silence, since she was a child. When she was three years old, Mathi's mother ran away from her husband. Mathi's mother carried with her the little Mathi but this poor mother could only give the little girl a dark and lonely childhood by leaving her all alone locked up in a small dark rented room while she was out for work. Her mother refused to turn on the electric light whenever she was at home and would not even permit little Mathi to have any light on when she was out. Little Mathi was used to sitting alone in the small dark room all day. This dark rented room, or the following different shabby rented dark places, is never filled with a mother's love or tender words. The darkness and emptiness characteristic of the various rented rooms reveal the possible inner world of little Mathi's childhood memory. The initiative stage of little Mathi's self-identity formation and her sense of the life-world is as dark and incomplete as what she experiences from the interaction with her poor mother. She learns to live in her inner world of dreary silence and seclusion.

Mathi never saw her father again until her mother died when she was twelve. After living with her mother for nine years, Mathi felt like a stranger to her father's second wife and two sons, and could never really open her heart to her father's new family. Adult Mathi does not grow out of her old identity. Mathi avoids establishing any firm and affectionate relationship with her father and his family, and she refrains from any possible friendships in her college life. Mathi ties herself to her lover Jason as if he were the only one she could count on in this life. However, this love does not last long. After graduation, she keeps wandering from job to job, not because of poor performance or incapability, but because of her fear of being trapped by the predictable future of the job—getting promoted, taking more responsibilities, climbing higher on the social ladder, and enjoying the inevitable white-collar glory. She gets married, but as soon as the fantasy of love dies away, they

separate. A woman nearing thirty, Mathi possesses nothing and had nothing to be proud of. Mathi drifts from one place to another so as to avoid any lasting relationship and refrain from being tagged with a fixed identity. She mistakenly takes isolation as a kind of protection.

The problem of identity has been with her since childhood. Even now, Mathi finds no words to say to her classmates sitting around her in the wedding hall. But the news of Jason's death is the hardest blow to bear. Mathi feels transfixed. Jason has always told her to live for herself: "What is important is your own opinion. Don't live for other's value judgment" (Chu 6).³ Mathi tries to keep Jason's motto in mind. She pursues every kind of job to enjoy the freshness that a new job could provide her with, and once she feels boredom, she quits. She follows the trend and gets married before getting too old; however, the marriage soon ends in separation. She tries to follow her feelings, but she becomes a failure in society. She tries to go with the flow only again to be proved a loser, defeated by the societal tides. Ever since childhood, Mathi has failed to construct her own identity. However, self-identity "is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 52). Just like those who have "[a]nxiety about obliteration, of being engulfed, crushed or overwhelmed by externally impinging events" (Giddens 53), Mathi's sense of self is fractured or disabled:

A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to

³ Shao-ling Chu (朱少麟). *A Song of the Sad Coffee Shop* (《傷心咖啡店之歌》). Taipei: Chiu-Ko, 2004. The translation of the quotations from the novel in this paper is mine.

other people. That person also, through early trust relations, has established a protective cocoon which “filters out”, in the practical conduct of day-to-day life, many of the dangers which in principle threaten the integrity of the self. Finally, the individual is able to accept that integrity as worthwhile. (Giddens 54)

Due to her traumatic past, Mathi fails to establish early trust relations. Living frequently under threat of losing her mother and the shabby dwelling place, her integrity and her self identity are fractured. Jason’s death is the biggest irony to her faint trust in him. It laughs at her unsubstantial fantasy about him and his long faded love. Her tiny hope of a secret subjective identification with the loved one is smashed to pieces at the moment she knows of Jason’s death.

The traditional marriage feast table conversations annoy her, because she could find no comfort sitting with classmates/strangers, and moreover, to keep a conversation going is a task for Mathi who would agree with bell hooks that “Language is also a place of struggle” (203), not to fight for her own voice to be heard, but to meet the requirements social etiquette demands. Mathi rushes out of the wedding hall, aimlessly wandering along the streets.

This is a rare occasion for Mathi to take a walk on the street without any purpose in mind. The sky is very blue. After a night’s wind and rain brought by a strong summer typhoon, the streets of Taipei are covered with a thick layer of leaves and branches. The typhoon leaves broken branches and leaves spread all over the road. Paying no attention to this great change in the often barren urban landscape, Mathi steps indifferently on the leaves and laboriously continues her sad walking bearing nothing particular in her empty mind. Mathi steps on the leaves carelessly and keeps walking forward, and

turns only when a traffic light turns red. After several hours of aimless wandering, Mathi loses consciousness and falls down on the ground. Because of the typhoon, Taipei is transformed from a desert into a city of greens. Before Mathi falls down, she pays no attention to the green wonder that changes the city overnight. The typhoon brings with it a rare space, a heterotopia, of romantic fantasy. This romantic fantasy loses its impact on Mathi whose eyes are merely set upon her own inner thoughts. Similarly ironic are the workers who suffer through the cleaning work. If this is the stage where human minds are selfish and self-centered, their refusal to project their minds beyond their own business is reflected through their negligence of nature.

In a modern city full of high cement buildings and artificial neon light, the sudden greens do not catch much attention from the city-dwellers. The inhabitants of Taipei are lost in their own dreams and business, not really realizing the temporary geographical changes outside their apartments nor appreciating nature's amazing magic in both its destruction and creation upon the urban landscape. However, if most Taipei people never really set eyes upon their neighborhood and city landscape, Mathi is no exception. This is the heterotopia where no one pays attention to anything else outside of their own selfish minds and narrow concerns. To get trapped in it as Mathi does is to taste its indeterminacy and blank openness, which only results in dizziness, not transformation, nor epiphany. Mathi does not pass the test of this liminal space, and being incapable of crossing it, Mathi loses consciousness in there.

The Sad Coffee Shop: the Initiation to Friendship

With a sense of loss and failure in life, Mathi walks into the small café where she is going to find her "place" in it as a guest in the beginning, and

later, a help, and finally, a spiritual “sojourner.” She soon finds out that the Sad Coffee Shop is the very place for her restless mind. She loves all the male and female share-holders/partners. These people once worked at the same company and opened the Sad Coffee Shop to keep working together when their company went bankrupt. The close friendship among them makes the shop a very alluring place for Mathi. It is this strong wish to prolong their friendship after the company went bankrupt that makes the Sad Coffee Shop such an alluring place for Mathi. The sincerity and care they show to each other intrigues Mathi’s wandering soul. She has never experienced such a close relationship with anyone else. They do not usually make money, social status, or marriage their common topics, and their conversations and thinking process fascinate and stimulate Mathi to join them and soon become one of them—she is invited to help serve coffee part-time at night, which she gladly accepts.

The semi-darkness, the smoky atmosphere, the loud music, and the free flowing of the conversational fragments all help transform this small space of the coffee shop into a heterogeneous area outside the pursuit of fortunes and capitalistic modernity that the city is so proud of. What Mathi cannot find in the outside urban space—the group identification that a spiritual vagabond craves—is plentiful here: friendship, care, sincerity and love. Outside, the modern urban Taipei city cultivates hundreds and thousands of inhabitants crazy for money and social status; inside, the crowded space of the Sad Coffee Shop cultivates the care for freedom and love among this small group of close friends. This is the first time Mathi dares to speak out her opinions in front of others and there are some people who really want to hear her:

“I feel my life is a mess. Some might wander a whole life for love, and some for dreams. I envy them, for they are much more fortunate than I am. My problem is I have no love, no

dream, and no direction.”

“In my opinion, that is because you sure know what you don’t want to do.”

This saying was quite like a hit on the head. Hai-An’s countenance radiated with serenity, and Mathi seemed to see a very broad mind. (Chu 72)

Similar dialogues flow out frequently in the small Sad Coffee Shop. Mathi is easy-going and her warm and unselfish character suit well the mood of the Sad Coffee Shop. She is always a good listener, not an eloquent speaker. Whenever she mentions her dislikes of the urban, capitalistic trends, she receives understanding smiles and encouraging warmth from the others. However, if Mathi wants to really “know herself,” she has to lay bare her true perplexing problem, so as to cultivate the courage to search out some possible solution in life. Hai-An’s reply partly catches Mathi’s problem, but what lies under the apparent explanation of Mathi’s problem will remain covered as long as Mathi keeps refraining from directly facing her true self and from any fixed social identity. Mathi preserves her mythic, traumatic memory and unfathomable thoughts to herself. Her words, hence, reveal and also conceal. Language delineates—through its articulation, the understanding of a story becomes possible. At the same time, language conceals—what is not delineated might not have the chance to be exposed under the sun. For most of the time, Mathi’s words can merely get near to the periphery of her secrets. The pressure of the modern urban competition is only a partial cause of her not being able to constitute her own self-identity, and it cannot fully explain her sense of insecurity, nor her preference for seclusion. The Sad Coffee Shop is the starting place for Mathi to join a group and establish friendships, but the moment for Mathi to establish a firm relationship that involves not only true

identification with a group/society but also the affect and understanding together with the close bonds of knowledge, interests, pressures and sufferings of this group/society, is still pending:

“I want to travel to Madagascar [...].”

“It is not hard to understand. It is because the geographical shape and location of Madagascar are very similar to those of Taiwan. But it is not Taiwan. The longing for visiting Madagascar is but a reflection of your complex emotion for both desiring and abandoning home. What people desire is space” (Chu 101-102).

Mathi longs for freedom—the kind of freedom that allows her to just do nothing. She tries to describe this kind of feeling to her friends in the Sad Coffee Shop. However, she only understands part of her feelings. The self-exposing trait of language belies the possible misinterpretation, elimination and ignorance. Language, in this way, discovers and covers simultaneously. The language that delineates freedom and the words of her youthful ambition betray her real emotion and problems:

“I feel lonely. Because I have no home since I was a child [...]. Now, I’m working again. But having a job makes me more at a loss. I am afraid that I have to live a monotonous life like a white-collar worker until I retire. I wish I could find a chance to escape this kind of life [...]. I wish I had wings and could fly freely [...].”

“That’s good. You have no reason not to have freedom.” (Chu 103)

Through the conversation, Mathi reveals her fear and her desire. She makes a great step in letting out her feelings and thoughts; however, even if she finds the language and the words to express herself, she is not free to escape her life-long burden. Always hiding behind the door in the dark, secluded and excluded, Mathi is accustomed to longing for the light in her own way: staying in the darkness and dreaming of the forbidden light. Judging from Mathi's secret longing and description of freedom, it could be surmised that sometimes social relationships and group identity become a form of bondage for her. Once Hai-an points out to Mathi the self-confinements she sets up for herself:

“In this world, who is really free?” [Mathi retorts.]

“The problem is still the same. You care too much about others' approval and consent. When you say you are not free, you do not mean that you lose the freedom to do whatever you want to do, but that you cannot obtain others' approval to do it. That brings forth certain spiritual or moral pressures, and then, you feel that you are pressured, interfered, and bereft [of your freedom]. Mathi, wings are on your shoulders. You cannot fly because you care too much about others' criticism of your flying position.” (Chu 104)

Not really comprehending Hai-an's words, Mathi contends that there is too much pressure and too many restrictions from her work, her family, and the environment. She could not escape from the confinement, nor could she pretend to ignore it. Nevertheless, as Hai-An warns her: the fact is that she is confined by others' language and criticism.

The treasures that Mathi cannot procure outside the Sad Coffee

Shop—care, friendship, love—help open a crack in the dark room of Mathi's heart and let the light shine in the lonely darkness. The consequence of all the compassion and eye-opening words of advice from the friends in the Sad Coffee Shop is Mathi's determination to leave for Madagascar. She gathers enough courage and energy in this heterotopia where friendship and care flow out sincerely and partly heal her traumatic and broken heart. However, not until the moment she could finally cross the liminal phase of the social transition rites and be prepared for returning to her habitual social and cultural structuration with a different perspective and in particular, with a confidence in her self and in her identity, can Mathi have her dream realized.

Taipei: The Site of Pressure

Taipei, a city speeding down the road of modernization, becomes a metropolis that would mercilessly leave all those unsuitable for competition behind. Mathi believes Taipei elicits a longing for humanity, itself lacking elastic, motivating energy. One only needs to follow the rules, let one's life be filled with regulations, details, and then get disciplined, socialized, institutionalized, mechanized, and then, everything will become simple and neat. One afternoon on her way home, Mathi happens to see on a street corner a high school student violently punching the button of a video game machine. The fury of this student is a portrait of suffering and pain. However, Mathi cannot be sure whether the boy's anguish is released as he leaves with a hand swollen by twenty-one continuous heavy punches on the machine (Chu 82). It is the day before the Joint College Entrance Examination. It is not the virtual monsters on the screen but the pressure of the JCEE that the boy is desperately fighting. Mathi's step-brother, Ma-nan, who is of the same age as the high school student, when asked by Mathi what major he would like to

choose after the JCEE, expresses in quite a different way his distress and agony towards the system and the competition. Ma-nan sullenly replies with a kind of premature insolence: “I want to enter law school. . . . becoming a lawyer is the fastest way to climb up the social ladder. . . . One is to be judged by the wealth he possesses in this society. . . . You cannot beat the system . . . ” (Chu 87). As Donatella Mazzoleni precisely points out, “Metropolises are no longer ‘places’, because their dimensions exceed by far the dimensions of the perceptive apparatus of their inhabitants . . . the metropolis is a habitat without a ‘somewhere else’. It is, therefore, a *total interior*” (297-298). Living in Taipei, in this total interior, not being able to see any farther, people can only become blind, as all Mathi’s office colleagues do (and Ma-nan, or perhaps, the high school student, would one day become one of them), and the goal of life is a fight for saving money: just as the daily sardine bus makes everyone dumb and dull, standing together with the crowd, you cannot escape nor resist the mesmerization of this group identity, and you become part of the great huge dullness.

The highly modernized urbanity Taipei represents only evokes more sadness and lethargy from its inhabitants. A humdrum life is nothing to be afraid of, but the meaningless yet cutthroat competition and the bloody thirst for eliminating all enemies so as to climb up the social ladder and save up a small fortune are not far away from de-humanization. In a modern metropolis, as David Harvey explains, “the very existence of money as a mediator of commodity exchange radically transforms and fixes the meanings of space and time in social life and defines limits and imposes necessities upon the shape and form of urbanization” (165). In a modern urban society, the commands over money, space, and time “form independent but interlocking sources of social power, the repressive qualities of which spark innumerable movements of revulsion and revolt” (166). Similar kinds of social power plays

and those repressive qualities, in Mathi's eyes, also intoxicate the social space of the Taipei city.

Seeking out her own identity and begging for the approbation of her behavior and life are two things that trouble Mathi. She is trapped by the value judgments and concepts of the world outside, and is still the child that was locked up by her mother in the dark room. She was forced away and rejected, first by her mother, then, by the distorted self that reflects too much her mother's image. The habitat, the place that she is trapped in, could only become a mirrored place of the primeval scene. She tries to escape from the haunted, suffocating darkness of the small rented room, which is now transformed into the pressure a modern urban habitat would emit—a sign of the need to survive by making oneself economically independent through monotonous work in a restricted place, regulated by de-humanizing work systems and soaked with tepid work morale.

When looking down from the mountain top with friends from the Sad Coffee Shop one starry night, Mathi cannot but feel sad and powerless. "I see this sea of light as a wok of bubbles," Mathi says to her companions from the Sad Coffee Shop,

Some [bubbles] climb upwards; some end up slopping down, but all are crowded in the wok and try desperately to spread over the space [...]. I don't want this kind of life, as if we were another doll on a gigantic stage, acting the part out vividly, forgetting that we are just playing, while in fact we cannot control our own fates. Get to work, and work, and make money, and make more money—that is the play. This play is dull, yet everyone fights for the leading role; no one would settle for anything else. Everyone craves to obtain an acceptable identity

and live prosperously, but completely forgets to dream of a possible ideal living. (Chu 136)

Besides occasionally and reluctantly following the trend, she does not know how to deal with her life. Partly because of her uncertainty as to the value of this kind of social identification, and partly because of her doubt of the existence of a possible alternative, she keeps wandering between two poles: the pressure of cultural identification and the dream of freedom. She abhors the pursuit of this kind of social identity. The suffocation caused by modern society and the confinement of a highly reified identification system of social relations and ideologies keep haunting Mathi's mind. This stifling atmosphere forms the bondage that ties her body and soul. She could feel it, smell it, and recognize it, for social environment and human relationships are fully immersed in the codes of confinement and restriction.

The highly modernized city space brings forth the articulation of a capitalized, commercialized world of de-humanizing, hierarchical identification system of social ladders. That is the reason why everyone in Linda's wedding ceremony was busy exchanging and studying name cards, demanding more information from others, and re-arranging in mind secretly the scales and ranks of the societal hierarchical system. The symbolic identification and value judgment help form the destitute situation that confines Mathi, not just on the special day Linda married, but every day as long as Mathi remains poor, jobless, and separated from her husband. Mathi knows all too well that everywhere is a social place that has been imbued with arbitrary rules and regulations for everyone inside to obey (Lefebvre 35). A habitat like Taipei will create and force a strong whirlwind into your mind and then, turns and drives you all around whether you feel congenial to the flow or not. In this liminal space, Mathi could not but adopt an indifferent attitude,

and it is because of this sense of indifference and detachment towards her living space that Mathi never allows her body, not to mention her soul, to mix with other bodies in this modern urban heterotopia. She carries no personal authentic subjectivity and identity of her own in it.

Mathi cannot find an identity where a dehumanizing system devours everyone's conscience and humanity. She resists the possible connection and identification that Taipei as a modern habitat in an epoch of capitalism and globalization is so proud to offer. She has no interest in it. However, it might also be possible that since Mathi detests conforming to the cultural identity highly celebrated in her city, she simultaneously cuts off the connection between herself and society. There is no identity or bondage built between Mathi and her habitat. Mathi takes Madagascar as a sign of salvation, and since there is no close relationship or tie that binds her to Taiwan, she reconnects herself through the imaginary tie to this enlarged mirror image. Mathi lets her soul fly over to Madagascar as if it were a shelter for temporary exile.

However, I would argue that it could only be retained as a fantasy of temporary exile, for Mathi lacks the "love" needed to establish a group identity, a love that both supports and restricts the freedom of those under its power. Moreover, it is even more doubtful whether she could find true freedom at this phase of her life, for everywhere on earth the establishment of a relationship and identification demands love and sacrifice, no matter where she flies, whether around Taiwan or to Madagascar. Because she has a tendency to remain detached from the identity and ideologies a habitat contains, she should find it very difficult to obtain real "freedom" anywhere. However, after the long expedition to Madagascar, she finally understands.

"Freedom" is never free to enjoy. There is a certain kind of "love" that lies in being bound, Steve Pile lays stress upon this point in interpreting Sigmund Freud's understanding of the ties between a group and an individual.

And I would like to argue that this kind of “love” also embeds in it a certain kind of bondage that ties up the individual, or, at least, a demand of a certain amount of sacrifice from him:

In other words, there is a “love” between the individual, the group and the leader which both explains and needs to be explained in order to account for the strings that knot the group together. [...] it is because of the strength of their feelings that individuals want to identify with groups and it is because they “express” those feelings that groups seem to provide individuals with “freedom.” (Pile 102)

Mathi cannot find love in her home, and fails to love anyone after Jason left her. The love between her and her husband disappears soon after their marriage. As a symbol for a group and social identity, Taipei is rejected by Mathi, and without the bondage of love, Taipei excludes Mathi from its *communitas*, an experience of “social interrelatedness.”

All her life Mathi is in pursuit of freedom and of an identity that would enclose her and include her—a place she could call her own. Without these elements, Mathi believes, no true identification process could be constructed. In a rare situation, she happens to see a photograph of “Jesus,” and she firmly believes that what she sees there is serenity itself. This wandering hippie undergoing a certain self-made enlightenment in Madagascar rekindles her old dream of freedom and Madagascar. She determines to go and travel to Madagascar and find this man. In her fantasy, she faintly believes that if she could find this man, she could learn from him to really obtain that kind of serenity—the sense of freedom to once and for all get rid of all mundane restrictions and ties. But she does not know that the real and true habitat that

she consciously and unconsciously identifies herself with and joins would end up being a place full of light and love—the two elements that Mathi the little girl, Mathi the college student, Mathi the wife, or Mathi the friend to the Sad Coffee Shop always seeks to cherish and treasure, yet is rarely or never given the chance to experience and possess. It will finally turn out that Mathi's quest in Madagascar is successful because it helps solve a trauma dating back to her childhood.

If the nightmare and pressing image will keep returning to a person as uncanny as Freud describes his chance experience in Italy, "I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *détour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery" (273), then, Mathi's nightmare does haunt her often in various ways, and to solve her problem, she needs to make the detour in Madagascar as entering the liminal phase of rites of passage so as to find herself safely and soundly returning "home," this time not to a dark room but a lighted place full of the bluest color in the sky of Madagascar.

Madagascar: the Initiating Liminal Space

Going to Madagascar is not true exile. Mathi dreams of leaving Taiwan to find its "mirrored" other as if from this quest she could finally come upon a true identity and apparently solve her own problems. It is not the escapism or the abandonment of the past time and space that features and nourishes her dream. To pass this liminal stage, Mathi is to experience "the betwixt-and-between state of liminality" and "the state of outsiderhood, referring to the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set

outside the structural arrangements of a given social system” (Turner 1974, 232-233) and as passing through a symbolic domain she is supposed to obtain something beyond her previous ken of knowledge.

But during this liminal phase, Mathi begins to experience “the betwixt-and-between” as a complex of familiarity and foreignness—the past and the present, Taiwan and Madagascar start to mix with each other. They reveal to Mathi an experience of ambiguity. She fails to feel an identity of her own, because her marginal position forbids her identifying with either Madagascar or Taiwan. When her watch is out of order in her aimless traveling in this wild barren land, Mathi begins to feel a sense of loss, not knowing precisely whether it is time for sunrise or sunset. Mathi thus reflects upon her life in Taiwan:

People there [Taiwan] have plenty of things, but lack time and space. People here have nearly nothing, not even a watch, so they have plenty of time. Humans are seeds, being sown here, or there. . . . What is unchangeable is that people here and there all have to find a way of survival individually. (Chu 304-305)

Nevertheless, whether with or without the pressure from modern culture and identity, Mathi finds out quite ironically that after leaving all the burdens attached to her old identity, and wandering all alone for so many months in this strange place, she could still feel the stifling feeling of suffocation—a testimony of her affinity with Taiwan.

In her aimless wandering on this great land, Mathi finally meets “Jesus” in the desert near the great plateau and begins her practice of self-made enlightenment as his silent travel companion and a novice. She does not speak to him but determines to follow him until she learns the secret of serenity and

freedom. In the beginning, Mathi tries to imitate his way of walking as if she could only demonstrate her sincerity and courtesy by following the great master's footsteps. "Jesus" keeps walking, but would suddenly take a ninety-degree turn on the plateau, as if he were walking on an invisible road. Mathi follows behind him as if she were practicing a certain kind of ceremony. Mathi finally finds out after a period of time that the pleasure of this walking style is you don't have to go in a straight line all the way, which is quite absurd when there is really no road on this great plateau, and since you could always make a good turn when you have no mood to go on the same straight line, you could make a little fun out of this pure walking. It is not because there is any significance in this kind of walking, Mathi thinks, but because you have a sudden impulse to take a turn (Chu 317).

This kind of walking style in fact is not new in the story narrative. Before Mathi falls down on the street in Taipei after she runs away from her classmate's wedding ceremony, she unconsciously walks in this very style. She first walks straight down the street. When a red light appears, she turns left or right. This is the way that Mathi walks across half of Taipei. During that time, she dares not stop, for she cannot help beginning to reflect upon all the failures in her life and to face the problems she can not solve (Chu 2). Here, in Madagascar, "Jesus" adopts the same kind of walking, and quite to the contrary, he uses it to face his own self and the problem of life and death.

One day when accompanying "Jesus" on board to sail to another town, Mathi pleads with "Jesus" to help save a big fish caught by fishermen. "Jesus" refuses. Another day, while trooping alone in the desert, Mathi finds a village plagued by an unknown disease. Mathi cries to "Jesus" (who practices Chinese acupuncture to heal some aboriginal habitants in another town) to at least try helping some of the villagers. Once again, "Jesus" gives no notice or response to her cry. She is terribly shocked to find out the cruelty and cold

indifference “Jesus” shows to human beings and animals. She wonders why the aborigines in Madagascar call such a merciless man “Jesus.” However, the true understanding of “Jesus” dawns upon Mathi when finally the opportunity comes for her to really change her perspective. As Mathi accompanies “Jesus,” climbing higher and higher up the rock mountain, she gradually comes to the understanding that “Jesus” preserves.

The higher she climbs, the farther away she is from the dead village. Now, when she reaches the mountaintop, she sees quite a different view. For the first time she could see more than the image of the dead village. The world is more than just a dead village—farther beyond the dead village, she sees a great group of desert plants growing vigorously. Together they unite into a huge unit, like a green arm, approaching slowly but firmly coming over the site of the dead village. The location of the ruin without doubt contains the water these plants most need. Mathi suddenly finds: “For human beings, the ruin is a destitute place; in the wildness, this is another prosperous land of water and greens” (Chu 353).

In the first part of the novel, Mathi takes a bird’s eye view of Taipei, and finds it to be a terrible pressure cooker. In Taiwan, the bird’s eye view does not help her understand the secret lying within the locality of Taipei, but in Madagascar, the bird’s eye view helps her understand the secret of life. In Taipei, she is trapped by her own thinking process, and is too deep and too emerged in troubles so that she cannot see all the troubles from a distance and look into the mystic significance of life. In the second part of the novel, Mathi first adopts a new perspective of a flâneur strolling on the plateau of Madagascar and changes her previous detached attitude which is completely based upon her own concept as a lonely divorced woman under great social and economic pressure from a modern capitalistic society. She experiences there on the Madagascar plateau the company of a dog, yet sadly realizes that

she, too, like the dog who follows her everywhere for food and refuses to leave her when finally she and “Jesus” have to board a ship for another town, has an invisible chain that connects her to the company on road, and it is this chain that prevents her ubiquitously from walking the road to freedom. There is no escape from the food chain that controls all species on earth. The dog clings to her for food and company, and the fishermen need to catch fish to survive. Hence, she has the first taste of understanding of the concept of God (or certain deity). He does not shed tears for the death of a fish but takes in a whole view of the possible consequences where the life and death of a creature is part of the chain of being.

Moreover, she experiences strong hatred towards “Jesus” for his not even making an effort to rescue the dying villagers, and therefore, bitterly witnesses the complete extinction of the whole village suffering from an unnamable plague. However, “Jesus” guides her to look down from high above the dead village, whose site in the very near future would become a nourishing oasis for wild plants and other living species. Nature reveals to Mathi the secrets of life and death. Quite different from her past mode of interpretation, Mathi for the first time tries not to understand and interpret the scene from a human being’s perspective. To let a whole village be extinguished is a great sin. Under that charge, “Jesus” deserves Mathi’s hatred and condemnation. However, if other species besides human beings are taken into consideration, the dying out of a human village is but part of the whole celestial scheme, for this huge scale of death provides other species—the plants and other animals outside the village—with a chance of living. Death is closely tied up with the burgeoning of new life.

With a focus on the concern of “the mutually constitutive relationships between persons and the environments in which they live and work,” Penelope Harvey contends that the relationship between human beings and

landscape should be examined “in terms of human capacity to view, survey and map the territories in which they live, imposing meanings on particular landforms or determining land use through the activities done to or on the land” (197). Not taking into consideration the impact that human beings’ use of the land might have on the lives of the other species (be they animals or plants) brings forth biases and misguided understandings. Through a single-minded geographer’s knowledge, a landscape so textualized perfectly represents a homogeneous interpretation, even though it does arrogantly abolish other heterogeneous elements in interpreting the landscape and the diversities it represents. However, such a reading of space can tolerate no heterogeneities, not to mention the pursuit of liberation and revolution against the regulations of the social relation and value system.

“The reading of the signs that the landscape affords is less like the reading of a map and more akin to how one might try to interpret the feelings of others by looking at facial expressions and bodily postures” (Penelope Harvey 198). Resisting the homogeneous cartographer’s perspective, Penelope Harvey reads the landscape in terms of the interrelationship between human beings and the personhood of hills and pathways, with an attempt to avoid merely taking into concern the simple concept of tradition or cultural otherness. Mathi’s understanding of the landscape from the plateau can be understood in part from Penelope Harvey’s interpretation of the “animate landscape,” and in part, from the non-interference concept that traditional Chinese philosophers (Laozi and Zhuangzi as the two most eminent advocators) interpret and understand how God (or an all-mighty deity) would rule the world.

Through the death of the fish and the extinction of the village in Madagascar, Mathi comes closer to the mind of “Jesus.” What really counts and matters when viewed from a higher level need not be well conceived by

the human mind. The sympathy that human beings possess can only extend to the beings that are the closest to them; however, what nature broods over might not be the life and death of a single fish, or the extinction of a destitute village, but the rotation of life and death of different species—for in the circle of life and death, being human is but one possibility, and not particularly favored when compared with other forms of existence. When viewed from the perspective of God, every event would reveal quite a different aspect: life or death is nothing to be worried about, and turbulent conflicts are no longer troublesome.

If universalism and uniformity are what trouble Mathi most in her pursuit of a career, and if just as Kevin Robins points out, these two positions are “associated with a crisis of urbanity,” then Robins’ concept about the postmodern city might provide a new light to the interpretation of Mathi’s Taipei experiences: we need to adopt “an attempt to re-imagine urbanity,” so as to recover “a lost sense of territorial identity, urban community and public space” (304). This is also part of the resolution Mathi achieves through her personal experience in Madagascar.

It is the burgeoning of the tactile process of initiation that gradually incorporates Mathi into the ultra-commonsensual concept of deity. Mathi’s journey to Madagascar finally shows some possibility of passing the liminal phase. In exchange for her earthly fortunes, Mathi gains peacefulness instead. The cognitive voyage into the Madagascar plateau and the several months of apprenticeship under “Jesus” provide the duty-bound yet duty-averted Mathi with the chance of transformation:

On the mountaintop, Mathi realized that the meaning of life lay not in questing answers, for an answer was but the question of another answer; life lay in understanding and experiencing, no

matter where life was. (Chu 358-359)

Madagascar is the place where Mathi finds out the meaning of life; however, instead of staying there, Mathi determines to return home to keep on living. Different places set up different kinds of lives, and every life has its own inherent limitations and restrictions. Confined by their location, people are doomed to experience whatever their unique life brings forth. As bell hooks states, “I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there” (205). When reflecting upon her whole life, Mathi finds out that she is like the dog refusing to leave her and live independently in the Madagascar desert. Once chained by the living process, one would turn docile, and know only the techniques of surrender. She had neither the courage nor the imagination to break the chain when she was in Taipei. It is she herself that resists freedom (Chu 339). The initiation into the concept of a possible non-interference belonging to God (or the all-mighty deity) now at last dawns upon her. She now can finally reflect upon the possibility of light in a human life and the non-interference God possesses to treat all the species on earth.

Re-integrating the newfound balance that bears no hatred to anyone’s not offering a helping hand and no great sorrow for the death of any species, Mathi passes the liminality and completes the last phase of the rites of passage. She realizes that the meaning of life lies not in the quest of an answer, nor is it to be found in any escape from suffering and pressure. Death or life, sorrow or joy, are but fragments belonging to a larger whole. She feels that she comes closer to “Jesus” and gets to understand his world-view gradually. And that is the time Mathi makes her resolution to go back to Taipei—to re-enter and re-unite into her cultural and social home/land. From this perspective, Madagascar or Taipei makes no great difference to Mathi now. The two spaces

still bear their geographical, economical and cultural differences as well as similarities; however, Mathi knows that as a human being she has her road to walk on. Reinsertion into the world she comes from will not provoke any stir of shock or churning nausea in her this time, for there is a thoughtful yet concrete determination to live through and experience whatever comes forth to her.

Even though at last she cannot return to her hometown alive as she, without a second thought, rushes out from the rocks to save “Jesus’s” life under the Madagascar tribal militiaman’s bullet, she practices what she learns from the transition rites in Madagascar—the mystic experience of and the epiphany of death, life and inter-subjective relationships of all beings on earth. Mathi’s tour of rites of passage, though failing to really bring her back to her home/land, does bring her into another kind of understanding. She finally reaches a relatively stable state and can examine her social and spatial position in this life/world in the context of inter-subjectivity. By sacrificing her life to save “Jesus,” Mathi demonstrates her new understanding and practices it with all her body and mind, with her affect and cognition, to prove that she has really learned the true spirit of “Jesus’s” practice of mortification—the quest of true self-identity and subjectivity that harmoniously joins and shares the inter-subjective relationships in context. Subjectivity reveals itself while “[i]ntensity shocks the subject into experiencing its own aliveness and vitality, generating a sharp sense of its own embodied relation to the world.” (Fullagar 68) In Mathi’s case, this intensity of the affect reconnects her to the world which demands love and sacrifice as an exchange for freedom and unboundedness, and allows her identity and subjectivity to shine out of the limits of self as she crosses over the liminal space where life and death intermingle.

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《傷心咖啡店之歌》裡 過渡儀式式的自由之旅

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摘 要

在台灣小說家朱少麟的《傷心咖啡店之歌》裡，馬達加斯加島被故事女主角馬蒂當作自由的象徵。由於對台北都市高度現代化與資本主義競爭感到厭倦，馬蒂在夢想中刻畫著馬達加斯加島宛如台灣的擴大版與良知，並終於出發前往該島尋求象徵中代表自由與認同的符號與認知體系的連結：自我身份認同與自由的串聯。本文將以小說中馬蒂的認知為起點，由台灣，台灣的鏡像馬達加斯加島與自由的符號象徵作為探討這些社會、文化、空間符號背後的符號學連結關係，檢視小說中馬蒂在台北工作與生活時的種種迴繞、徘徊，與在馬達加斯加島追求自由的旅行過程，是如何成為一種空間過渡（季內普，特納），成為「過渡」儀式般的一種跨越社會與文化的中介；而這樣的跨越與「過渡」，最終將因為馬蒂在馬達加斯加島的各種經歷與領悟，而得以用更開闊多元的認知符號體系的建立來釋懷創傷並面對新局。

關鍵詞：符號學連結、過渡空間、身分、自由、馬達加斯加、
《傷心咖啡店之歌》、阿諾德·凡·季內普、維克多·
特納

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