Women are often the main characters in the work of Guo Songfen. Even if he is not the only novelist who deals with women, he has the distinctive feature to show their point of view. Why do women play such an important role in his stories? What is the portrait he draws of them? Before we try to answer those questions, let’s see who is Guo Songfen, who is not, unfortunately, famous enough for the quality of his literary work, maybe because he early lost contact with the literary circles of Taiwan, or because he saves ink like gold.

Born in 1938 in Taipei, son of the painter Guo Xuehu, Guo Songfen began to write short stories at the age of twenty. He belonged to the group of the modernist writers of Taiwan, who were students in the department of foreign languages in the Taipei University at the beginning of the sixties, like Wang Wenxing, Bai Xianyong, Chen Ruoxi, Ouyang Zi or Wang Zhenhe. All those young writers, who had a excellent knowledge of Western literature, were trying to get out of the narrow confines of anti-communism thinking, and to focus on individuals. He got a degree in 1961, and began to teach in the same university while devoting to theatre, cinema, and art criticism. In 1966, he went to the United States, studied comparative literature in Berkeley, but he interrupted his PhD in 1971 to join the movement of protection of the Diaoyutai island. His rebellious and impulsive attitude made him undesirable in Taiwan for a long time. His bitterness led him to write from 1983 on. From then on, he wrote several short stories (zhongpian xiaoshuo), including Shouts under the moon, Moon Seal, The Running Mother, Snow-blindness, About writing, The grass. He lives nowadays in New York.

I would like to focus on two of those short stories, Shouts under the moon (Yue hao) and Moon Seal (Yue yin), published in the Taiwan magazine Wenji in 1984. This will enable us to show what is the image of women for Guo Songfen according to three points of view: the expression of female psychology, women and tradition, women faced with love and death.

Let’s give a brief summary of them.
Shouts under the moon deals with the relationship within a married couple which seems to be beyond reproach through the memories of a woman, who keeps watch over the body of her dead husband. After sharing his life for more than thirty years, she has the feeling she was never closer to him than now. Their whole life passes through her mind. Doing her best to contain her sadness, she thinks about the secret of her husband she could only penetrate after his death: his betrayal during his three-year stay in Japan as a student and the child he got with a Japanese woman. She is waiting for an explanation from her late husband. The whole story is about the life of this couple, who never managed to communicate.

Moon Seal is the story of a young woman, Wenhui, optimistic and full of dreams, who fully devotes herself to her husband, Tiemin, who came back from the front close to the end of the Second World War suffering from tuberculosis. But her life soon becomes greyish and austere, she never complains but gradually loses her joie de vivre, forced to fight against the illness of her husband. Tiemin is worn out by the remembrance of war and by the February 28 Incident. The illness is cured, but then he commits himself with politics, and partially abandons his wife. The golden prison Wenhui undergoes and her jealousy for a communist woman who fascinates her husband puts an end to her love for him. Without realizing she could put his life in danger, she denounces him for hiding forbidden books at home, then he is arrested and sentenced to death.

Feminine psychology and the image of the moon

Like the other modernist writers, Guo Songfen read Western writers like Henry James or Virginia Woolf. He is working about language, combining Western and traditional Chinese features in order to express the inner world of his female characters. He is devoted to experiments like introspection, interior monologue, ruminations, analepsis. The unlogical and jerky narrative structure reminds of the so-called “stream of consciousness”: recent memories, old memories, immediate visual, auditory or olfactory sensations, obsessive and repetitive thoughts (like Wenhui and the vision of the train arriving into her native province), idea associations or thoughts without much connection between them run into each other.
For example, in *Shouts under the moon*, the interior monologue begins already at the first line, when the heroine (whose name we don’t know) whispers to herself: “Why, why, why?” Snatches of memories and feelings are mixed. When the moon appears at the window, she goes to the funeral director’s, following the direction of the moon. On the way, she remembers those moments when she saw the moon appearing framed in the window, who called to her mind an image of white lotus flower on a black pond. Immediately, through an association of ideas, another memory adds itself to this one: she remembers having read one day an article in the newspaper where a young boy asked a question: is there any flower which opens at the moonlight? The answer was: yes, there is one, it is called “epiphyllum”. Then the woman remembers some smell, she finds out it is the smell of flowers in her house in front of the window, those flowers which her husband was very fond of. This skilful interweaving of memories and thoughts show us how important the moon and the flowers will be in the plot. Their symbolism will be understood later.

In a passage of *Moon Seal*, Wenhui, looking at the sky, remembers some evening a few months earlier, when egrets suddenly swept down on the roof of the house. Tiemin said they looked like a wing of fighters. Then she suddenly thinks at the first bombing of Taipei some years before. She was visiting the zoo with Tiemin and saw the bombers. At the end, she thinks again about the sky full of birds and their call.

In order to set out the point of view of the female characters, Guo Songfen uses free indirect speech, sometimes simple indirect speech (to emphasize some important thought, for example when Wenhui suddenly thinks: “Everyone is maybe lonely in life.”), but very little direct speech. The narrator mainly reports the thoughts of the main female characters, occasionally those of other characters, especially men, just in order to give another image of the women, to show how they look like, to insist on their physical appearance. For example, in *Shouts under the moon*, the funeral director sees the woman as quiet and distinguished, with an elegant and slender figure, dressed with a black mourning crepe dress.

The jerky narrative rhythm with very few dialogues reminds us of the rhythm of poetry. A sentence (or not much more) every line leads us to reduce the speed of our reading, so that we can enjoy the savour of words, like in a poem. Guo Songfen creates an original aesthetics, polishing his style in a refined manner. He chooses his words very carefully, using very precise terms, especially for plants and animals, which may
be neologisms. A polished language and numerous images, like natural visions reminding of classical poetry, makes his works extremely refined and often lyric, expressing the intimate feelings of the female characters. In *Moon Seal*, nature comforts Wenhui, who is in anguish because of the sickness of her husband:

“After the last fiery glow of sunset
The stars suddenly appeared above her
She deeply breathed in the fresh air”

In another scene, Wenhui is “surrounded with rustling clouds of foam, which look like a wedding dress”, a poetic image to show how delighted she is by the beautiful scenery of the Xindian river where she came to fish with Tiemin.

Some scholars like David Der-Wei Wang underline that the writing of Guo Songfen was very refined, with an “obsession with purity” (*jiepi*). He is one of the few modernist writers who make use of a “bone aesthetics”, what the Chinese call “feeling of the bone” (*gugan*). The result is a very pure and sober narration, lacking in flourishes, obtained after much effort. Ellipsis play the role of empty spaces in ink painting, bringing an impression of ambiguity, mystery, and also of moderation and refinement.

For example, the author suggests slightly, indirectly, without any superfluous detail the fright of Wenhui in a scene of *Moon Seal*, where she thinks to have heard an air raid warning. She soon realizes it is not possible in the countryside to hear it. It might be a bird, she thinks. We only know it set her heart beating. After a while, the noises of waves in fury come into her ears. “The sea was so vast, so frightening. And the night was so quiet.” The sea appears to be a metaphor of the state of mind of the female characters. Later, Wenhui “feels herself as quiet as the ocean at dawn”. In *Shouts under the moon*, the woman is full of emotion, like “the waves in the port lapping against the quay”.

Moderation and refinement are also the main features of the female characters of *Moon Seal* and *Shouts under the moon*, as well as mystery: the author shows us only some aspects of the personality of those women. Therefore, content and form are closely linked. The moon, a traditional Chinese feminine symbol, plays a crucial role as an emblem of female characters. It is always related to the most lyric moments, when

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women experience deep emotions. Their moderation and sweetness, which remind those of the moon, hide violent feelings, sadness, and despair. In *Shouts under the moon*, the heroine is fascinated by the impassivity of Japanese women drawn on etchings, who do not express any joy, sadness, pleasure or anger on their face. However, those Japanese figures are very similar to the main characters of Guo Songfen. The dignity of those moderate and refined women is emphasized by a scholar, Dong Weiliang: “In *Shouts under the moon*, the author doesn’t only give a noble nature to the female character, who shows also an admirable dignity. In another woman-oriented story (*nüxing xiaoshuo*), *Moon Seal*, he endows the character almost the highest level of wisdom and morality, but he combines them with some human weakness.”

The so-called “morality” of those women is what is expected from them according to tradition. We will try to demonstrate now how the weight of tradition is expressed through the attitude and thinking of the female characters of Guo Songfen.

**Women and the weight of tradition**

This exploration of the inner world of those female characters is combined with some fading of the social context, which shows an influence of existentialism, as it is the case for many other modernist writers of Taiwan. However, the external world still exists, as seen through the subjective eyes of the heroines, and some allusions are scattered in the narration, enough to let us guess when and where the action is set. The action takes place in both cases in Taipei, during and after the Second World War, that is during the childhood and youth of Guo Songfen (who left for America at the age of twenty-eight and who is still living there today). At that time, Taiwan was no longer a Japanese colony, intellectuals are making their way between the Japanese and Chinese cultures in search for a new society.

Guo Songfen might focus on women also for historical reasons, because women had to face many difficulties at that time and had to play an important role, like Wenhui who has to wait for Tiemin who is fighting in Southeast Asia under the Japanese uniform, then to look after him during his long sickness, being responsible for life at home. After his recovery, she hears about the February 28 Incident (that incident which

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led to a movement of revolt against the corruption of the Guomindang government in the whole country). Wenhui is just afraid, without understanding its real meaning. She is supported by her mother, a widow herself (like the main character of Running mother, another short story of Guo Songfen). All the events exist through her eyes, including the white terror, when her husband is executed.

In Shouts under the moon, the heroine is not confronted to so many difficulties, and we can guess what is the historical background thanks to a few hints in this story made up of very little action (only one visit at the funeral director’s and the conversation with a Japanese unknown guest): the stay of her husband in Japan is postponed because of war, both of them have difficulties to speak mandarin Chinese because of their Japanese education: it shows they have been educated before the war.

This historical background is important to understand the traditional psychology of those female characters. In the two stories indeed, the heroines have a certain idea of happiness. Their first goal is to start a family, they struggle hard to reach that goal, whereas they are not interested in political life. They do not work, their whole life is family-oriented and focused on the man. Therefore Wenhui is so delighted at the prospect to see Tiemin coming back from the front that she forgets the sad vision of the bombed city of Taipei and only dreams about their future happiness, thinking that her sacrifice for her sick husband will lead to his recovery and that happy conjugal life will reward her afterwards. In her mind, it should be a country life, simple, concrete, close to nature. She has got a strong sensibility to nature and is overjoyed by discovering the first bamboo-shoots after the war, fishes in the stream near he house, the camellia oil of the door-to-door salesman, and by working in the vegetable garden. She is drunk on the beauty of the night sky, of the flamboyant facing the sea in her native province, of the sunset in the wilds… Later, when she feels happiness gets away from her, she still remembers at their ride from the Bitan lake, “keeping in their heart the light of the whole day”.

Those family-oriented women, according to their conservative education, are closely related to the house, which is their main space of living, unlike their husbands who are always away (in mysterious places with other communist activists in Moon Seal, in Japan in Shouts under the moon). Under the influence of that education, those women have a strong desire for children and feel guilty if they do not have any. In Shouts under the moon, the main character has a bad conscience, and a strange feeling
of anguish grips her when this idea comes to her mind as well as when she sees the reflection of the moon on the water, which seems to be a foreboding of danger. She thinks she might have the moon-sickness. In *Moon Seal*, Wenhui believes that women without children are “oppressed with a feeling of inexpressible emptiness”.

Whereas men dream to build a new society, women refuse to go in search for it and do not show much national identity consciousness, even if they are graduated from secondary school. Men have other concerns. In *Moon Seal*, Tiemin declares during his illness he does not want to live in vain. Wenhui remains indifferent to those words, although they reveal much of the aspirations of Tiemin. Coming from a conservative and prosperous family, she does not really understands the evolution of society.

Guo Songfen draws the portrait of a quite different woman, Mrs Yang (*Yang dajie*), cultured and politically committed, in contrast to the main character. Wenhui is fascinated by her and realizes how ignorant she is in front of this cultured, committed as well as refined and radiant woman, feeling herself “too superficial, without any education. Compared to Mrs Yang, she looked like an uneducated peasant woman, no good for anything else than being in charge of a house”. This woman, in her eyes, combines authority and intellectual superiority of a man to the charm of a woman. “She would have never thought that a woman could express herself in such a serious way, and be listened to in a religious silence.” She admires her also for her elegance and her beauty: the face of Mrs Yang is as beautiful as a summer sunset or like a wonderful landscape, she gives a pleasant feeling when she appears, “as if a lake as stretched out into the hall of the house”, a silver silk scarf is draped over her shoulders, which flies up like an egret above a rice field”. A scene is symbolic of her lack of interest for politics. While the others have a discussion about communism and continental China, which seems empty to her, she is fascinated by a bonsai. When Mrs Yang asks her what is her opinion about China, Wenhui is highly confused, realizing that she does not feel anything for this country she does not know, which is nothing more than a name for her. We can see that she has a very week national consciousness.

The contrast between both women (Mrs Yang and Wenhui) highlights the gulf which lies between Wenhui and her husband. It is because their concerns are too different, their expectations and efforts are contradictory that men turn away from women in *Moon Seal* and in *Shouts under the moon*, without any doubt. Wenhui will denounce her husband to the police because out of jealousy and ignorance. Is she guilty
of not knowing anything about the current events? Does she have a too narrow world, dreaming of a country life far away from society, whereas Tiemin decides to act in the collective interest as a communist? Or doesn’t she have a lucid and objective reaction compared to Tiemin who lives on dreams, far away from reality? Whatever the message of Guo Songfen might be, he shows us at least the deep gap which lies between men and women whose thinking is too traditional.

**Search for impossible love and fatal outcome**

Despite their bravery and perseverance, the female characters of Guo Songfen seem to be condemned to moral solitude and love heartbreaks. Whereas they are imprisoned in an unsatisfying conjugal life by traditional morality, men are flying away.

Their sexual life is revealed by some allusions. In *Moon Seal*, Tiemin is sensitive to the beauty of Wenhui, like in the scene of public baths, where he discovers her again through a steam screen. But it is obvious in that scene that they are strangers to each other, avoiding eye contact. Wenhui rejects her husband after his illness, before accepting him later. But soon he will lose his interest for her. In *Shouts under the moon*, the woman shows coldness to her husband until quite late in their life.

However, communication does not seem to exist in those couples and compromises the blossoming of their love. Husband et wife remain silent. Again, they look like strangers, as if their ways never crossed, although living together. Both heroines try to prevent their husband from escaping from them and are fascinated by their “secret garden”, the secret they can not share: the three years spent in Japan in *Shouts under the moon*, which are a blank in their couple life, and the locked book chest (full of forbidden communist books) in *Moon Seal*.

In the two stories, the failure of their love, that is to say of their life, is symbolized by the lack of children. Flowers replace the absent child. Wenhui thinks the birth of a child is very similar to the opening of a flower. In *Shouts under the moon*, the heroine feels like bringing home an orchid because she notices her husband is fond of it.

In *Shouts under the moon*, a repetitive thought, almost obsessional, which is a kind of premonition of the woman, announces to the reader the betrayal of her husband: “Their couple life should have come to an end in that port.” (that port is Jilong, where the husband sailed for Japan from). At night, she suddenly understands the son of the
Japanese woman who came to visit her was the child if her husband. This key scene is full of dramatic intensity: “In the middle of the night, there was suddenly a dead silence. The moon appeared at the window. (...) A moment of perfect stillness.” Auditory and visual feelings as well as the moon as a metaphor strengthen the impression of an immense sadness. The child looks like the husband with his moon face, beautiful and shining like the moon. A kind of inner rebellion grips her: she is suddenly invaded by doubt, without being really sure anymore whether they have been husband and wife. She does not understand how she could stay with him for more than thirty years. The passion of her husband for flowers is explained: flowers symbolized for him that illegitimate child. She wonders why he never said one word about that other woman, that child, imprisoned within his façade morality. This would have purified the stifling atmosphere of their life.

In the same way, we feel the despair of Wenhui growing inexorably in *Moon Seal*. Since the illness of her husband, she thought they could reach a common happiness, but she understands her husband is more and more avoiding her. In a crucial scene, she is crying in the smoke of a fire she did not manage to light, as if her happiness went up in smoke.

The stubborn determination of those women to escape from their fate ends up in the death of the husband, as if they (or the moon) had brought bad luck to them. *Shouts under the moon* is filled of death, since the man is already dead at the beginning of the story. The woman is at home or at the funeral director’s close to the coffin. This accidental death has only brought to light the gap which separates the two protagonists, the same way as in *Moon Seal*, where the death of the husband is unintentionally caused by the woman.

The shadow of death hangs over the life of those two women, who are already confronted with loneliness and indifference. Sickness, absence, silence are already like a little death. Both women have the impression that their life is going by in vain like Wenhui in *Moon Seal*, afraid of getting old too early and who finds an antidote against isolation in alcohol. She feels as empty as the house itself, abandoned, deserted by Tiemin. In *Shouts under the moon*, the man is present without being present, trying to hide himself, taking refuge to a complete silence and to the writing of his memories. Those women are condemned to a moral solitude, before and after the death of their husband.
Therefore the fatal outcome of those couple lives is not so surprising. Death puts an end to an unbearable situation. Both characters have the illusion they could finally begin a dialogue with dead husband and get closer to him. The man seems to be amazingly alive.

In *Moon Seal*, Wenhui notices the hair of the body, similar to rice straw, which is quite familiar to her. She hears him calling her as he did when he was sick. She forgets reality, her old dream occurring to her again: “If only I could have a child with you!” is her last thought at the end of the story.

In *Shouts under the moon*, the woman seeing the made-up face of her dead husband and discerns the shadow of a smile and a slight liveliness on it. He seems even more lively than before his death. She can not bring herself to leave him and is observing his closed mouth, waiting for some explanation, as if it would be the key to their problems (like the mouth, the keys of the husband seems to be an important image for her, as if they could be a solution she always expected). The mouth, which was open after his death, was closed with some injection: “What did he want to say?”, she thinks. But he keeps as silent as during his whole life.

At the height of their despair, those women have some hallucinations, as if this sudden change in their life could paradoxically bring a new hope. In *Shouts under the moon*, the woman is hearing melodious bird singing. In *Moon Seal*, Wenhui remembers the flamboyant, that exotic tree with fire-red flowers facing the serene ocean in her native province, under a sumptuous green transparent sky.

Guo Songfen brings to light what he imagines to be the feelings of women in man-oriented country. Women, full of virtue of loyalty, who are emotionally dependent on men, sink into despair when they realize their sacrifices were in vain, their effort to enjoy happiness (what they believe to be “happiness”) has failed, they remain deserted and isolated. Their husband have a “secret garden” they refuse to let them know. Those women battling with an absurd and heavy life they never wanted have a dignity and an exaggerated sensibility the author tries to suggest through a poetic language.

It seems that Guo Songfen denounces the weight of tradition and that his work is an indictment of traditional families and marriages without love where communication and dialogue are impossible insofar as men and women must play too different roles and have too different goals. They can only misunderstand each other, and their love is
bound to fail. This concern is closely akin to those of the female literature of the
eighties, with some writers like Ouyang Zi or Qi Jun, who show women in search for
love, ending in shattered illusions, or like Lin Haiyin, who demonstrates the old family
structure has to be transformed. Women must become aware of themselves and liberate
themselves from the yoke of her education which teaches them to accept male
chauvinism. Guo Songfen maybe wants to show that individual happiness will be
reachable in an egalitarian society where women are not anymore at the fringe of it and
become aware of their identity, so that the gap which separates them from men is finally
filled.